

Performance Language : Beyond the Written Text in Second Language Theatre

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Beyond mere translation of text from one language to another, the theatre presents a unique challenge to those who would cross cultural and linguistic boundaries as theatre has its own unique semiotic. The text is only a small percentage of the elements that generate meaning on stage and in performance, and the “performance text,” as it is termed is culturally bound and linguistically structured as much as the spoken words are. In this paper we propose to analyze the challenges in the study, teaching, and learning of theatrical performance from another culture with its own performance language. If, as Suzuki Tadashi argues, “culture is in the body”, it is not merely enough to learn the lines in the new language, one must begin to learn the body language, the gestures, the physical world of the play. After a historical consideration of the study of traditional Japanese theatre in the West and the development of shingeki, the modern Japanese theatre based on western models, we then turn to the practical aspects of westerners learning the gestural language of kabuki and nihon buy? and teaching English (and North American culture) through Method acting. Lastly, we consider the work of Kee Company, an intercultural collective that developed and performed productions in Tokyo designed for multi-lingual audiences, and the challenges and solutions inherent in such an endeavor. We hope that these analyses will provide insight into the power of theatrical language as a “third” language that aids in second language education and acquisition.