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Patrick Michael Finelli  
*University of South Florida, finelli@usf.edu*

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# Paralinguistic and Kinesic Codes of Performance: An Intercultural *Gilgamesh*

Patrick Michael Finelli

University of South Florida, Tampa, United States

This paper examines the directing, acting and rehearsal process in transforming the ancient Babylonian epic *Gilgamesh* for the stage using performers' journals as a means of determining the effect of corporeal non-western styles on actors whose prior experience was almost exclusively in naturalistic and text-based theatre. The introduction of theatrical elements from multiple cultures including puppetry and the masks and techniques of Noh drama created a multi-tiered field for intercultural exchange. While Patrice Pavis's hourglass model for the transfer of theatrical material from a source to a target culture may hold true for productions that use linear modes of transmission, translation and incorporation of text, music, costumes and styles, its limitations make it necessary to posit alternative theories that take into account intercultural rehearsal practices, the collaboration of source and target culture and the dynamic interactions that take place through the agency of actor training in the fleshly physical theatre.

*Keywords:* theatre, performance, intercultural transmission, physical theatre, Japanese acting techniques, masks

## Introduction

Intercultural theatre has been broadly defined by Patrice Pavis (1996) as “a crucible in which performance techniques are tested against and amalgamated with the techniques that receive and fashion them”. Pavis developed an hourglass model to explain the transmission of culture in a theatrical production. The upper bulb is the “foreign” or source culture, which must pass through a narrow passage before reaching the lower bulb, or target culture, in an arrangement that “is not random, but regulated by the filters put in place by the target culture” (Pavis, 1992, p. 5). This metaphoric model works for productions that transfer material from a source culture through translation or adaptation and filter it through the theatrical practices and customs of the target culture. Peter Brook's *Mahabharata* (1985)<sup>1</sup> is often cited as a paradigmatic example of this type of intercultural theatre. Brook (1987) was fascinated by the relationship between performance and ceremony; he admired Kathakali dance and the Vedic traditions and did not attempt a reconstruction or representation of the symbolism of Hindu philosophy (pp. 160-161). Despite his conscious effort to celebrate a work by filtering it through an artistic process with many nationalities involved, he drew criticism for appropriating a sacred text from India and was accused of neocolonial exploitation (Barucha, 1993, p. 68). The problem was compounded because the British director adapted the epic Sanskrit poem as well as Indian styles of performance that were incorporated into a

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Patrick Michael Finelli, Ph.D., professor of School of Theatre and Dance, University of South Florida.

<sup>1</sup> Archive theatre review: Krishna comes to the city of the popes/Stage/The Guardian. Available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/1985/jul/16/peter-brook-mahabharata-theatre>.

western mode of production.

The hourglass model relies on translation theory, a one-way cultural flow based on a hierarchy of privilege. While Brook's production took an Asian source and staged it for western audiences, Tadashi Suzuki's *Cherry Orchard* (1986)<sup>2</sup> and Yukio Ninagawa's *Macbeth* (1980), *The Tempest* (1987) and *Hamlet* (2001) turned the hourglass upside down, reversing the direction of the cultural flow while retaining the same methodology. These productions appropriated texts written by western authors and created performances with their own culture's movement, language, vocal patterns and scenic elements. In each of these cases, the source texts were filtered through the theatrical practices of the target culture. Two recent productions have followed a similar West-to-East hourglass model: the Turkish production of *A Streetcar Named Desire* (Özbirinci, 2008) and the Chinese adaptation of *Desire Under the Elms* (ZHU & LIU, 2009). Lo and Gilbert (2002) considered the hourglass model to be an "accurate" way to picture the transfer of material from a source to a target culture, but admitted it cannot account for "alternative and more collaborative forms of intercultural exchange" (p. 41).

Neither Suzuki nor Ninagawa adapted plays from the western canon in order to directly explore the issue of interculturality as a theme in their performances. They put the western plays in Japanese context. *Gilgamesh*, on the other hand, exhibits the functions/meanings of different cultures by defining the roles of humans (played by male actors) and non-humans/creatures = others (performed by female actors). These clear role definitions symbolize the conflicts of two different cultures in multiple layers: animism and monotheism, indigenous culture/religion and prevalent (invader) culture/religion, patriarchy and matriarchy. Thus, the production of *Gilgamesh* does not fit into the hourglass model from a thematic point of view. The content of the play is non-linear and culturally layered. Interculturality is the theme of the play: an Asian female director with alien status in the US interprets Mesopotamian myth while training American actors with eastern techniques.

Ariane Mnouchkine is a prime example of a theatre director who employs a more collaborative production practice resulting in intercultural exchange. Mnouchkine has blended western and Asian theatricality in her Theatre du Soleil stage productions since 1964. *Les Atrides* (1992)<sup>3</sup> combined the three parts of *The Oresteia* with Euripides's *Iphigenia in Aulis* in a performance that featured Kathakali dance, Kabuki katas and a multicultural cast with Brazilian, Armenian and Indian actors in major roles. While suitable for a linear transfer and filtration from source to a target culture, the hourglass model does not sufficiently account for the cultural interactions that arise from rehearsals and performance in Mnouchkine's theatre.

Izumi Ashizawa, a Japanese director and Suzuki expert, worked with American actors for a year prior to the opening of a play based on her adaptation of the ancient Babylonian epic *Gilgamesh*. There are many aspects of the production process that fit the hourglass model including the adaptation of a foreign text for performance and introducing theatrical elements from source cultures including puppetry and the masks and techniques of Noh drama. Other dimensions of the rehearsal and performance do not fit as neatly into the hourglass model. Prior to this production, the American actors had been trained using a system that has been transmitted from teacher to students since the Moscow Art Theatre influenced Harold Clurman, Lee Strasberg and Stella Adler in the early 20th century: text analysis, emotional experience, identifying objectives and physical embodiment. The director,

<sup>2</sup> Suzuki Tadashi Suzuki Company of Toga. Available at <http://www.scot-suzukicompany.com/en/profile.php>

<sup>3</sup> Review/theater: Les Atrides; Taking the stage to some of its extremes/*New York Times* (Online). Available at <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/10/06/theater/review-theater-les-atrides-taking-the-stage-to-some-of-its-extremes.html?ref=mayotteRef>

highly trained in an amalgam of Noh, Kabuki, Suzuki and martial arts in both philosophy and practice, transmitted her technique by rehearsing with her actors in intensive workshops and also performed in the production. The actors brought intrinsic bodily techniques and ideologies to rehearsals that were antithetical to Ashizawa's approach. This collision between established cultural and performative traditions created a dialectical tension that became an animating current for a performance more powerful than anything the actors had previously experienced.

### Theoretical Models

Performances with multiple channels of cultural interactions require the development of an alternate model that accounts for non-linear exchanges. Lo and Gilbert (2002) cited the observations of Erica Fischer-Lichte and Patrice Pavis about the difficulties in proposing a global theory of interculturalism (p. 31). Pavis located the potential for agency at the microscopic level of actor training, revealing the limitations of the hourglass model (as cited in Lo & Gilbert, 2002, p. 43). Fischer-Lichte "rejects all theorizing which suggests a communication or translation model, cuts herself off from any productive model for exchange and renounces a semiotic (even a simply theoretical) explanation, reducing everything to the target culture" (Pavis, 1996, p. 11). Schmitt and George (1989) proposed a theoretical model nearly 20 years ago using quantum physics. According to the quantum model, a multi-channel field for intercultural exchange could be considered analogous to a polyatomic reaction, which is what happens to atomic particles in a supercollider—non-linear, high energy motion with new reactions and creation of new particles—and therefore requires a mode of inquiry analogous to particle physics, one acknowledges the uncertainty principle and the transitory and indeterminate nature of the event itself. The problem is similar to that faced by physicists in detecting the results of hermitic collisions, determining what happens during and after the collisions and examining the energies and direction of their momentum. The results of an atomic reaction will be too short-lived to make much direct impression on the detectors, so any presence of them will be revealed by the identity and behavior of its decay products. Direct observation of subatomic events is impossible. Determining what takes place in a theatrical rehearsal process and performance presents a similarly daunting challenge.

Conceptualizing a theoretical framework for intercultural performance must also consider the catalytic effect of inculcating actors with new ("foreign" or "alien") techniques. We can hypothesize that this may cause the actors to question their own traditions and practices. Eugenio Barba explained this condition according to cultural anthropology:

This implies a displacement, a journey, a detour strategy which makes it possible for one to understand one's own culture in a more precise way. By means of a confrontation with what appears to be foreign, one educates one's way of seeing and renders it both participatory and detached. Theatre Anthropology is the study of the behavior of the human being when it uses its physical and mental presence in an organized performance situation and according to principles which are different from those used in daily life. This extra-daily use of the body is what is called technique. (as cited in Gough, 1991, p. 7)

If the limitations of Pavis's bicameral hourglass model make it suitable primarily for translations and adaptations of text and performance elements from source to a target culture, and the esoteric non-linear particle physics model does not apply to the observable and determinable phenomenon of rehearsal and the choices a director and actors make, then how can we develop a theoretical model that takes into account intercultural

rehearsal practices, the collaboration of source and target culture and the dynamic interactions that take place through the agency of actor training and performance in the fleshly physical theatre? When Grotowski established his workcenter at Pontedera, he stopped directing plays in order to concentrate on his “researches”—intensive work in the process of transmission with focus on the ritual arts of ancient songs, physical action, impulse and organicity. During this period, Grotowski collaborated with Thomas Richards on an approach called “art as vehicle”. Richards (1995) has documented what took place during this period of research. The challenge for the theatre theorist is to uncover primary source evidence that is comparable to Richards’s empirical, experienced-based narrative account. In order to formulate a theory of intercultural performance, it is necessary to analyze at the cellular level, to examine closely the specific activities, exercises, discoveries, successes, failures, mental processes and physical activities that comprise the synaptic nerve endings of the organic process that becomes an intercultural performance.

The hourglass model appears insufficient to conceptualize theory out of a complex network. What are some of the techniques we might use to begin developing a new theoretical model? According to Barba, the interpretation of performance texts and the transmission of performance texts can be abstracted and encoded, but the learning of secrets can only be acquired person-to-person (Gough, 1991, p. 7). Most critical studies have concentrated on the end result without examining specific rehearsal practices. Our approach must consider those steps in order to uncover how the cultural experience is transmitted by the director and assimilated by the actor. Genetic analysis has the potential to offer an alternative to a linear, translational mode of inquiry, particularly when we consider the variables of cultural background, personality differences, experience and traditions that might be considered the DNA, or genetic blueprint of rehearsal and performance (Feral, 2008). This requires a multi-nodal critical examination of the creative work involving: (1) the director’s notes; (2) the director’s transmission of techniques in rehearsal; (3) the collision of traditions; (4) performers’ journals; (5) direct observation of rehearsal; (6) personal interviews; (7) public performance; and (8) audience reception. This paper will focus on such an empirical approach, concentrating on the effect of corporeal non-western styles on actors whose prior experience was almost exclusively in naturalistic, text-based theatre in order to move closer toward formulating a performance-based theory of intercultural theatre.

### **Directorial Approach**

Ashizawa’s training system is made up of many intercultural layers. She has adapted fundamental movement patterns of Noh, Kabuki, Suzuki and Grotowski’s (1996) *plastiques* and *corporeals*, but the exercises that she teaches are altered to be more suited to the western students. Having amalgamated traditional movement patterns and techniques, she found another source of inspiration in the Japanese sport anime, the *Spo-Kon-Anime* (*Sport Spirit Animation*). *Spo-Kon-Anime* includes television series with *Tennis Girl* (*Ace Wo Nerae* (*Get the Ace*)), *Baseball Boy* (*Kyojin No Hoshi* (*The Star of Giants*)), *Valley Ball Girls* (*Attack Number 1*) and *Soccer Boy* (*Captain Tsubasa*) in the 1970s and 1980s that she watched every day as a young child. Most of the *Spo-Kon-Anime* consists of countless difficult training scenes and competition scenes with melodramatic story lines. The people who admired anime during this time were called *otaku* (or maniac who stays inside of the house) and belonged to the subculture category of “others”. In the late 1990s, Japanese animation started to gain a global reputation and entered mainstream popular culture after 2000. Ashizawa still worships Miyazaki’s animation, but

she is not impressed with the bloody and violent nature of pop culture anime. The cast members knew that she invented exercises inspired by the rebellious Japanese sport anime period.

The performance is based upon a translation of an ancient text initially codified in the archaic language of inscrutable cuneiform symbols. Director Izumi Ashizawa creates her own expressive codes to convey the complexities of the narrative poem in a dynamic dramatic performance. When she rehearsed her actors, one could hear the sound of their feet pounding the floor as if summoning the forces of nature from the earth. She employs techniques from the traditional Noh theatre and the Suzuki Company of Toga that require extreme discipline and physical control. She demands precision and focus in exercises like the slow squat where the actors move in successive counts of 10, 20, 30 and 40 as they imitate her own action. The stylized movement is apparent throughout; even the archaeologist Smith has to move in that way when he enters the world of mythology. The text is a fundamental signifier, but there are other semiotic systems that serve to separate theatre performance from spoken literature. The scenography, movement, masks and puppets bring an aspect of ritual to the communal performance. The stage space is filled with immediate and overpowering images. The result is an original approach: an innovative theatrical interpretation of the ancient story.

### **The Epic of *Gilgamesh***

*Gilgamesh* is one of the oldest written stories in history. It ranks along with Homer's *Odyssey* and Virgil's *Aeneid* as an epic narrative that explores issues of human responsibility, fate, will and immortality. It tells the story of the King of Uruk who lived around 2500 B.C.E. in Sumeria, an area of ancient Mesopotamia known as the Fertile Crescent and cradle of civilization. Originally written in Sumerian on clay tablets, the archaic wedge-shaped cuneiform pictographs were meticulously copied by scribes for centuries. The Akkadian version was found in 19th century Iraq in the ruins of the library of King Assurbanipal. When George Smith, an assistant in The British Museum, identified the great flood on Tablet XI in 1872, he recognized the similarity to the *Old Testament*. Upon translating the text, he "jumped up and rushed about the room in a great state of excitement, and, to the astonishment of those present, began to undress himself" (Mitchell, 2004, p. 4) There were someone who considered it to be blasphemous since it so closely resembled Noah's story in Genesis.

The early urban civilization of Ancient Babylonia sustained a growing population with architectural structures like temples and palaces and cultural elements such as art and writing. The original story of *Gilgamesh* was written at a time of tectonic changes in society. Gilgamesh is Uruk's tyrannical king, a builder of walls: "Two-thirds of him is god and one-third man. The form of his body none can match. He builds the wall of Uruk, the enclosure, the sacred temple of Ishtar... He is our shepherd; strong, handsome and wise" (Heidel, 1949, p. 18). As the city grows, power shifts from a temple-centric religion to the political might of the king. The king seeks divine authority to make himself godlike and immortal. In response, the gods create Enkidu to balance Gilgamesh's power.

The production bristles with a multiplicity of complex codes that correlate with specific sign systems. The most basic level is the linguistic, the poetic words spoken by the actors translated from the Akkadian language. The vocal sounds were not achieved through conventional western musical scores, but developed as onomatopoeia. Smith, exhausted from unsuccessful archeological excavations in the desert, hears the sound of flapping wings and the hallucinogenic sound of a bird (see Figure 1):

Kappikappikappikappikappikappikappi

Lib-ki-ka = luibki-ka

Lib-ki-ka = luibki-ka

Lib-ki-ka = luibki-ka



Figure 1. Act I, Scene i. (Discovery), Smith, exhausted hears the hallucinogenic sound of a bird (photo by Kyle Sharf).

These paralinguistic expressions are layered with literal and connotative meanings. “Kapi” connotes the sound of a lamenting bird, and in the Sumerian language it means “my wings”. Ashizawa learned this from Yajima’s Japanese translation of *Gilgamesh* that includes descriptions about archaeological evidence, history and word choices in the text (Yajima, 1998). The word became a refrain in this scene. The same source indicates that “Lib-ki-ka = luibki-ka” is from the Text A (in Assyrian language) excavated from Nineveh. This is the section where Gilgamesh loses Enkidu and laments his loss. It means literally “cry for you”. In the tablet, this same phrase was repeated twelve times. Izumi (2010) believed the repetition of the simple words “cry for you” conveyed an enormous amount of pain:

In the Japanese language we usually omit the personal pronoun—it seems like the Japanese linguistic tendency is similar to Assyrian grammar in this regard. Without the specificity, it could mean “I” or “we” or “he”. Thus, “we” are encouraged to cry for Enkidu, or it can be Gilgamesh who cries for Enkidu, or both. It gives us more interpretational freedom. It is almost child-like, lacking any complex metaphor of any kind, yet the refrain of a simple phrase expressed stronger emotion than elaborate words. One of my interests is how to convey the essence of human emotion in primal form in theatre. Along with other techniques, I wanted to experiment with the idea of repeating a simple Ancient phrase as a refrain in performance. (I. Ashizawa, personal communication, December 12, 2010)

These paralinguistic codes became expressive morphemes that evoked a sense of primal ritual. This is how Ashizawa learned Noh theatre’s *Utai* (chanting segment). There is no score for Noh theatre. The Noh script contains symbols along with poetic text. Her actors learned in a similar way by listening and repeating with slight alterations as they became more familiar with the sounds. The process for *Gilgamesh* chanting is rooted in a practice resembling shamanistic ritual passed down orally through centuries long before musical score invention. In order to make the chanting composition work fully, the director turned off the fluorescent room lights, and put one 60-watt bulb in a reading lamp. This lighting condition applied to all of the ensemble vocal compositions. All of the actors sat in a circle facing each other; close enough to touch on both sides. Then they were placed in a

four-legged animal position. In the process of composing the mothers' birth scene, Ashizawa asked male cast members to chant "E-o-e-o, E-o-e-o". She demonstrated the sound, and they repeated. Next, she asked the females to chant "E, e, e—" demonstrating the sound before they repeated it. Subsequently, both were uttered together: "E-o-e-o, E-o-e-o," "E, e, e—". Finally, she asked the females to breathe in and out in a specific way: "Ha, ha, ha—" The female breathing became the opening of this chant. Thus, "The Mother Chant" became "Ha, ha, ha—, Ha, ha, ha—, Ha, ha, ha—E-o-e-o, E-o-e-o, E, e, e, e—". Ashizawa prepared a hand-written scroll diagramming "The Mother Chant". It is used both in *Mother/Baby* (as cited in Ashizawa's script, Act I, Scene iv) and in the dream sequence (as cited in Ashizawa's script, Act I, Scene viii). The physical movement in this scene is rigorous as the soldiers and Gilgamesh take the babies from their mothers and the baby masks become part of the wall. The carved effigies of babies on the wall, powerful in its iconic simplicity, signify the persecution of the people by Gilgamesh, creating a grotesque tableau that echoes the words: "Gilgamesh does not leave a son to his father... Gilgamesh does not leave a girl to her mother", projecting a mystical sense of cruelty and mortality. The effect is a transcendental signifier of power. It is a powerful "coup de theatre" (see Figure 2).



*Figure 2.* Act I, Scene iv. (Mythical King). A mother appears from the earth. She pulls out the mask of a baby. Gilgamesh steals it from her. It becomes part of the wall (photo by Kyle Sharf).

### **Stylized Movement and Visualization**

The Birth of Enkidu (as cited in Ashizawa's script, Act I, Scene v) displays intense primal movement, innovative use of costume and props, and ritualistic, seductive chanting. Aruru, played by the director, forms a cylinder of clay, which represents Anu's sexual organ. Aruru builds a cylinder as potters do before they start forming a bowl. Ashizawa's uncle is a ceramicist and she has practiced ceramic arts for years, fascinated by the visual transformational metaphor of clay in the process of bowl-making; it starts as asexual wet earth, turning into a shape of masculine organ, then transforming into a feminine container that later holds food, which becomes a source of sustenance and eventually goes back to the earth. The cycles of the spinning wheel make possible the metaphorical transformation of clay.

Aruru, played by the director, forms a ball of clay. Her stomach swells as she conceives an image of Anu



(see Figure 3). A transparent cocoon emerges from sand (see Figure 4); a puppet falls from the sky. The cocoon consists of two actors appearing as one. What you see is the covered upper body of one actor and the covered lower body of a second actor. They rip off the transparent cocoon, emerging as two separate puppeteers. The Enkidu puppet is dropped from the sky, landing in front of the puppeteers. They look at the puppet, look at each other, approach the puppet simultaneously and begin to animate the puppet.



*Figure 3.* Act I, Scene v. (Birth of Enkidu). Aruru forms an image of Anu (photo by Kyle Sharf).



*Figure 4.* Act I, Scene v. (Birth of Enkidu) (photo by Kyle Sharf).

The god Anu is actually a knee-mask (see Figure 5). The manipulating actor's knee movements give life to Anu's mouth. In composing the birth of Enkidu chant, Ashizawa worked with two actors, who happened to be twin sisters, cast in roles in which they must mirror each other such as Scorpion Sister, Voluptuous Woman, Tree and Mother. She asked them to observe an object in her hand. She demonstrated the following: (1) her hand wrapped in saran wrap; (2) the hand makes a pounding movement like a heartbeat; (3) the hand starts to shiver; (4) the hand slowly starts to tear the saran wrap; and (5) the hand is completely out of saran wrap and makes a rough breathing movement. After this demonstration, one was asked to put sound on this hand movement, making sure to differentiate the transitions. Next, the other sister was asked to do the same. Finally, she asked them to repeat the sound that they just created, this time without her hand movements. Then, she asked them to make the two sounds simultaneously and repeat several times. She gave several concrete directions, such as "visualize the warm blood pounding in the vein, and now exaggerate that element in your vocalization", "put the element of a baby going

through the maternal pathway in your vocal” and “put the element of suffocation”. She gave several nuanced directions such as “put a little bit more blue in the vocal color”, “put the element of cocoon, inside is liquid, then vocalize the transformation from liquid into substance” and “vocalize the way a newly transformed butterfly coming out of cocoon—but it was not a butterfly it was a moth!”. She asked them to cut some parts and elongate other parts. Then she asked them to try a part of the tune from another scene (snake chant). The melody from the snake scene sends a subliminal message of the ominous predicament to the audience. At the same time, it gives a thematic link and philosophical depth, connecting the swirling movement of Enkidu and that of snake woman.

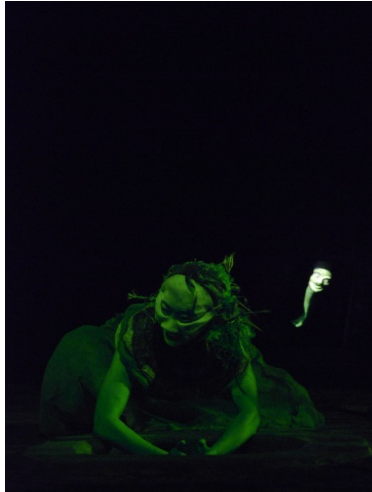


Figure 5. Act I, Scene v. (Birth of Enkidu) Knee-mask of Anu (photo by Ashley Einfinger).

Taming of the Beast (as cited in Ashizawa’s script, Act I, Scene vi) contains extreme vocal changes in pitch and tonality as the voluptuous women absorb Enkidu, a puppet manipulated by an actor, detaching Enkidu’s arms and legs from his torso. The stylized movement and vocalization of the voluptuous women takes place within Smith’s narrative. For this scene, Ashizawa asked the twin sisters, “What is the movement or behavior of an animal that make you think most sensual?”. This action or behavior of an animal should not be the action that straightly connects to the animal’s reproductive behavior. The action or movement is the one that has no meaning of sensuality as it is, but associates with the “idea” of sensuality only through our perception. Then, she asked them to imitate animal’s behavior physically. After they repeated the same movements several times, she asked them to minimize some and exaggerate other aspects of their movement. They repeated this version several times. Next, she asked them to make sound as they moved. They repeated movements with vocal expression several times. Then she asked them to minimize some sounds and exaggerate others and repeat only their sound without movements. Finally, the two sounds were put together in harmony. This became the chanting for the taming of Enkidu. She combined some of other movement parts based on several different exercises with this “sensual animal behavior” movement composition. Throughout the play, all the movements of each actor consists of techniques devised from multiple movement compositions that had been already created based on different exercises during the training session. This fragment-assembly technique represented the fragmented nature of the original cuneiform clay tablet text. The movement physically reflects the ancient text at the end of the scene. The bloody marks in *Gilgamesh* strikingly suggest the symbolic shape of the cuneiforms.

### Transcultural Transmission

The twin sisters, Rachel and Vanessa Nolan, began working with Ashizawa two years before appearing in the Tampa premier, and performed in the Maryland production as well, giving them a unique perspective on the transmission and reception of transcultural acting techniques. Rachel (2009) wrote, “My involvement with Izumi Ashizawa’s play, *Gilgamesh*, has helped me correlate my recent experience in a physically demanding performance to the principles behind Grotowski’s training methods in Motions, and the research with the Objective Drama project”, in which an actor must be spiritually and physically disciplined. Ashizawa’s eastern influence constructed a mind-set that is alert and focused. She brought the art of silence into the training period as well as the performances.

Thomas Richards (1995) described motions as “a series of stretches/positions of the body. Its structure is fairly simple, and on its first superficial level can be taught quickly” (p. 52). Although seemingly simple, motions is rigorous physically and mentally. Richards (1995) recalled many people assuming that they had learned motions within a few days of being introduced to it. Of course, this is a contradiction. According to Richards, certain aspects of motions have taken him years to master. The “primal position”, for example, commences the training.

The “primal position” is the starting point of Motions, a position of readiness from which the body can move immediately. When I first learned Motions... I was told that from the “primal position” I should be able to defend myself from attack. (Richards, 1995, p. 53)

Izumi Ashizawa’s approach and the Suzuki method of training also begin similarly with a “primal position” like stance. Rachel (2009) described her first experience with the Suzuki exercises:

Because the majority of the class had never experienced Suzuki, Ashizawa started us with what seemed to be a simple standing position. Like many exercises in the training, the standing position’s simplicity becomes contradictory to the novice. I stood as I would in life, feet shoulder width apart, staring straight ahead. I did not know at the time, but there is a significant technique in the way that Ashizawa’s actor should stand in order to expand the body and mind to the fullest. She came behind me while I was in standing position and pushed me lightly from my back. I was surprised when my body jolted forward. One element of Ashizawa’s training is locating the center of our body. Although this seems like an easily achievable task, it is quite difficult to maintain this centeredness. Much like the “primal position”, the center is the position in which the performer always begins and ends. Without this balance, it is unlikely to see the potential benefits of training in this particular discipline. (p. 3)

During the training of *Gilgamesh*, it was often very difficult for the actors to concentrate on when a new element was added to the exercise. For instance, as the starter positions became easier to accomplish, Ashizawa would extend the position of an arm or leg to an intricate pose in which their bodies were not familiar. Rachel (2009) said:

Immediately, my eyes would stop focusing, and I would find myself holding my breath. I was no longer holding my focus or my center because I allowed my body to freeze. Later, after repeating these movements many times, I would discover that relaxation is the key to conquering the complex movements. (p. 6)

### Chanting

Fight and reconciliation (as cited in Ashizawa’s script, Act I, Scene vii), introduces Ninsun floating upstage narrating the struggle between Gilgamesh and Enkidu with solo chanting by Ashizawa followed by clappers and pitched voices with Tibetan chants in the dream sequence (as cited in Ashizawa’s script, Act I, Scene viii), where Vanessa Nolan became the solo chanter. In this scene, the director asked her to add more ominous color and make it

minor in tone and pitch, which Ashizawa called “Mother Minor”. The director prepared a hand-written scroll diagramming the chant, first demonstrating the male chant “Wo, Taratara—Wo, Taratara—” and had the male actors imitate and repeat it several times. Then, she demonstrated the female chant “U, Ha, Uu—U, Ha, Uu—”. The female actors imitated the chant and repeated it several times. The sound of the female chant sound derives from a song of a popular Japanese animation character (Sazae-san) created by Machiko Hasegawa. Ashizawa altered it, making it more heightened and violent than the song of Sazae-san. This “U, Ha, Uu” is not exactly from the song itself but is from the short moment of the opening song of Sazae-san when she eats a sweet excitedly. She swallows it too quickly and chokes on it. When she chokes, she makes the similar sound “U, Ha, Uu”.

Finally, she asked male and female actors to put their vocals together as “Wo, Taratara”, “U, Ha, Uu”, “Wo, Taratara,” “U, Ha, Uu”. As boys and girls repeated the chant together, she asked Rachel Nolan to imagine “trees as woman” and their arms, legs and hair are ripped off by men one by one and vocalize this image on top of the chant. Finally, she asked the female actors to add the same breathing sound (“Ha-Ha-Ha”) at the opening and closing of Mother’s Chant again at the beginning and the end of Tree-Cutting Chant. She used the identical lighting conditions of a single 60-watt lamp for rehearsal as she did for the earlier chanting scenes.

The other-worldly sounds of the Scorpion-Women at the Twin Peaks (as cited in Ashizawa’s script, Act II, Scene i) involved a unique process. Ashizawa had previously recorded two tropical birds communicating with each other from a distance in an Australian rain forest. Her impression was of “a most strange pitch and intonation that sounded like crying babies, or Japanese cartoon characters. They were very mysterious to me because I couldn’t see their appearance; I tried hard to see the color or shape of the birds, but they were in the dense foliage of very tall trees. The idea of hearing voice without seeing the source of the sound definitely stimulated my imagination”. She played the recording for the Nolan twins a few times while describing the forest and asked them to imagine the place and mimic the birds vocally. She suggested that they create two different tones with simultaneous variations based on the vocalization. Then she infused the Scorpion Sisters’ speech with these variations of vocal mimesis—to speak their dialogue with the pitch and tone of the tropical birds (see Figure 6).



*Figure 6.* Act II, Scene i. Scorpion-women at the twin peaks (photo by Jemaar Graham).

### Nature and Civilization

The tension between nature and civilization as secular culture usurps the power of religion is at the core of Ashizawa's dramatic interpretation of the story. Gilgamesh and his alter-ego Enkidu defeat Humbaba, the demon guardian (see Figure 7), when they cut down the Cedar Forest to make a huge gate, symbolizing cultural displacement (see Figure 8). The mask of Humbaba is double-layered. When all the branches and heads are ripped off from female trees, Humbaba's outer mask cracks open, and a sad inside mask appears. The forest is represented by women wearing costumes with antler-like extensions similar to sea sponges or corals, signifying the cedar forest. Men play the soldiers, tearing off the branches, an iconic representation of cultural upheaval and the triumph of patriarchy over matriarchy.



*Figure 7.* Act I, Scene viii. (Annihilation of the sacred forest). Gilgamesh and his alter-ego Enkidu defeat Humbaba, the demon guardian, when they cut down the Cedar Forest to make a huge gate, symbolizing cultural displacement (photo by Kyle Sharf).



*Figure 8.* Act I, Scene viii. (Annihilation of the sacred forest). Actors imagine “trees as woman” and their arms, legs and hair are ripped off by men one by one and vocalize this image on top of the chant (photo by Kyle Sharf).

### Conclusions

At the heart of Ashizawa's mode of performance are the kinesic elements derived from Japanese traditions—the rigorous movements, gestures and expressions that are rich sign-vehicles. Her actors have become fluent in a theatrical language unbounded by verbal and textual limitations. The ensemble is made up of individual artists who work together to convey the action. They speak the text through paralinguistic techniques of vocalization using distinctive non-verbal sounds, shouts and cries with variations in loudness and tempo that

create a dialectical tension in conjunction with kinesic action and the proxemic relationships established through the interpersonal dynamics of actor-actor and actor-audience.

Ashizawa's kinesthetic method of training has not been practiced widely in western theatre, yet her philosophy and discipline changed the way these actors think and feel about acting. One actor commented that Ashizawa's training:

Changed my lifestyle. I'm learning to carry over the discipline structure of *Gilgamesh* training in other aspects of my life, such as school and work. Because of this experience I have a greater respect for acting, and the vast amount of time it takes to build a show as intricate and deep as *Gilgamesh*. (Nolan, 2009)

According to Grotowski (1996), "The actor who, in this special process of discipline and self-sacrifice, self-penetration and molding, is not afraid to go beyond all normally acceptable limits, attains a kind of inner harmony and peace of mind" (p. 45). These actors have the experience and desire to approach acting in a whole new way.

It was not only necessary for the cast to be fully focused to concentrate on mind and body, but also the technical crew. The cast became accustomed to the concentration Ashizawa demands. When the performance was nearly ready for an audience, it was time that the technical crew was also initiated into the experience. Ashizawa initiated the crew through a rite of silence. This task was essential to the performance because of the weighty responsibility the crew (and cast) had regarding the set (see Figure 9).



*Figure 9.* Cuneiform shape set concept by David Williams, Cesar Cornejo, and Izumi Ashizawa. Lighting and scenography by David Williams, University of South Florida, April, 2009 (photo by Jemaar Graham).

This set, composed of several trap doors requiring manipulation promptly at precise moments, could become hazardous if one is in a state of relaxation. Before the technical rehearsal, Ashizawa led the crew approximately twenty minutes in a walk around campus, in which they could not talk or interact with each other. After the walk the technical crew was led into the rehearsal space where they watched the routine warm-up in silence.

The production resonates with contemporary issues dealing with power, arrogance, civilization, nature and the quest for immortality. The Tavern Woman holds a window frame with one hand and glares at Gilgamesh. He explained how he lost his beloved Enkidu and asks her about Utnapishtim, the man who gained eternal life. She replies: "You will never find the eternal life that you seek. Stop wandering around hopelessly. When the gods created humans, they also created death. They kept eternal life only for themselves. Men are born, they live and they die".

In the end, wisdom comes as Gilgamesh mourns the loss of his friend and returns to his city.

The plant's name is "The Old Man Becomes a Young Man",

Then I will eat it and return to the condition of my youth.  
 At twenty leagues they broke for some food,  
 At thirty leagues they stopped for the night.  
 Seeing a spring and how cool its waters were,  
 Gilgamesh went down and was bathing in the water.  
 A snake smelled the fragrance of the plant,  
 Silently came up and carried off the plant.  
 While going back it sloughed off its casing.  
 At that point Gilgamesh sat down, weeping.<sup>4</sup>

The central themes of this ancient story relate to our own time as we cut down rainforests in the name of progress and seek to extend life through medical advances. We look for a cure, yet we cannot achieve it. Izumi Ashizawa historicizes the story of Gilgamesh, exploring ideas beyond the similarities with antiquity, enabling us to see our own condition in contrast with the timeless inevitability of the past. Ironically, Gilgamesh, the king did not gain eternal life, but his story has achieved artistic immortality as literature in the clay tablets and as drama brought to life by the actors in Ashizawa's staging.

The production received two Kennedy Center American College Festival Faculty Meritorious Awards, one for the scenography of David Williams (Excellence in Technology) and the other to Izumi Ashizawa for Excellence in Directing.

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<sup>4</sup> *Epic of Gilgamesh: Tablet XI*. Available at <http://www.ancienttexts.org/library/mesopotamian/gilgamesh/tab11.html>