

Summary

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The doctoral thesis *From the Myth of the Androgynous to The Scarlet Princess of Edo: a cross gender experience, between East and West* derives from the research that I initiated while I was creating the role of Princess Sakura in the show mentioned in the title, created by Silviu Purcărete at the National Theater "Radu Stanca" in Sibiu. The whole process includes notions related to sex, gender identity, the androgynous, cross gender and cross dressing. Apart from the show and the related role, I approached these aspects from a wider spectrum of European theatricality over time, using excerpts from emblematic playwrights such as William Shakespeare or Bertolt Brecht. But the main cultural and artistic area of the work, the core that I developed extensively, is kabuki theatre and, above all, onnagata. By onnagata we understand the Japanese art strongly rooted in tradition and ritual, specific only to kabuki theatre, which involves a male actor playing a female role. Although put into words so succinctly, it may seem enough to describe the role I'm doing in *The Scarlet Princess of Edo*, the European and Romanian context must be taken into consideration, as it's not only the cultural space that the show was created in, but also where I was trained as an actor. Neither Silviu Purcărete's show, nor the main role that I performed, claim to be included in the kabuki and onnagata areas. Strongly inspired by these, they are nevertheless fused with social and psychological nuances specific to the culture in which we the creators function as people and artists. That is why my doctoral research also includes social and cultural aspects of these very different worlds: the Japanese and the European (more precisely, Romanian). Moreover, the topic of onnagata and theater in general cannot and should not be approached without careful attention to the historical and social context in which they exist.

The starting point of the research were in-depth studies on topics such as onnagata, sex and gender, the representation of identity on stage and in dramatic texts, cross dressing (a body identified as being of a certain gender wearing clothes and elements specific to the other gender) and cross gender (cancelling the traits of a certain sex and assuming the other, or simultaneously denying any of them). I have analysed, assimilated and processed them through my training and personal and professional experience, without ignoring the societal

conventions, but challenging them at the same time. I have used examples from literature, theatre, society and personal experience so by the end of the paper to be able to demonstrate the process and reasoning behind the role of Princess Sakura; even if in the show as it finally turned out all of them are not obvious, they certainly contributed to its construction and to the creation of what I continue to do on stage, in every performance.

The story of *The Scarlet Princess of Edo* is based on the play *Sakura Hime Azuma Bunshô*, written by Tsuruya Nanbouku IV – a classic text belonging to the kabuki theatre. The original idea of the show is the kabuki universe itself, but adapted to the European world; merging these two dimensions resulted into a hybrid product. The paper begins with an extensive presentation of the kabuki theatre and its strong nuances. As an ancient Japanese theatre form, deeply rooted and bound by tradition and ritual, I considered it important to reproduce and develop the context in which it was created - Japanese society itself. Although an in-depth study of it is worthy of an entire separated work, I briefly outlined the most important elements, such as religion, myths or key historical moments in the formative period of kabuki. I believe that in order to fully understand such an art form and a creative process so attached to the cultural essence, a foray into these aspects is mandatory, as the context plays a particularly important role.

An entire subchapter is dedicated to the art of onnagata. I have traced this form of kabuki expression from its origins to the present, noting the great historical moments that marked its course, with the results and effects thereof. I also presented the most important onnagata elements, from those related to the body and personal expression – the lifelong training, the specific stage positions, the acute body technique, the voice and expressions – to the added elements and artifices that serve the visual illusion – wig, make-up, costumes, props rich in meanings. The books *Onnagata. A Labyrinth of Gender* by Maki Isaka and *Beautiful Boys/Outlaw Bodies: Devising Kabuki Female-Likeness* by Katherine Mezur comprehensively showcase this art, its history, and the elements it contains. I used these works in my research, complementing them with other sources, recordings of performances or testimonies of actors and media, available on the internet.

A dominating aspect of onnagata is ambiguity, which I further explored in the paper both in relation to the kabuki stage and to the Japanese society in general. The Japanese have a strongly ambiguous character about them, shown not only through artistic and creative expressions, but through the very way their society is structured and unfolds. The social norms, human values and beliefs that underlie Japanese manifestations are strewn with

ambivalence. The study I made on Japan, kabuki and onnagata theatre is primarily based on theoretical research, complemented by the direct observation I was able to conduct when *The Scarlet Princess of Edo* was performed at the Tokyo Metropolitan Theatre and I had the opportunity to spend 10 days in the place that was once Edo. However, my own training and the cultural and social context in which I was formed are indeed very different.

It felt mandatory to complete the research on the role and the so dominant notion of cross gender, by leaning on European civilization in its cultural diversity and pointing out the most important milestones. To begin with, we identify the aspect of ambiguity in the myth of the androgyne, so carefully reproduced and debated by the great philosophers of ancient Greece. Plato, Aristophanes, and others alike approached eros and sexuality, debating these sides of the human being in depth. Plato's *Symposium* is certainly a masterpiece from this point of view and one of the most important sources of mythology and beliefs of ancient Greece. Even though they are based on myths, stories and deities (so fantastical beings), they had a profound effect on society and the way Greek culture developed – a culture so influential throughout Europe, even now after so many centuries . All this rich and vast culture gave birth to theatre itself as an art, and the performing arts certainly presented a high degree of ambiguity, as well as cross-dressing – although the reasons are of social matter, the performative expressions are rich in meanings and it dictates not only artistic but also cultural and societal conventions. This reasoning also holds true centuries later, during the early Renaissance in England or France, then later in 20th century Germany. These three great milestones in the cultural chronology of Europe are illustrated in the works of great playwrights William Shakespeare, Molière, and Bertolt Brecht, respectively. Each of these represents remarkable periods in their cultures, and is important to note that they captured it fully in their writings, through the stories and characters they created.

Through the plays *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It*, Shakespeare used not only the concept of cross dressing, but also cross gender, both through the gender impersonations that his characters do, but also through the feelings and thoughts that they nurture, that go beyond gender identity and sexual orientation. Molière, for his part, used cross gender as well, even if not so explicitly from a visual point of view, but certainly on a human level and social perception of genders. He juggled femininity and masculinity as they were understood and accepted at the time, and the play *The Learned Ladies* is a very good example of this. Brecht combined the notions of cross gender and cross dressing in *The Good Person of Szechwan*, in a very complex but precise way. Through the characters Şen De and Şui Ta, played by the

same actress, he accurately renders not only specific traits associated with the respective genres, but also human nature in relation to society's expectations. This cross gender that he endorses is truly striking for the audience, as the alternative male character that the actress takes on is not just a disguise, but a creation of a completely different character, with a totally opposite personality to Sen De – that is until the story evolves and the character traits seem to merge and transfer, even if only very subtly. In any case, Brecht's great merit in this play is that in the end, he reduces everything to the human being and proves that the fundamental way of existing can be completely separated from gender identity.

Coming into the recent period in history regarding cross gender in the performing arts, I found it necessary and important to lean into the art of drag queens. A completely unique form of expression, drag art takes the concept of a man playing a woman to a level never seen before in the performing arts. It is perhaps the form of interpretation closest to the onnagata – even if fundamentally different – and it is certainly strongly reflected in the role I created in *The Scarlet Princess of Edo*. More than being a form of entertainment, drag art is also a social and political manifesto. Beyond cross gender and cross dressing, one cannot fully discuss drag queens without including the notions of sexual identity and sexual orientation. A product of the modern world heavily inspired by society, drag is completely unique in the artistic and cultural landscape. The books *Changing Room. Sex, Drag and Theater* by Laurence Senelick and *Drag, Interperformance, and the Trouble with Queerness* by Katie Horowitz are the main written works that form the basis of my research on this topic. But this is perhaps best encapsulated and easily understood by watching the show *RuPaul's Drag Race*, which has been produced for 15 years now and continues to showcase the art of drag happening in the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia.

I explored all these notions and their artistic and cultural expressions, placed in the related time and space, because they sum up my personal process in creating the character of Princess Sakura. The last part of the paper is therefore dedicated to the performance *The Scarlet Princess*. The chapter presents both kabuki and European spectacular aspects that the show contains, mentions the component traditions – both Japanese and Romanian –, as well as an actor's work on stage as well as at home. This part of the paper is a testimony of how I approached and created this cross gender role; with no purpose that it serves as a guide, it can at least be an inspiration and spark new methods for an artist who undertakes such a role.

The inspiration for the PhD thesis therefore comes from the show *The Scarlet Princess* and the personal and professional experience of playing the role of Princess Sakura. Hence, it

is a journey into the theatrical world (both kabuki and European), into the expressions of the art of onnagata and dramatic literature, as well as into mythology and artistic manifestations. As I already stated and I support in the paper, these discussions must be conducted on a social basis, because theatre is born from society and then reflects it, in a never-ending cycle. Moreover, the notion of cross gender is something deeply human, and it relates to human states and feelings that exist primarily within ourselves, independent of the theatrical stage. Therefore, the doctoral thesis also focuses on this side of man - gender identity. The ideas related in this sense are supported by Thomas Laqueur in *Body and Sex. From the Greeks to Freud*. But I did not intend for the work to prove theories related to gender identity, sexual orientation or gender fluidity. These aspects, although deeply felt in the onnagata and in Ancient Greek or European Renaissance theatrical art, are merely important components of the subject of the work worth mentioning, as an exhaustive approach would require a paper in itself, separated from this one and dedicated only to these topics.

In conclusion, the doctoral thesis *From the Myth of the Androgynous to The Scarlet Princess of Edo: a cross gender experience, between East and West* is a research of an artistic process based on deeply human states of being. Starting from the history and concrete development of the concept of cross gender in theatre – from ancient times to the present, from Asian to European territory (and even American, by including drag art as a subject) – I complemented the theoretical research with my experience and personal observation as an actor. The process undertaken in the creation of the role of Princess Sakura is - because it continues to take place with every performance - particularly complex and has its foundation in various sources. This role, like the performance itself that the director Silviu Purcărete made, is unique in the Romanian theatrical landscape due to all the themes that are addressed, the sources of inspiration, the types of artistic expression employed. Therefore, I believe this research can bring value to the field of theatrical art, as a testimony of the process and the reasons behind it.