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**CULTURE**

“Showroomdummies #3” (France) | ©MATHIEU ROUSSEAU

STAGE

## French to the fore on SPAC’s 2014 festival menu

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It is often said that “variety is the spice of life,” but in the multifarious world of theater it is more a staple than a special condiment. That said, “variety” is the keyword chosen by Satoshi Miyagi, artistic director of the Shizuoka Performing Arts Center (SPAC), to capture the upcoming and especially diverse 2014 World Theatre Festival Shizuoka under Mt. Fuji.

For Miyagi, 55, variety is an essential and core part of theater that is necessarily generated by the collaborative processes involved in its production and reception. And, as an interactive space, theater also invites all its participants to traverse geopolitical or cultural lines in their collective quest for distinctive modes of expression.

So now, especially with dystopia seeming to beckon from every news report in the form of sectarian and territorial conflicts around the world, the theater remains a valuable space in which to rethink the importance of mutual respect and some of the richness that can stem from variety.

It's little surprise then, with Miyagi's proven cutting-edge track record, that many of the works in this year's festival, which runs on the weekends from April 26 to May 6, are exemplars of cultural diversity.

Riding on the success of last year's Franco-Japanese collaboration — which saw the legendary director Claude Régy travel to Shizuoka to celebrate his 90th birthday by reviving his iconic version of Maurice Maeterlinck's play "Interior" with a Japanese cast — four of this year's productions are part of a yearlong program of events commemorating 90 years of Franco-Japanese cultural relations.

This partnership which began in 1924 with the founding of the Maison franco-japonaise in Ebisu, Tokyo, is of particular significance to SPAC, as Miyagi has introduced many francophone artists to Japan and many of his own productions have been received in France to great acclaim.

That was the case with his adaptation of the epic story of ancient India, the "Mahabharata," which played to packed houses in Paris in 2006 and was praised for its theatrical ingenuity, virtuoso cast, elaborate costumes and outstanding musical score written and conducted by Hiroko Tanakawa. The production also showcased a directorial device Miyagi developed with Ku Na'uka, the company he formed in 1990 and worked with before taking the job with SPAC in 2007 — namely, the division of cast members into movers, what he called the pathos roles, and speakers (logos) who voice their lines in what becomes an otherworldly experience for audiences due to the separation of physical and verbal languages.

Miyagi's "Mahabharata" is one of the hot tickets of the Shizuoka festival, after which it will return to France in July as the prestigious opening work of the world-famous Avignon Festival. There, it will be performed in a quarry in what promises to be a real open-air spectacular that will echo Peter Brook's landmark production of the "Mahabharata" at the same venue in 1985. In fact, a video of Brook's staging will be shown at this year's SPAC festival, along with "The Tightrope," a 2012 documentary about the master at work, and recently uncovered footage of Brook's early experimental work in Africa.

Meanwhile, the festival seems set to serve up another fine exemplar of cultural diversity in "Splendour and Lassitude of Captain Iwatani Izumi," a one-man show performed by resident SPAC actor Keita Mishima.

Written and directed by the avant-garde French multimedia theater artist Jean Lambert-wild, this is the story of a soldier clinging to a code of honor when all that is left around him is sand and blood. The original text was written and produced in French in 1999, but after seeing Mishima perform at SPAC in 2010, Lambert-wild decided to revive it this year in order to work with this seasoned actor. His poetic tale, which draws on his uncle's military experience, was translated by Akihito Hirano.

Also in 2010, the Cameroonian French dancer and choreographer Merlin Nyakam was invited to lead what was styled the SPAC-Enfants Project. Auditions were held inviting young people from across Shizuoka Prefecture to work on a new "dance that can give hope for the future back to the children of the world."

One of the main outcomes of the project was “Takase’s Dream,” a euphemistic work that has since been through multiple iterations. Set beneath a large ornate papier-mache baobab tree, this powerful production focuses on a boy named Takase who wakes up from a strange dream to a sinister world from which he must escape.

The two remaining productions from France, “Jerk” and “Showroomdummies #3,” are both by in-demand director Gisele Vienne.

“Jerk,” based on a 2008 one-person puppet play created by American novelist Dennis Cooper in collaboration with Vienne and performer Jonathan Capdevielle, is an imagined retelling of crimes perpetrated by 1970s U.S. serial killer Dean Corll. However, the story is told from the perspective of Corll’s partner in crime, David Brooks, who uses puppets in his prison cell to re-enact scenes surrounding the murders.

“Showroomdummies #3” was originally produced in 2001 and is a collaboration between Vienne and multi-disciplinary artist Etienne Bideau-Rey. This mixes dance, theater and visual arts and was inspired by Austrian author Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s 1870 novella “Venus in Furs,” whose themes include female dominance. Although the title references a track on electronic-music band Kraftwerk’s 1977 album “Trans-Europe Express,” the emotionless but sexualized mannequin-like performers critique the commodification of the body.

Besides francophone works, however, this year’s festival will also serve up pieces from Spain, Germany and Japan.

“Short Exercises in Dying Well” is a participatory performance by the Teatro de los Sentidos company from Barcelona, led by Colombian-born director Enrique Vargas. In this, audiences can choose between two doors; one leads to reflections on dying well — the other on living well.

In addition, German director Nicolas Stemann presents the first part of his marathon eight-hour production of Goethe’s classic play, “Faust.” An ambitious project by this avowed proponent of the postdramatic school of theater, this defies conventions in an explosion of styles that bring the infamous story of Faust’s pact with the devil to life.

Finally, among this year’s highlights from Japan is “Yaji and Kita,” a stage adaptation directed by Tengai Amano of an eponymous manga by Kotobuki Shiriagari that ran between 1996-2002. Intriguingly, though, the manga was itself based on “Tokaidochu Hizakurige,” an early 19th-century book about the “road-movie” misadventures of two travelers on a pilgrimage to Ise Shrine, which is among Shinto’s most venerated sites.

Then, once the festival’s main program ends, audiences have a chance to see further works at the end of May as part of its Open-air Performing Arts strand staged at Shimizu Marine Park and Hamanako Garden Park. This includes a revival of the phantasmagoric “Water Fools,” a spectacular yet oddly balletic waterborne performance by French company Ilotopie, directed by Bruno Schnebelin; and “The Castle Tower,” one of SPAC’s repertory plays directed by Miyagi.

Certainly, the rich assortment offered by this year's festival will provide ample food for thought. As always with theater, though, audiences will be the final judges on taste.

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*World Theatre Festival Shizuoka under Mt. Fuji 2014 runs on weekends from April 26-May 6 at the Shizuoka Performing Arts Centre, while the Open Air Performing Arts Festival under Mt. Fuji runs on weekends from May 30-June 6 at Shimizu Marine Park and Hamanako Garden Park. For more details and reservations — and information about subsidized bus services from Tokyo, Hamamatsu, Mishima and Numazu — call SPAC at 054-203-5730 or visit [www.spac.or.jp](http://www.spac.or.jp) (<http://www.spac.or.jp>).*

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