1001 Beds
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During the period when he was composing Us, Tim Miller traveled to Japan for the 2002 Dokkyo University Performance Conference, where he gave his first performance in Asia. For the Tokyo appearance he compiled segments from several previous works—including, as he reports here, his walk into the audience to sit naked on someone’s lap, from My Queer Body. Miller also worked with Japanese collaborators to create new elements for the Tokyo performance, giving rise in the essay that follows to thoughts about cross-cultural communication within common areas of gay experience. The film from which Miller’s voice-over text was translated by a Dokkyo University student was originally done for a PBS station in Minneapolis (which declined to show it). “Tokyo Tim” was published in The Drama Review in 2003.

Hello.
Konnichiwa.

My name is Tim.
Watashi no name ha Timu desu.

I come from America.
Watashi ha amerika kara kimashita.
I love Japan.

*Nihon ga daisuki desu.*

Do you come to this bar often?

*Kono bar ewa yoku kimasuka?*

Let’s take off our clothes.

*Fuku wo nugimashou.*

I walked naked through the audience in a theater in Japan trying to scope out whose lap I would plotz my sweaty butt down on for a section of my performance. I knew I was in trouble when I saw a young Japanese woman hiding her eyes to avoid my nude, Western, *gaijin* body! She was not just covering her face with a few fingers, but rather burying her head as far as possible in her armpit under a tangle of elbows and forearms.

I was performing in Tokyo at the Dokkyo University International Forum on Performance Studies. This remarkable conference was organized by Professor Yuichiro Takahashi, a leader in Japanese inquiries into performance theory and practice. I was fortunate to be invited to perform my work at the forum, along with performer Denise Uyehara, my colleague from LA, and Japanese installation artist Yoshiko Shimada. The conference was subtitled “Resistance, Mutation and Cultural Hybridities,” and definitely all three of those things were happening as I gamboled without clothes through the aisles and the Dokkyo student’s gaze crept further and further inside her armpit. Now admittedly, I have made young ladies—as well as young men—all over the English-speaking world shrink into their seats with eyes gazing heavenward when they encounter my queer narratives on stage and my even queerer body in the orchestra seats. Sure, dismantling the unfamiliarity, the ick-factor and general invisibility of lesbian and gay embodied experience is one of my main jobs as a performer wherever I travel and perform, but there was something quite unique about approaching my first audience in
Tokyo Tim

Japan, indeed my first audience in Asia! Though I have performed in many countries, cultures and languages—and even allowing that this was an international conference sponsored by the English Department at Dokkyo University—I felt a particular challenge with this first performance in Japan. My inner self-doubt monologue was fast and furious: how will this Japanese audience make sense of my homocentric world view? Why should they give a shit about the travails of an American gay performance artist? In my text-heavy U.S. performance, how are they even going to understand a word of what I say!

We can coolly theorize about the pitfalls of cross-cultural dialogue, but the specificity of the live performance is a much more gnarly, real-time communication challenge. On the upside, there is a kind of freedom that comes to the performer when the audience is not necessarily understanding every word you say on stage. (As if we can assume that even with an English-speaking audience!) My performance in Tokyo felt set free in some ways by the problematizing of language. It gave me opportunity to understand the piece in a totally different way, to literally make sense of it anew. I have had this experience before when performing in Sicily or Belgium or Austria,
but in Japan I felt a fresh set of performance possibilities come forward. Of course, as I performed the piece I indulged that universal human tendency to negotiate language borders by beefing up my idiosyncratic sign language, a post-modern semaphore of gestural commentary added to my already high-energy, kinetic performance style. But I knew I wanted to come up with some fun, wild but simple translation devices to make my nonstop English work for this mostly Japanese audience.

In Japan this need I had to translate not so much the show’s English, but my own experience of performing the show, created interesting opportunities for collaboration and juicy two-way pedagogy. Many e-mails zipped over the Pacific between Yuichiro Takahashi and me, discussing strategies for how the performance could pack the best wallop for this audience in Japan. With Prof. Takahashi’s assistance one of his students at Dokkyo, Masashi Shiratori, translated my voice-over text of an extremely homoerotic film of myself and another fellow cavorting, and performed the text real time as a kind of duet aria with my own performance. Not only did Masashi get to have a bravura full-throated, sexy monologue that seemed to be a great performance experience for him, but he also got a translation extra-credit!

For another section, my longtime Japanese friend in New York, Gen Watanabe, translated and recorded a goofy Berlitz-style Japanese-English gay language lesson that I had written for the Tokyo performance. This brand new section gave me a chance to learn how to say “Suck my dick” in Japanese—Shakuhachi shite, if you're interested—and ended up being the comic highlight of the performance. Gen and I had long phone calls trying to figure out translations of colloquial English expressions for sex and love, to untangle the very different ways U.S. and Japanese culture experience and name such things. As Gen and I rehearsed the piece, I came to realize how ethnocentric my work’s assumptions are about nudity, the body, and the language of desire. But as we worked on this piece, I also gained a deeper understanding from Gen of just how charged
it might be for me to be doing a piece like this in Japan. Gen shared with me how much it would have meant for him a few years ago, as a young Japanese gay man in university, to have such an out, sex-positive, queer performance happen as part of an international conference. I thought of Gen’s words many times during my adventure at Dokkyo University.

As I worked with Gen and Masashi on these simple translations, these gestures of understanding, my psychic and soulful relationship to the performance plan was immeasurably deepened, and I hope I also returned the favor by offering an interesting creative runway for both of these Japanese men. This kind of private, human-scaled, before-the-performance exchange is as important to me as whatever happens onstage.

Back to the show in Tokyo—I have left the young woman hiding her eyes and am looking for my victim for audience participation. One of the things I have learned over the years of performing is that I always eventually end up sitting naked on the lap of the person I need to meet in a new city or country. While in Japan, I had been hearing a great deal about the most self-identified gay theater in Tokyo, Flying Stage, and I wanted to meet the folks making that theater happen. As I walked naked through the audience, I was pulled with a huge wash of intuition toward the lap of a particular Japanese guy. I sat my butt down and—with my limited Japanese on display—we performed together this intimate dialogue about presence and sweat and the encounter of real humans in these theaters and performance spaces. After the performance I would learn that for this sweaty butt-on-the-lap moment I had picked Shin-ichi Sekine, the playwright of the Flying Stage. It is such encounters, serendipity and translations that renew my faith in the potential of performance, and the heart-held hope that we do have a fighting chance to communicate across oceans, languages, and even the footlights.