



Figure 1. Mitsuru Ishii's puppet design for *Farusunotaiфу* (Falstaff) from the 2014 production by the National Theatre of Japan. | Photo courtesy of Mitsuru Ishii. Used here by permission of The Bunraku-za Company.

# Millions of Shared Ideas in One

# Brush Stroke

BY YOSHINORI TANOKURA

Infusing the Japanese concept of harmony, *wa*, Mitsuru Ishii, creates designs that blend disparate aesthetics

The renowned Japanese designer, Mitsuru Ishii lives in a quiet residential area of Tokyo with his family. In springtime, blossoming cherry trees with soft shades of pink enfold the streets leading up to his house. The unassuming elegance of the house harmonizes peacefully with the cherry trees and neighboring houses, embodying the Japanese concept of harmony or *wa*. In similarly modest fashion, Ishii's design works have been presented at international design conferences, such as the Prague Quadrennial and World Stage Design. Compared to that of his contemporaries, the uniqueness of Ishii's designs derives from international experiences that enable him to fuse Japanese and Western aesthetics, and his extraordinary aesthetic merits close observation.

In Ishii's view, Western arts and design often rely on the use of realism and intricate artistic embellishment. By contrast, the Japanese aesthetic, as Ishii describes, is historically more about long years of training and discipline that enable an artist to create mood, depth, energy, and beauty—all with one brush stroke. For

this reason, Ishii believes, Japanese theatre design styles have been traditionally symbolic and abstract, as the Noh stage and sets for Kabuki and Bunraku exemplify. Over the past 40-plus years, Ishii has been working in and outside of Japan refining his unique aesthetic with *wa* at the heart of his design.

## **Freed from Conformity**

Ishii began his theatre career in the 1970s when by chance he became one of the 10 assistant directors of a musical version of *Gone With The Wind*. Under the American director Joe Layton, the four-hour epic titled *Scarlett* was first produced by an entertainment production

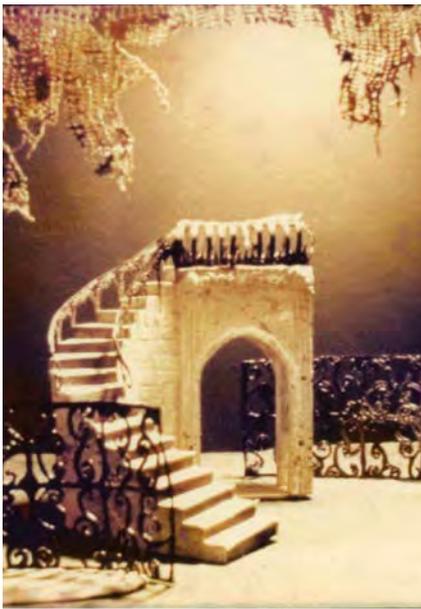


Figure 3. *The Turn of the Screw*. Class Project. 1975. | Photo courtesy of Mitsuru Ishii.



Figure 2. Mitsuru Ishii with his mentor, Percy Harris. | Photo courtesy of Mitsuru Ishii.

company, Toho Co., Ltd. in 1970. The production became a smash hit and ran for three months at the Imperial Theatre in Tokyo, which was unprecedented at that time. Theatre productions in Japan were usually scheduled to run for only one month. Two years later, Layton was asked to revamp the musical by the British producer Harold Fielding for the London production. The only way for Ishii to remain involved with the production was to go to London and enroll in school with his own money.

Inspired by Layton's work, Ishii initially planned to study directing, but realizing his English skills were not good enough to pursue a directing degree, he changed his focus to design. One year later in 1972, Ishii had an opportunity to work as an assistant director and lighting designer on *Man from the East*. The show was produced by Red Buddha Theatre, a Japanese avant-garde theatre troupe based in Paris at the time. The show toured throughout Europe and the U.S. for one and a half years, ending at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

The world tour greatly motivated Ishii to further his design studies, and he enrolled in the Theatre Design Course at the English National Opera in 1975. The Theatre Design Course was originated and run by Margaret "Percy" Harris, and her words influenced Ishii's aesthetic for years to come. Ishii fondly remembers Harris said to him, "There is no need

for you to emulate the British design style. You must cherish your cultural background. The most important aspect of stage design is to develop our own originality. Not to imitate existing styles" (Ishii, 2020). Harris' words freed Ishii from conformity that was ingrained in him in a culture where individuality and originality are sometimes secondary to harmony as a guiding principle.

When Ishii returned to Japan in the 1980s, he was greeted by the idiosyncrasies of the collectivist society and found it difficult to establish himself as a freelance designer. In a society where a sense of unity and peace tend to suppress individual ideas, designers were and are still not trusted by their potential employers unless they belong to an

organization. To establish a foundation for himself, Ishii first found a job at NHK Art Co. Ltd., which was an affiliated company of Japan's sole public media corporation, NHK (Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai). Ishii was hired as a freelance designer, which allowed him to keep designing for various national and international theatre companies. While at NHK Art, Ishii worked on a number of period shows and learned a great deal about Japanese painting styles and traditional Japanese architecture and props.

In 1986, his biggest breakthrough came when he designed the set and costumes for *The Tempest*, which was directed by Gordon McDougall at Shoctor Theatre in Alberta, Canada. The set consisted of legs made of slats and two organically shaped mounds that were made of layers and layers of slabs. The slatted walls were reminiscent of Japanese bamboo blinds, or *sudare*. In the background, Ishii created a large Japanese *sumie* wash painting.

Ishii explained that he and the director discussed the importance of magic in the show, and they wanted to showcase theatrical tricks that the Canadian audience had not seen before. One of the examples was to make Ariel a spider instead of a harpy in Act III Scene iii. Spider is one of the most famous Kabuki characters, and making Ariel a spider allowed them to use the old Kabuki trick of *chisuji no ito*-spreading thousands of spider webbings made of rice paper from a hand. The costumes were a blend of Indian, Japanese, and Western styles, exemplifying Ishii's unique visual aesthetic. This production of *The Tempest* was a turning point in Ishii's career. With the success of the

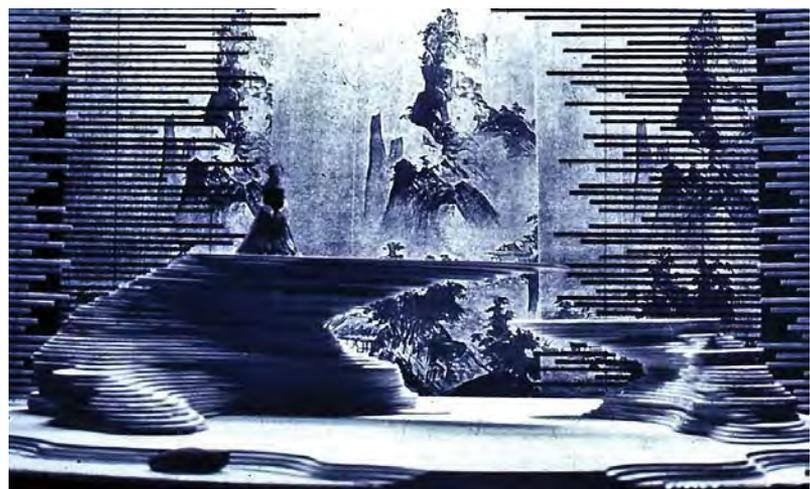


Figure 4. Scale Model of *The Tempest*. | Photo courtesy of Mitsuru Ishii.

When Ishii designed the set and costumes for *The Tempest*, which was directed by Gordon McDougall, the pair wanted to showcase theatrical tricks that the Canadian audience had not seen before.



production, Ishii began to receive many job offers. At the age of 40, after working for NHK Art Co. for more than 10 years, Ishii finally commenced his full-time freelance career.

Japan experienced unprecedented economic growth between the mid-1980s and 1990. It was an age of prosperity “defined by opulence, corruption, extravagance, and waste” (Johnston, 2009). The Plaza Accord, a 1985 agreement among the G-5 nations, “called for the depreciation of the dollar against the yen and was supposed to increase U.S. exports by making them cheaper” (Johnston, 2009). Art organizations suddenly found an influx of money and began to bring international stars to Japan,

Figure 5 (top). *The Tempest* Act III, scene iii, Ariel's Entrance. Figure 6. Costume for Ariel as Harpy/Spider. | Photo and rendering courtesy of Mitsuru Ishii.



Figure 9 (above). Show Curtain for *Die Zauberflöte*; Figure 8 (right). *Die Zauberflöte*. | Photos courtesy of Mitsuru Ishii.



setting a perfect stage for Ishii to showcase his long-cultivated global knowledge, skills, and aesthetic.

On Oct. 23, 1991, Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* opened at Kanagawa Kenmin Hall and was subsequently performed at Tokyo Bunka Kaikan. The production was conducted by Wolfgang Sawallisch under the direction of Toru Emori. The all-star creative team included a celebrated fashion designer Junko Koshino as costume designer, and Ishii

as set designer (*Performance Info: Die Zauberflöte*, n.d.). Ishii's design was an impressive collage of religious artifacts of the world. Statues of Hindu goddesses were used as legs, while Greek goddesses resided up stage next to a ruined globe. The show curtain depicted a post-apocalyptic view of the world with the destroyed Statue of Liberty, Genbaku Dome of Hiroshima, and ruined cityscapes of various capitals of the world. Also, on the show curtain, *ho-o* (Asian mythological

bird that brings peace and prosperity) were painted to manifest the message of the opera.

An elaborate set with many non-linear shapes might not have been anything new to the Westerners, but it was an unusual sight to behold in Japan at the time. Kenichi Toki, who assisted Ishii on several shows, expressed his wonderment about this particular design: "It must have been extremely challenging for Mr. Ishii to convince the shop to build the set



Figure 7. Costume for Stephano. | Rendering courtesy of Mitsuru Ishii.

Ishii's design for Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* incorporated an impressive collage of religious artifacts of the world.

for *Die Zauberflöte* because Japanese shops were not used to creating a set that had so much dimensionality and no straight lines. Back then, a *tō-ryō* (the U.S. equivalent of a technical director) had an absolute say in the realization of a design," and to convince an often-old-fashioned *tō-ryō* required considerable people skills (Toki, 2020). Ishii is masterful at such skills, and his easy demeanor and humble politeness, backed by formidable knowledge, certainly made it

possible for him to realize his design for the opera.

More than \$3 million was spent on *Die Zauberflöte*, and 33 11-ton production trucks were used to transport the set pieces from the shop to the theatre (Ishii, 2020). As if it were to demonstrate and symbolize Japan's economic power, the run was limited to only four performances. Ironically, the economic bubble burst in the following year and Japan started descending into a deep recession.

Ishii's fluid style allows him to work with small performance groups as well as behemoth companies, such as Johnny & Associates, Inc. (A.K.A. Johnny's), the most popular boy pop music group producing company in Japan. Set designs for the commercial theatre are often large and elaborate, and Ishii believes that the sets need to entertain the audience as much as performers do. The set design for Johnny & Associates' production of *Shock* did just that. Similar to that of *Die*



Two scenes from *Shock*, which incorporated numerous traditions. Figure 10 (top) shows the influence of Japanese pop music while Figure 11 (bottom) uses a traditional Japanese style. | Photos courtesy of Mitsuru Ishii.

*Zauberflöte*, the design for *Shock* was a mix of Japanese pop music, Western (Figure 10), and traditional theatre (Figure 11) styles. Despite the long recession, the popularity of Japan's pop music culture never diminished, and *Shock*, which has been revived every year in the past 20 years, has had more than 1,800 performances.

### Fusing Aesthetics

Patience and amenability are essential disciplines in a collectivist society where

the principle of harmony plays a large part during the creative process. When Ishii works on a prominent production like *Shock*, he often has to compromise his original ideas for the good of the company, make his design serve the celebrities starring in the show and entertain the audience. In 1999, I had an opportunity to assist Ishii and attended a production meeting for *Shock*, where I witnessed a brainstorming session like I had never seen before. There were at least 20 people at a long table, and they



were discussing how the set should look and how it needed to function. At a meeting like this, according to Ishii, the director poses questions to the creative team about the design that Ishii has brought to the table, and the team answers with various proposals. By the end of such a meeting, the integrity of the design can be greatly altered by all the suggestions and demands from the collaborators.

Smaller theatre companies are more accepting of Ishii's individuality and originality. After the economic bubble burst, these theatre companies experienced major budget cuts. Always an optimist, Ishii takes the lack of budget as a chance to showcase his creativity and design aesthetic. When Junkichi Mochizuki, a frequent collaborator of Ishii's, directed a play titled *Okashitamono* by Jūrō Miyoshi, Ishii instructed Mochizuki and his staff members to make hundreds and hundreds of tetrahedrons using only wooden chopsticks and rubber bands (Figure 13). For this production, the Japanese principle of harmony was fully actualized as the directing and stage management team, actors, and stagehands all participated in the making of the chopstick tetrahedrons. Astonishingly, the combined cost of the materials was less than \$100. Once the



Figure 12 (top). The set for *Okashitamono*. Figure 13 (inset). Chopstick Tetrahedron. | Photos courtesy of Junkichi Mochizuki.

Figure 14 (bottom). The set for *My Town, Sengawa*. | Photo courtesy of Mitsuru Ishii.

tetrahedrons were assembled and painted, the shop crew put them together in the theatre to build two walls (Figure 12). The tree-like structure seen in Figure 14 was also created in the same method for the production of *My Town, Sengawa* at Sengawa Theatre (2012). The assistant

director and the stage management team spent one hour before and after every rehearsal for three weeks under Ishii's supervision and created a striking abstract set. The process of realizing this type of design reflects Ishii's scrupulous use of the foundations of *wa*.



Figure 15. Set for *Twelfth Night*. | Photo courtesy of Mitsuru Ishii.

Asked how he manages to collaborate with such wide varieties of performance groups, Ishii explains that he focuses on how he communicates his ideas to a director, and he also tries to figure out how the director may think about his design and staging the show. He has developed and honed this approach since he worked on *Scarlett*. Ishii has never lost his directorial way of thinking. Collaboration, Ishii says, is possible because we can use our past experiences as the foundation for a project.

However, the creation and execution

of an original and imaginative design requires new ways of thinking, and that tends to disrupt the Japanese principle of harmony. For this reason, Ishii acknowledges that it's often easier to work with Western directors who are more willing to trust his vision. His collaboration with Michael Pennington on Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* (Haiyuza Company, Tokyo, 1993), for example, illustrates Ishii's uninhibited originality (Figure 15). The emphasis on the vertical movement was a departure from the Japanese aesthetic that often puts emphasis on horizontal lines. The dynamic yet sensual use of lines was a salute to his influences, Ralph Koltai and Joseph Svoboda.

Ishii's fusion of Western and Eastern aesthetics becomes most virtuosic when he designs sets with traditional Japanese architectural elements. A good example is his design for the staged version of Akira Kurosawa's masterpiece, *Yojimbo*. It was conceived by Hisao Kurosawa (Akira Kurosawa's son) and was produced in 2002 under the direction of Mikio Mizutani, with costume design by Kazuko Kurosawa (Akira Kurosawa's daughter). When adopting one of the most iconic films in history, it would have been safer for Ishii to take a realistic approach to preserve the integrity of the original film. Ishii's design for the production consisted of realistic traditional Japanese row houses, but he boldly painted the floor in perspective with dark brown and white stripes to give the set more depth. The theatrical approach did not end there. A half circular ground row with a ginkgo-leaf drop framed the dramatic sky, bringing the visual focus down to the actors.

Classical Japanese architecture was also the base of the design for *Kwaidan*, conceived and directed by a Toronto-born experimental theatre director Ping Chong, with text based on a collection of short ghost stories by Lafcadio Hearn. *The New York Times* reviewer, D.J.R. Bruckner, described Ishii's design as "such a mechanical marvel that it seems virtually intelligent" (Bruckner, 1998). The seemingly simple set was full of tricks that were revealed through sliding panels and projections. The demon in *Miminashi Hoichi* was represented simply with an enormous pair of eyes seen through two circular openings



Figure 16. Scale model for *Yojimbo*. | Photo courtesy of Mitsuru Ishii.



Figure 17. Scene from *Yojimbo*. | Photo courtesy of Mitsuru Ishii.



Figure 18 (top). Scene from *Yojimbo*. Figure 19 (bottom). Scene from *Kwaidan*. | Photos courtesy of Mitsuru Ishii.



Figure 20. Rendering for a scene from *Kwaidan*. | Photo courtesy of Mitsuru Ishii.



Figure 21. Scene from *Kwaidan*. | Photo courtesy of Mitsuru Ishii.



Figure 22. Scene from *Kwaidan*. | Photo courtesy of Mitsuru Ishii.

(Figure 19). The eyes were so finely constructed that their moving lids produced crinkles above and bags below when they opened (Bruckner, 1998). Such attention to detail mixed with playful yet refined tricks is one of the unique qualities of Ishii's design style.

### Freedom in Solitude

The apotheosis of Ishii's practice, the fusion of Western and Japanese aesthetics, came in the form of traditional puppet theatre, or Bunraku theatre. In 2014, Ishii was invited by the National Theatre of Japan to design the set and costumes for a new Bunraku production of *Farusunotaiфу* (不破留寿之大夫). It was an adaptation of the stories of Shakespeare's beloved character, Falstaff. Seiji Tsurusawa, a shamisen master who is certified as a Living National Treasure, conceived the idea and composed the music for the production. The puppeteers were led by Bunraku master Kanjuro Kiritake, who is a progressive force in this traditional theatre community. Ishii was delighted to learn during the first production meeting that Tsurusawa and Kiritake wished to create a new style of Bunraku that no one had ever seen.

The script, adapted by a Shakespearean scholar Yoichiro Kawai, had playfulness and imaginative elements, such as a character of Shakespeare drinking in an Edo-era bar. The shamisen and the Bunraku masters' willingness to break from the several centuries-old traditions and the uniqueness of the

script freed Ishii from following the conventional Bunraku imageries. The most memorable look of the set was the scene where an enormous cherry tree with full blossoms (an adaptation of the Herne's oak tree from *The Merry Wives of Windsor*) dominated the stage (Figure 25). Placing a three-dimensional cherry tree was a major departure from the conventional flat painted pine tree, which is often used in Kabuki and is a permanent fixture on the Noh stage. In a bar scene, the multiple Bunraku conventions were broken with the classic architectural structure creating the depth and framing the shadow puppets in the back.

For an art form that focuses on the artistry and operational techniques of puppets, the elaborate set Ishii designed combined with another art form (shadow puppets) was unthinkable in Bunraku before this event. The chance that the National Theatre of Japan took with these artists was nothing short of a miracle for such an old and established institution. The production was a success, and Ishii received the Yomiuri

Figures 23 and 24. Puppet designs for Bunraku Shakespeare productions. | Photos courtesy of Mitsuru Ishii.



Theatre Award (equivalent to the TONY awards) for Excellence in Design. Still, bringing change to a 400-year-old institution is difficult; to the performance of *Farusunotaiyu* at the National Theatre

of Bunraku in Osaka was canceled because the Bunraku Association did not grant permission.

The Japanese aesthetic Ishii speaks of is ingrained in every Japanese from a young age when they are taught *shuji*,

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Figure 25. Scene from the 2014 *Farusunotaiфу* production by the National Theatre of Japan. | Image courtesy of Mitsuru Ishii and used here by permission of the Bunraku-za Company.



Figure 26. Scene from the 2014 *Farusunotaiфу* production by the National Theatre of Japan. | Image courtesy of Mitsuru Ishii and used here by permission of the Bunraku-za Company.

Japanese calligraphy that fuses poetry, literature, and painting. One of the fundamental skills of *shuji* is to be able to write a word with a brush dipped in ink just once. To complete a word, a calligrapher must vary the pressure of the brush, accentuating and softening certain parts of the letter. It takes decades of practice to master the technique and express the calligrapher's emotion through one rhythmic motion. This art of harmonious

and philosophical expression epitomizes Ishii's design as he sometimes presses his ideas firmly onto his collaborators to achieve his vision, and sometimes stands back and stays agreeable for the sake of harmony within the team, even if the originality of his design has been compromised. In Western culture, the concept of harmony may seem an obstacle or unrealistic for designers. Ralph Koltai, once said, "Despite a production being a

collaborative effort, the designer is a very lonely animal ... For the designer to succeed requires a pronounced critical faculty, for he must also remain true to himself as a creative artist ... in the final analysis the decisions are his" (O'Brien, 2018).

Independence comes with a certain degree of loneliness, and it might be this solitude that gives Ishii a sense of freedom when he works with Western directors who respect Ishii's ideas and let him

develop them unencumbered. Then again, there is no doubt that Ishii's Japanese aesthetic is founded upon the concept of *wa*. The deeply ingrained Japanese sense of harmony is built upon the sum of millions of people with a shared value and aesthetic that guide them every single day (*Exploring The Japanese Culture Of Wa And Harmony*, 2018). Ishii's designs are created with millions of shared ideas in one brush stroke.



*Yoshinori Tanokura, originally from Tokyo, is currently teaching scenic design at Rider University in Lawrenceville, NJ. For the past decade, he*

*taught at East Stroudsburg University, where he was Associate Professor of Theatre. Tanokura holds a master's degree in Scenography from Central Saint Martins College of Art & Design in London and an M.F.A. in Set Design from the University of Connecticut. As a freelance designer, he has designed sets across the U.S. and assisted on a number of Broadway productions. His design credits include Moon Over Buffalo (People's Light & Theatre), Clever Little Secret by Joe DiPietro (Westside*

*Theatre, NYC), Exonerated (Delaware Theatre Company), and Peter and the Starcatcher (Adrienne Arsht Center) for which he received the Carbonell Award for the Best Scenic Design in 2015. Tanokura assisted John Lee Beatty on a number of Broadway productions, such as Venus in Fur, Doubt, and The Color Purple. Yoshi is a member of the United Scenic Artists, Local 829.*

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