

At the Crossroads of Cultures: A Story of Two Performances

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Abstract. The article describes two theater performances: the first took place in the Chinese Theater of Tsarskoye Selo in the summer of 1803, and the second one (or, rather a series of guest performances) – a hundred years later, in 1902, in Moscow and Saint Petersburg. The first performance was shown for Emperor Alexander I and his guests including the Japanese sailors who were leaving for their motherland with Ivan F. Kruzenshtern’s global circumnavigation. The description of the performance the Japanese sailors left became part of the manuscript *Kankai Ibun* (“*Surprising Information about the Seas Surrounding [Earth]*”) written in 1807. The performances of 1902 were presented by the Kabuki guest company headed by Otojirō Kawakami with actress Sada Yacco, the star of the company, attracting most attention. The performances shown in Russia aroused a mixed reaction among spectators and art critics, which is proven by periodical editions of those days. The article analyzes specific perception of foreign-language theater culture reflected in the spectators’ descriptions and concludes that, regardless of the reaction to strange and unusual things, the acquaintance with other culture dramatically broadens the spectator’s horizons and allows discerning something new in one’s national culture.

Keywords: Kankai Ibun, Chinese theater, Emperor Alexander I, castaways, Charles Didelot, Russian musical instruments, Sada Yacco, Vsevolod Meyerhold.

The history of various cultures' intersection is replete with unexpected mirror coincidences that allow considering similar events from various angles. The relationship between Russian and Japanese theater and music cultures is no exception. This article dwells on two theatrical performances spread out over a hundred years (one performance and one guest tour, to be exact), which took place in Saint Petersburg and its environs.

Below is a short pre-history of the first performance shown in the summer of 1803.

In 1793, Japanese commercial vessel *Wakamiya Maru* with seventeen crewmembers suffered a shipwreck near the Aleutian Islands. After they had lived with aborigines for 10 months, the sailors were taken on board of the Russian harvesting vessel, moved to Okhotsk, then to Yakutsk. Finally, they traveled by the Lena River to Irkutsk, where they lived for 8 years. In April 1893, the Japanese sailors were brought to Saint Petersburg, where they were received by Emperor Alexander I.¹ The project of establishing trade ties with Japan, towards which the Russian government had conducted an isolationist policy for a long time, had

¹ Entries in *Kankai Ibun* state that the audience took place on May 16 (according to the Julian calendar), closer to the evening upon termination of the Emperor's dinner [Kankai Ibun 2009, p. 257]. The Japanese sailors were accompanied by Count Nikolai Petrovich Rumyantsev (1754–1826), an inspirer and enthusiast of the global circumnavigation, a full privy counselor, gentleman in waiting, Minister of Commerce, and Senator. Prior to their departure to Japan, the sailors had lived in his house in the English Embankment. The audience was attended by Emperor Alexander I, Empress Elizaveta Alexeyevna, widowed Empress Maria Fyodorovna, and Grand Duke Konstantin Pavlovich. Saint Petersburg of those days saw great festivities in honor of the centennial of Saint Petersburg founding and the castaways watched the air balloon flight together with the Imperial family. Of interest is that there is no relevant entry about this audience in the Chamber-Fourier journal for 1803. See: [Kamer-fur'erskii tseremonial'nyi zhurnal... 1903]

already been underway. The implementation of the project was one of the goals set before the first Russian global circumnavigation under Ivan F. Kruzenshtern's command (1770–1846), that was to start in summer 1803; the expedition was to depart on July 20.² Diplomat Nikolai P. Rezanov (1764–1807) was appointed an official envoy to Japan.

Prior to the audience, Emperor Alexander I had requested the sailors to consider an opportunity of returning to Japan together with the Russian Embassy and express their wishes during the personal meeting. Four of the sailors agreed to return while the others, who had already been christened as Orthodox believers and started families, preferred staying in Russia and returned to Irkutsk.

The Russian Embassy arrived in Nagasaki in September 1804 and the Japanese “castaways”³ were handed over to Japan's authorities; they were subjected to lengthy interrogations, during which they provided detailed stories about what they had heard and seen in Russia. The interrogations were conducted by Otsuki Gentaku, Chief Medical Officer of the Miyagi military clan, and Shimura Hiroyuki, a rangakusha.⁴ While the sailors were telling their stories, it was necessary to illustrate them; Otsuki Gentaku's pupil made a sketch of what had been said while the sailors later confirmed the likeness.⁵

² Due to a number of contingencies, the departure was postponed several times; it happened only on August 7, 1803. More about Kruzenshtern's circumnavigation in: [Kruzenshtern 2007].

³ That is how official Japanese reports referred to the sailors.

⁴ A scholar who studies *rangaku* (蘭学, lit. “Dutch sciences”), which is understood as a set of European scientific knowledge that entered Japan when the country was closed (1639–1853).

⁵ The compilers explain: “... it was necessary for us to explain what they [the sailors – N. K.] told us but we failed to accomplish it. Therefore, at some point, a pupil began making meaningful drawings; it was decided to depict the items described by the sailors in drawings next to [descriptions]; then we asked again and corrected until finally we came to have several dozens of drawings. They illustrated every part of the manuscript. It looks as if we

The interrogation results and further research efforts allowed compiling the manuscript *Kankai Ibun* (“*Surprising Information about the Seas Surrounding [Earth]*”) in the early summer of 1807⁶.

The manuscript contains a detailed description of various life realities in Russia at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, including a short glossary of the Russian language. Two scrolls, i.e., the 10th and the 11th (as well as the end of Scroll 9), are devoted to the description of Saint Petersburg, where the castaways arrived for the imperial audience. The sailors were shown the city sights and taken around the city, which they liked very much; they visited Kunstkamera and went to a theater. Judging by their description, it was the Bolshoi Kamenny (later Marriinsky) theater. The Japanese sailors also visited Tsarskoye Selo,⁷ where they were invited to see a theatrical performance.

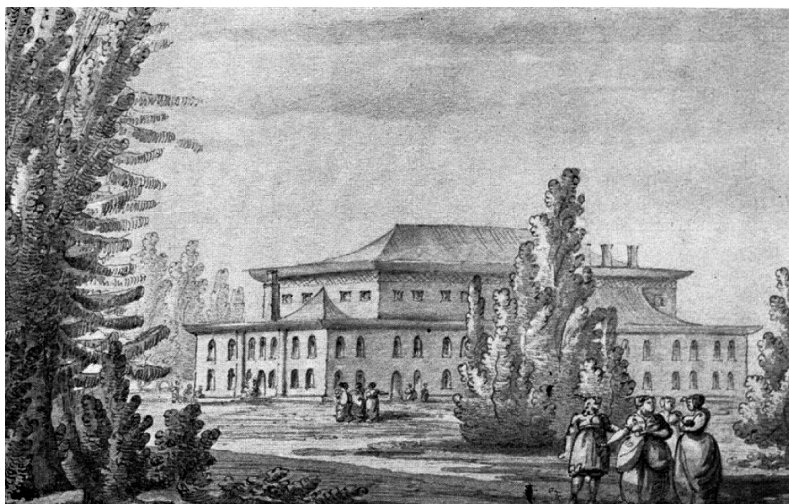
The performance, most likely, was staged in the famous Chinese Theater, built in the Alexandrovsky Park of Tsarskoye Selo by architects A. Rinaldi and I. V. Neyelov in 1778–1779 (Illustration 1).

The interior of the Chinese Theater was splendid. According to the descriptions of contemporaries and researches, the central box,

managed to understand the essence of the depicted, yet all [our drawings] did not conform to the images of real figures, and from the very beginning, we tried to achieve just one thing – to get to know their general contours. In addition, while in the process of compiling it [the manuscript], we sometimes received drawings of such items that we knew about only from their stories; we copied these drawings and inserted them into the text then...” [Kankai ibun 2009, p. 38].

⁶ The treatise was published in Russian in 2009, translated and edited by Vladislav Nikanorovich Goreglyad; the treatise is preceded by an introductory article telling the history of its creation and the difficulties accompanying reading and translating it. See: [Goreglyad 2009].

⁷ The manuscript transcribes it as *Tsuvarusukoisero* and explains that this is what is known as the Cool place, which served as a summer country residence and place of rest for the Emperor and his family [Kankai ibun 2009, p. 273].



*Illustration 1. Chinese Theater in Tsarskoye Selo,
engraving of the mid-18th century*

Source: <https://www.citywalls.ru/house23231.html?s=ivos2ohu53ibfs7ojg9fstuno3>

stage portal, and plafond were adorned by figures of Chinese people, dragons, shields with zodiac signs and other elements of the Eastern décor⁸. The indoor appearance was enlivened by little bells, beads, pendants carved of wood – motley, silvered and gilded. The box decorations were made of painted carton with the glossy foil layer. The central Imperial box and two side boxes for Grand Dukes contained genuine items of Chinese art: decorative lacquer panels, porcelain, and furniture.

In 1779, I. Krist, an artist and theater settings designer, painted an orange silk curtain with scenes and landscapes according to “Chinese taste”. The theater was opened that very year with the opera *Demetrio Artaxerxes* by Italian composer Giovanni Paisiello (1741–1816); the performance was attended by Empress Catherine II. Afterwards,

⁸ See, for example, [Fomin, N. 1935].



Illustration. 2. Scene from Giovanni Paisiello's opera "Demetrio Artaxerxes" shown at the opening of the Chinese Theater in Tsarskoye Selo in 1779.

Source: <https://www.citywalls.ru/house23231.html?s=ivos2ohu53ibfs7ojg9fstuno3>

performances were arranged for the Emperor, his family, and guests, as a rule, in summer⁹ (Illustration 2).

⁹ The theater was later renovated and rebuilt several times; shortly before the revolutionary events of 1917, a thorough overhaul was made and the interiors were restored in 1908–1913 under the design of a Petersburg architect Silvio Danini (1867–1942). Two-storied lateral annexes were added to the building from both sides to house foyers, vestibules, buffet, and Tsar's side box; the theater was heated by steam. In 1924–1926, the building was repaired again to be used as a museum. The bombardment of September 15, 1941 fully burned the inside of the theater in Pushkino and left it roofless; at the present time, the building is in a ruined state. Yet there is a project aimed at the restoration of the unique historical monument

The sailors described the performance they had seen as follows:¹⁰

They showed a performance to us here in the palace. The theater room was closed from four sides; it was quite dark but when many candles were lit, it became light as in daytime.

The Imperial family, entourage members, and castaways alone were present – there were no other viewers. The Emperor's seat is right above the stage.

The entrance of the imperial family was met by flutes and drums on the stage. The Emperor proceeded to the rhythm of their sounds. Finally, the orchestra lined up before the stage; kotos, violins, and other instruments began to play... It seems that kyōgens¹¹ are performed in different countries. The performance changed with each act; there were no continuations. When they showed performances about their country, they did it in the local style... some people wore waraji¹²... [Illustration 3].

And one more thing: when they show the country with black people, buildings, men and women – they paint them all in black, while clothes and other items look in keeping with that country's customs. As to actors, men play men and women play women. There are no what we call oyamas [onnagatas, "female faces" – N. K.] among men. The faces of the old and the young change very quickly as they step onto the stage. Although the language is not at all understandable, the situation and the atmosphere are quite the same as in our theater. Fifteen men and women divided into two groups danced in kyōgens.

Three women out of those climbed a high rock. This rock slowly shrank and went down while the women slipped off and continued to dance.

and its interiors; the works will start in 2022, given favorable circumstances. For further information see: <https://www.tzar.ru/node/1569>.

¹⁰ In Scroll 11 of the *Kankai Ibun*.

¹¹ The Japanese name for theater performances.

¹² *Waranji* or *waraji* peasant straw sandals similar to Russian *lapti*

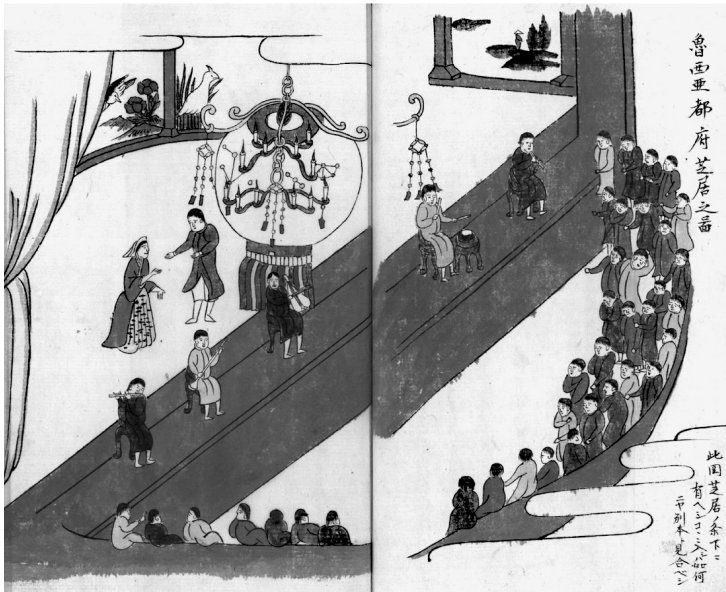


Illustration 3. Performance in the Chinese Theater, Tsarskoye Selo. 1803.

Source: <https://streetart-ekb.livejournal.com/281293.html>

Many dancers jumped to the height of five-six shaku¹³ and danced spinning on one leg. The viewers applauded and praised them. When the Emperor, deeply touched, clapped his hands, all the other spectators began clapping their hands too... That is, generally, what it looked like. The castaways say that, as they did not understand the intrigue as a whole and did not know the language, they could not grasp every detail [Kankai ibun 2009, pp. 275–276].

Judging by the sailors' description, they were shown a *divertissement* containing a drama or opera performance as well as an afterward ballet. The entries in the Chamber-Fourier journals of 1803 state that theatrical performances, as a rule, included a drama in French or a French comic

¹³ Japan's measure of distance, approximately 30 cm; for fabric measurement it is nearly 40 cm.



Illustration 4. Charles Didelot in the ballet *Cora and Alonzo, or Virgin of the Sun*. 1820.

Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Modern grace, or the operatic finale to the ballet of Alonzo e Caro by James Gillray.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Modern_grace,_or_the_operatic_finale_to_the_ballet_of_Alonzo_e_Caro_by_James_Gillray.jpg)

opera ending with a ballet. It is also known from notes in theater chronicles¹⁴ that, on May 16, 1803, in honor of the centennial of the Saint Petersburg Imperial Theater, the Bolshoi Kamenny Theater held the first night of the “heroic and fantasy ballet *Roland and Morgana to Catarino Cavo*’ music staged by French dancer and choreographer Charles Didelot (1767–1837)¹⁵ (Illustration 4).

¹⁴ See: [Petersburgskii balet... 2014, p. 17].

¹⁵ The ballet *Roland and Morgana* was Didelot’s debut as a producer on the Petersburg stage. Starring were Yevgeniya Kolosova (1780–1869) and August Poirot (1789–1832?). Later Didelot staged the ballets *Faun and Hamadryade*, *Zephyr and Flora*, *Cupid and Psyche*, *Laura and Henrick*, etc., which were always a success. The above performances belonged to what

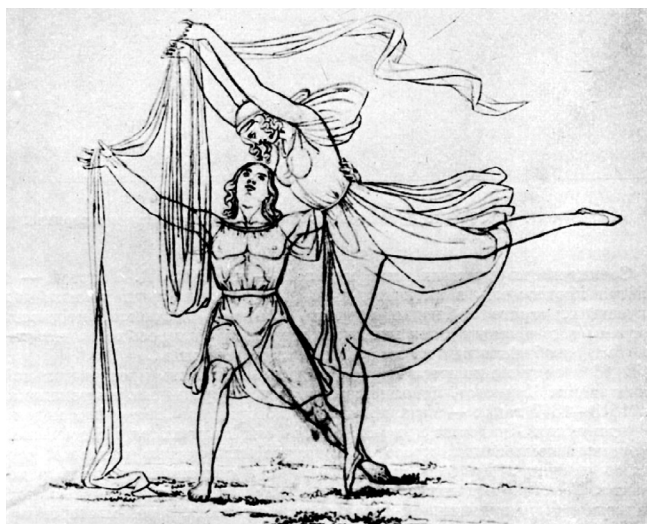


Illustration 5. Russian ballet of the early 19th century.

Scene from the Aeolian Harp. Drawing by Fyodor Tolstoy (1838).

Source: <http://artyx.ru/books/item/fo0/soo/z0000046/st017.shtml>

Didelot laid emphasis on theater settings, insisting on their variety, colorfulness and credibility; he also developed a new system of theater equipment that enabled dancers to “hover” over the stage either solo, or in groups. There were special appliances for this purpose: actors put on special corsets fixed to the wire that could move along the block invisible to the audience. Didelot also created his own choreographic style having introduced various improvements in the ballet technique (which became possible through the use of lightweight costumes – tights and light tunics)

is called the style of *Anacreontic* ballet – its motifs are derived from the love lyrics by Anacreont, an ancient Greek poet. Glorifying the beauty of natural feeling, choreographers required softness and lingering gracefulness, made performers “hover” in the air, shrouding them with flower wreaths and shawls, and thus achieving picturesque effects. Cupids and Zephyrs were personages as iconic for educated people of the early 19th century as Sylphs and Willis were in romantic ballets of the later epoch.

and replaced shoes with heels and buckles the dancers had used before by light ballet slippers, and later – by pointe-shoes¹⁶ (Illustration 5).

Ulrich Schlippenbach, a German writer, described the one-act ballet Roland and Morgana in his memoirs:

“The settings are excellent and transformations take place so quickly that one is astonished...The scene presenting a macabre cave transforms into the valley with the view into the temple floating in the clouds, while everywhere – in the fore- and background – nymphs and ghosts form most picturesque groups. The one who would have lowered his eyes during the performance and then looked immediately up would have surely missed the changes of scenery. The quick appearance of a nearly hundred people who suddenly fill the foreground of the stage is exceptional and may be called really magical”

[Surits 2012, p. 641].

The Japanese sailors described these very features of the spectacle they had seen: it is quite likely that they were shown this very ballet. Besides, the mention of “people in waraji” and “black people” may imply that the sailors were shown scenes of drama performances both from Russian life and that of exotic countries’ inhabitants. Probably, one or two acts of Nikolai Ilyin’s very popular play about peasant life was performed on that day – *Magnanimity, or Recruitment*; its first night took place in May 1803.

The same month saw the first performance of the drama *Judgement of King Solomon* by Luis-Charles Caigniez (1762–1842), translated by A. I. Klyushin; its scenes could also be shown in the Chinese Theater

¹⁶ For more details about the life and work of Charles Didelot, see: [Mundt, N. P. 1901], [Slonimsky, Yu. I. 1958]. Graphic images of scenes from the ballets of Charles Didelot, unfortunately, have not been preserved, but some idea of them can be obtained from the drawings of the Russian painter F. P. Tolstoy (1783–1873), which depict scenes from the ballet “Aeolian Harp” (1838). These drawings may have been inspired by the memories of his youth, since at the age of twenty Fyodor Tolstoy took classical dance lessons from Didlo.

[Petersburgskii balet... 2014, p. 17]. We may also name the play by Vasily Fyodorov (1778–1833) *Love and Virtue* as the one that could be presented; its first night took place on May 16, 1803 during the festivities in honor of the centennial of Saint Petersburg's founding.¹⁷

We may add for further information that the *Kankai Ibun* contains descriptions of some Russian musical instruments with illustrations. Among them are *koshike* (*goshike*) – “guselki”, gusli; *tochika* (*dotochika*) – misspelled “dudochka” (reedpipe); *kerefuko* (*urebuko*) – a three-string violin or *kyrympa* (in the Sakha language); *baraika* (*paraika*) – *balalaika*, or *pallaika* (in the Khanty language). Also mentioned are a drum and some wind instrument looking like a tube (a little flute with a wide bell). The manuscript continues:

“These instruments are used during dancing. Being in the capital, we saw them in the theater. They generally play all these instruments together. The musicians make a row before the elevation for dancing and the actors nearby begin dancing afterwards”

[*Kankai ibun* 2009, pp. 181–182] (Illustration 6).

That is how the Japanese viewers saw Russia's theater and music culture of the early 19th century.

A hundred years later, in March 1902 to be exact, Japan's Theater Company headed by Otojirō Kawakami (1864–1911) visited Saint Petersburg as part of the guest tour of the countries of Europe and America. That was the first tour of Japan's Kabuki theater in Russia,

¹⁷ For more details about the repertoire of early 19th century Russian theaters, see: [Istoria russkogo dramaticheskogo teatra 1977]. The Chamber-Fourier ceremonial journal for 1803 does not have an entry about the trip of the Emperor and his family to Tsarskoye Selo. Yet, the journal of Alexander I for May and June of 1803, which was kept separately, has not survived. It might have mentioned this trip and the performance in the Chinese Theater. Therefore, we may only assume when the performance took place and what play the Japanese sailors saw.

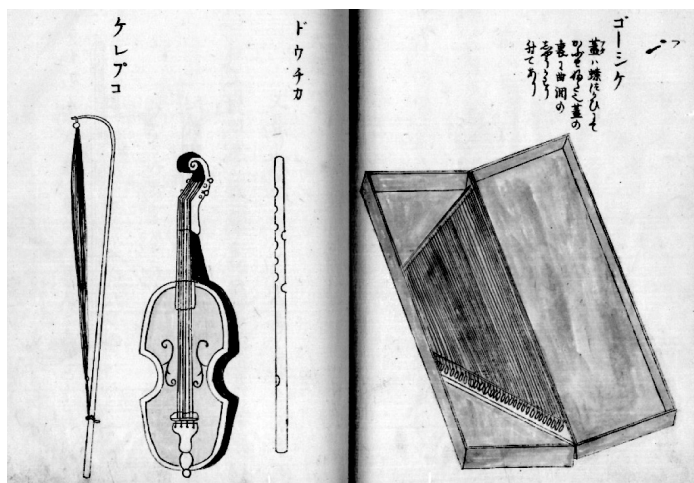


Illustration 6. Musical instruments mentioned in the manuscript Kankai Ibun

Source: <https://www.mediaport.ua/udivitelnye-svedeniya-ob-okruzhayushchih-zemlyu-moryah?page=1#img16>

and the savvy public of the capital was eager to hear and see the acting of Kawakami Sadayakko (1872–1946), a legendary actress and the star of the company, whom many had known from articles published in the French, English, and German press; she was likened to such greatest actresses of that time as Eleanora Duse, Sara Bernard, and Tina de Lorenzo (Illustration 7).

We may shortly note that the theater company consisting of fourteen men and four women performed first in the United States, then in England and France, where its performance had been announced specially as a final event of the cultural program of the World Paris Exhibition. Despite initial difficulties that arose in the United States, the company quickly adapted to the tastes of the public in those countries, having contracted the amount of oral speech in their performances (as the Japanese language was not understood by the viewers), and, vice versa, having focused on the visual effect of the performance – bright costumes, dramatic scenes of battles and suicides (*harakiri*), striking and expressive dances. The music specifically, as it sounded odd to a European ear, was dramatically



Illustration 7. Sada Yacco on the cover of Le Theatre magazine, 1900

Source: <https://twitter.com/JapanStoryFr/status/1240229317826826246/photo/2>

shortened or omitted altogether. It was for a reason that German newspapers, for example, a Berlin magazine “Ost-Asien”, indicated the pantomimic and “European-Japanese” character of the performances.¹⁸

On March 20, 1902, the Kawakami Company performed in Japan’s Embassy in Saint Petersburg, then in the Marriinsky Theater on March 21, and in the “New Theater” on March 22, 23, and 24; after that, the company left for Moscow.¹⁹ The titles of the plays presented are known:

¹⁸ *Ost-Asien*. No. 45, December 1901. Cit. ex.: [Fritsch 2003, p. 69].

¹⁹ On March 26 and 27, the company performed in the Moscow International Theater (earlier – Georg Paradise’s theater, then the theater of V. E. Meyerhold; now it is the Mayakovsky Theater).

Geisha and Samurai (translated into Russian as *Geisha and Knight*²⁰), *Kesa*,²¹ and *The Merchant of Venice*.²²

²⁰ The play *Geisha and Knight* is a combination of two Kabuki plays. The first act, the plot of which is borrowed from the play *Sayate* (“*Love Rivalry*”), presents two samurai struggling for the love of famous geisha Katsuragi. She had an affair with the winner of the duel, named Nagoya Sanza, who, however, had a fiancé – Orihime. The second act, based on the play *Musume Dojoji*, shows how Katsuragi, afflicted by jealousy, persecutes the samurai she is in love with while he hides himself and his fiancé in the monastery. The geisha tries to enchant monks with her dancing, as they did not let her inside the monastery; finally, she breaks into the monastery. She strikes a hard blow to her rival Orihime and dies of broken heart in the hands of her lover who deserted her so shamefully [Fritsch 2003, p. 71].

²¹ A historical drama based on the famous tragic episode of the 12th century from the life of Ando Morito (with the monastic name of Mongaku) and Kesa-Gozen. In Kawakami’s version, the plot is as follows: a young girl named Kesa and her mother were abducted during their travel and are now kept captive. Having heard about the abduction, brave warrior Morito releases both women after a hard-fought battle. Three years later, Kesa, who has grown and become even more beautiful, marries young Wataru, although the mother had promised Morito that Kesa would become his wife. Infuriated by the news, Morito intends to kill the deceitful mother, but Kesa suggests that he should get into her bedroom at night and kill her husband Wataru; after that, he would not have anything else to do but to marry Morito. The latter agrees. He secretly gets into the bedroom and kills the person he takes for Wataru; yet it turns out to be his beloved Kesa who had lied to him. Full of repentance and hopelessness, Morito commits *harakiri* [Fritsch 2003, p. 75].

²² The company staged a famous court scene from Shakespeare’s play *The Merchant of Venice*; the fragment was called *Sairoku* (“*Shylock*”). Shylock, a usurer, appears in a satirical image of a coarse Japanese sailor from a faraway island as an embodiment of western greed. The scene was produced during a tour in Boston in 1899 with the help and consultations of Henry

Despite the spectacular success and enthusiastic reviews of the press related to the Kawakami Company's tour in America and Europe, the Russian public showed quite a skeptical attitude. The articles written by our theater critics, as L. M. Yermakova writes, "combine a wish to master something new and enrich the existent art opportunities with a lack of readiness for adaptation, ability to accept new theater conditionality and difficult theater aesthetics" [Yermakova 2020, p. 133]. Along with attempts to provide a serious opinion of what they had seen, critics did not miss an opportunity of exercising their wits, with unacceptance of the sound component of the action being a commonplace. Pitches of Japanese voices, manners of singing and reciting, and weird sounds of musical instruments never heard before were perceived with hostility and often aroused laughter. Below are several quotations:

*"A bit of hilarity, a bit of tragedy, a bit of equilibristics, a lot of naïvety and yet a lot of art – that is the impression of the acting shown by the Japanese company that started its performances in the International Theater yesterday. It is all very original, very skillful, and, despite primitive settings and naïve devices, touching at times. Of course, many things make you laugh, beginning from settings and ending with conditional fighting methods, and those who, when going to the Japanese theater, present the claims we consider mandatory for our stage, will not experience anything but disappointment..."*²³

*"Their drama is more pantomimic, as there are only few words, and the plot is conveyed by the plastic and expressive movements. Odd are their grimaces and the hissing sounds of the Japanese language; the Japanese music grates on ears and the settings are unusual for our eyes, but, all this said, we must state that it is very interesting"*²⁴

Irving and Ellen Terry, American actors from the Knickerbocker Theater [Fritsch 2003, p. 78].

²³ *Russkiye Vedomosti*. March 14, 1902. No. 72. Cit. ex.: [Yermakova 2020, p. 140].

²⁴ *Moskovskii Listok*. March 14, 1902. No. 73. Cit. ex.: [Yermakova 2020, p. 141].

*“The art of this Duse is limited by sticking out hands and fingers, meaningless prattling and squatting to the accompaniment of rattling balalaika and rhythmic drumbeats...”*²⁵

The scene from *The Merchant of Venice* brought about the strongest, nearly xenophobic, response of the Russian theater press, demonstrating, as L. M. Yermakova put it, “the depth of the gap and misunderstanding existent between the cultures of Russia and Japan, as well as exorbitant eurocentrism among Russians” [Yermakova 2020, p. 142]. Theater critics of Petersburg did not avoid these misperceptions either:

*“It was curious to visit the off-stage of the Mariinsky Theater on the evening Japan’s “celebrity” Sada-Yacco performed there for the first time. There were many of our producers and actors among those present. In order to realize what impression the Japanese made on our actors it would be enough to note that our actors burst into laughter in the most dramatic episodes of Japanese plays. – The only name for it would be “cats on the roofs” – that is how they exchanged their impressions”.*²⁶

Despite the lack of furor around the Japanese tour, the public of Petersburg perceived it quite favorably. Yu. D. Belyaev (1876–1917), a famous theater critic, compared Sada Yacco’s artistic talent with Maria Konstantinovna Zankovetskaya’s acting and said that the latter and Sada Yacco were “actresses with a pure heart” [Belyaev 1902, p. 189]. Vsevolod Meyerhold visited the company’s performances and was greatly impressed by Sada Yacco’s art:

“She made gestures, she did this or that, but it was evidently not enough, and so she acted as follows. She brought her ecstasy to a certain

²⁵ Ibid. Cit. ex.: [Yermakova 2020, p. 141].

²⁶ *Peterburgskaya Gazeta*. March 12, 1902. No. 69. Cit. ex.: [Yermakova 2020, p. 136].

degree and began moving to the music... And she captured the public by it. Not by words, mimic, or postures, but by her acting against the background of the orchestra”

[Meyerhold 1968, p. 84].

The Japanese theater’s artistic devices, its symbolism and expressive gracefulness based on traditional dancing art going back to deep antiquity were, to a large extent, a foundation of the new theater that V. E. Meyerhold thought about at that time while looking for new principles of theater arrangement.

His enthusiastic review is followed by V. L. Yurenueva (1876–1962), in 1902, a graduate of the Petersburg Theater School and, later, a famous Russian actress:

“Her scenic images are created with such a technique we, actors of Europe, can only wish for. It is not enough to have just a usual, good theater technique to be so natural on the stage – you need some “super technique”. How well can Sada-Yacco play the most difficult scenes of madness or death!”

[Yurenueva 1946, p.56]

In addition, the Japanese company’s performances provided theater experts and critics with the basis for contemplation over the nature of the Japanese theater per se and its distinction from the western one. Theater critic Osip Dymov²⁷ from Petersburg noted in the *Birzhevye Vedomosti* newspaper on March 12, 1902 that the Japanese performances were full of “between-acts” effect; they were not arranged in accordance with theater laws architectonically – they seemed to show a piece of life “as if magnesium has sparkled for a moment and the photographic plate has developed some “life nook” snatched from the darkness”²⁸

²⁷ The penname of I. I. Perelman (1878–1959).

²⁸ Cit. ex.: [Yermakova 2020, p. 137]

The critic continues that this feature of the Japanese theater makes a very strong impression:

*“The important, needed, and indispensable is mixed with the accidental and third-rate; there is no observance of the laws of perspective, and one essential does not originate from another continuously; haphazard episodes often dominate over primary and important ones. The Japanese drama depicts life, its accidental and chaotic character, its ignorance of evil and good, its entwinement of the great and the petty, the accidental and the principal. The European drama (and art per se) attends not so much to life as to the “thick of it”, its analysis (Dostoyevsky), its synthesis (Ibsen), and its most intensively expressed episodes. Therefore, we, Europeans, take no interest in any between-acts developments, consequences, and epilogues. This is, I think, a major difference between European and Japanese dramas; specific features of national mentalities are of great importance in this issue”*²⁹

Thus, the Japanese theater’s tour, despite such contradictory opinions of theater historians, critics, experts, and ordinary public, caused a stir in the Russian theater world, making people argue, contemplate, get away from habitual estimates and ask themselves a question: “If everything they do is so different from us, *why* is it so?”³⁰ The Japanese sailors who had viewed the performances in Petersburg a hundred years before were certainly not theater experts; they did not ask these questions but only made comparisons: “This is the same as in our life, and this is quite different.”

Besides, they did not have any moral right to criticize the spectacle they had been invited to see by the first persons of the state. Unfortunately, we will never know their genuine feelings towards the Russian performances they saw. Yet, we believe that the similarity between the ordinary

²⁹ Cit. ex.: [Yermakova 2020, p. 138]

³⁰ Italics added. – N. K.

Japanese sailors' response to the western theater performance and Russian viewers' impressions of the Japanese scenic art proves that the Japanese as well as Russians discovered for themselves quite a different theater world as deep and charming as it was frighteningly unknown.

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