

# Symbolism in the Directorial Art of Tadashi Suzuki through Two Plays: *King Lear* by William Shakespeare and *Three Sisters* by Anton Chekhov

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**Abstract:** In Tadashi Suzuki's directing art, his theatrical treatments are highly symbolic, creating distinctive impressions and forming his unique directorial style. His productions of William Shakespeare's *King Lear* and Anton Chekhov's *Three Sisters* are considered among the many plays where his approaches to character, action, and script are imbued with rich symbolism. Through these works, Suzuki establishes a powerful visual and conceptual language that distinguishes his theatre both in Japan and internationally.

**Keywords:** Tadashi Suzuki; Symbolism; Directing Art; Theatre; Adaptation.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper analyzes in depth the two plays *King Lear* and *Three Sisters*, directed by Tadashi Suzuki and staged at the Japan - Scotland theatre, exploring various versions of the performances he mounted both within and outside Japan over different years. From this basis, the paper examines and evaluates the symbolic elements in his directorial treatment. Suzuki masterfully integrates the symbols of his directorial philosophy and Japanese cultural perspectives into world class theatrical works, achieving a "*Japanization*" that does not diminish their value or modernity. Through an analysis of performance layers, staging methods, and directorial intentions, it becomes clear that these two productions both begin and end with highly symbolic performance sequences.

The paper employs methods of analysis, synthesis, comparison, and evaluation to illuminate the artistic directorial issues in Tadashi Suzuki's work.

## 2. CONTENT

When speaking of the artistic innovations in Tadashi Suzuki's directorial work - a renowned Japanese director - one cannot overlook his tendency to transform the handling of characters, actions, and other stage elements into highly symbolic expressions. This approach contributes to the creation of a distinct and unique style that defines his artistic orientation.

According to scholars, a symbol or sign is an image, character, or any form that represents an idea, a material entity, or a process. The purpose of a symbol is to convey meaning quickly, easily, concisely, and simply. For instance, a person's name symbolizes their identity, or as is often said, the red rose symbolizes love and compassion.

A symbol can also be understood as a complex means of communication, carrying multiple layers of meaning. Symbols help humans make sense of the world in which they live and thus play a significant role in forming judgments, defining concepts, or expressing issues. Every culture in the world employs symbols to articulate its specific ideologies and social structures, and to represent various aspects of its cultural identity. Therefore, the meaning of symbols is always dependent on the cultural background of each individual.

Although Tadashi Suzuki was formally trained in the Russian Stanislavski theatrical system, by combining elements of Noh, Kabuki, and Zen theater, he created his own distinctive directorial style. The global theater community recognizes that Suzuki succeeded in the process of “*Japanizing*” Western drama (Greek, Russian, English...). In his works, both stories and characters seem to represent Japanese people and Japanese issues, because they are imbued with Japanese cultural symbols, religious symbols, and even symbolic patterns of Japanese thought.

On the stage of the Suzuki Company of Toga (SCOT), Tadashi Suzuki has directed and performed numerous Western plays, presenting them across the globe. Among the most representative works that shaped his directorial and creative style are *King Lear* by William Shakespeare and *Three Sisters* by Anton Chekhov. According to international theater scholars, what makes these two productions remarkable is that, although the stories themselves are not Japanese, they manifest profound symbolic expressions of Japanese culture and thought. Perhaps for this reason, Suzuki’s productions not only attracted the attention of the global theater community but also received enthusiastic and warm responses from Japanese audiences, who found new delight in Western plays reimagined on the SCOT stage.

Typically, Suzuki had been deeply fascinated by ancient Greek tragedies, and many assumed that with his blend of Noh, Kabuki, Zen theater, and Western methods, his directorial style would only suit the “*heroic tragedies*” of classical Greek drama. Yet, when he premiered his first version of *King Lear* in 1994 at the Beseto Theater Festival (Beijing, Seoul, Tokyo) in Seoul, audiences across Asia and beyond were astonished. The “*key*” to unlocking the production - the interpretation of the script, the staging, the directorial guidance, and the construction of highly symbolic imagery - proved to be uniquely distinct: unmistakably Japanese, unmistakably Suzuki. This production reverberated powerfully both regionally and internationally.

A second version was later revived in 2013, 2016, 2018, and 2019, featuring a multinational cast from China, Japan, Russia, the United States, Australia, Korea, and more. This version was strikingly different - so unusual that American media described it as “*a magnificent eccentric,*” owing to its relentless dissection of the characters, both figuratively and literally.

Audiences and theater enthusiasts seemed to be immersed in the symbolic world that Tadashi Suzuki constructed through his staging: a world that symbolizes both humanity and existence, embodying the director’s philosophical perspective that “*the world is a mental hospital and human beings are its patients*”.

In the 1994 version, the opening scene was staged with a human tableau forming a living frame. A nurse stood on stage holding a book, reading aloud the story of *King Lear* to an old patient awaiting death in a hospital. As soon as the nurse’s reading of Lear’s abdication ended, music began, and the elderly patient transformed into King Lear, while the nurse became his Fool. From there, the play unfolded. What was especially distinctive in Suzuki’s approach was his decision not to confine the characters to the past. Instead, he intertwined the destinies of “*Lear of the Past*” costumed in English attire with “*Lear of the Present*” portrayed by actors wearing traditional Japanese dress. The result was a story existing simultaneously in the past and the present, an interplay of East and West, executed through the unique directorial device of “*a play within a play*”. The recurring symbols of the “*hospital*” and the “*patients*” appeared again and again across scenes, hauntingly underscoring the fate of Lear - the pitiable father of ungrateful children.

By 2013, in the version hailed as “*a magnificent eccentricity*” in Suzuki’s staging, Lear was rolled onto the stage on a hospital gurney, delivering his abdication speech and expressing his love for each of his daughters. On stage, Suzuki recreated an operating theater where nurses and doctors of a hospital both literal and metaphorical, a “*hospital of life*” surgically dissected Lear, layer by layer, as the play unfolded. In the early scenes, Lear’s confidence in the supposed love of his daughters resounded: “*examine it, dissect it, search for it - they love me wholeheartedly*”. Yet in the final scenes, Lear suffered pain worse than death, worse than any wound or incision, as he realized the cold ingratitude of the children he had trusted and loved so deeply. At the end, Lear, along with the Fool and the nurses, returned to the hospital bed, suturing wounds that could never truly heal, weighed down by regret over his own blindness and folly.

Once again, the symbols of the hospital and its patients - the “*hospital of life*” reemerge. What Suzuki sought to convey here is, in fact, an issue deeply tied to Japanese people and Japanese life, expressed through the symbolic intentions of the play. It is well known that the Japanese enjoy longevity and disciplined lifestyles, rarely needing hospital care for ordinary illnesses, as they believe the body possesses natural methods of healing itself. But what about the soul? According to Tadashi Suzuki’s vision, perhaps there must still be a “*hospital*” to heal the loneliness and suffering of human souls, like that of Lear. After all, did Suzuki not literally dissect Lear on stage, exposing the character’s complex thoughts, perceptions, and emotions about life and humanity? The recurring symbols of illness and the hospital thus served as metaphors for the director’s intention - an example of his mastery in creating distinctive, unconventional stagecraft.

The symbolism of Japanese culture and Japanese thought was vividly expressed in each scene and layer of the performance. One especially symbolic moment was the scene in which a daughter, dressed in traditional Japanese costume, brought food to her father in the modern setting. Her gestures were cold and indifferent. When the rain fell, she raised an umbrella to shield him but humorously, Suzuki used a tiny umbrella, one so small it could protect no one, which then blew away into the void through the actress's movement. The umbrella became a symbol of the director's message: *perhaps we humans cannot truly rely on anyone else; perhaps no one can protect us but ourselves. Lear, too, was no exception.*

The play began with symbols and ended with scenes imbued with the highest degree of symbolism. Gradually, everything departed from Lear, gently and quietly until the only thing left on stage was Lear himself alone, his very being.

If Suzuki's *King Lear* presented "eccentric" and unconventional layers of performance, his staging of Anton Chekhov's *Three Sisters* moved toward a different approach one that combined a rigorously balanced, classical stage composition with bold, avant garde imagery of strong symbolic resonance. In 1986, Suzuki premiered a cycle of plays he called *The Chekhov* - a title coined in his "Japlish" style (a Japanese - English blend), reflecting his vision of powerful cultural reinvention.

This cycle created a sensation at the 1986 Olympic Theatre Festival in Greece, where Suzuki placed the characters inside large baskets on stage. Pairs of characters conversed and performed from within these oversized, scattered containers, as if unable to break free from the baskets or from certain tangible and intangible barriers hindering them from reaching their dreams. The image of the sprawling baskets containing the characters was regarded as a highly symbolic theatrical device. It expressed the director's profound intent and conveyed the playwright's message, as Suzuki himself explained: "*The characters in Three Sisters in particular, and in Chekhov's works in general, are unable to face reality... The conflict between dream and reality is the gap that Chekhov and I sought to express. I tried to amplify this distinctive trait of Chekhov's plays, because I believe that is where their true modernity lies.*"

The characters in this staging did not wear Russian costumes, nor did they move or gesture in Russian ways as in Chekhov's original plays. Instead, they dressed, walked, and thought as Japanese. One especially haunting scene, much discussed by theater connoisseurs, featured the three sisters now depicted as aging women huddled on chairs, being spoon-fed, then staring blankly into the distance toward Moscow or some hopeless elsewhere, uttering: "*We must live*". Another scene showed them sitting on toilets, endlessly repeating, "*We must live*". Yet another had them crouching inside the large baskets, conversing without ever meeting each other's gaze, eyes filled with hopeless despair, once again repeating, "*We must live...*".

The hopeless gazes toward a distant land, the hiding inside oversized baskets - these became symbols of desires that the characters could never fulfill. All three sisters shared the same dream: to go to Moscow. Yet they never realized it. It was not because they lacked the means, nor because something held them back, but rather because they lacked the courage to act. For them, Moscow remained forever a distant, illusory shadow of happiness. Likewise, in Suzuki's staging, the characters could never step out of their baskets to confront and pursue their own dreams of happiness.

Suzuki transformed Chekhov's faraway Moscow into a space seemingly closer - just outside the baskets. And yet, strangely, the characters - the women longing for happiness, repeating "*we must live*" did not dare to take even a single step beyond the baskets. Perhaps these symbolic images were Suzuki's message to Japanese women of 1986 and earlier, urging reflection on the tension between reality and the dream of happiness.

The originality and distinctiveness of Tadashi Suzuki's directorial vision are beyond dispute. Asian and international theater scholars alike have offered many observations on Suzuki's style and creative personality, with much agreement that he excelled in shaping strikingly symbolic imagery within his productions. These very qualities gave his works multidimensional appeal, rendering them unique and helping to define his eccentric yet masterful directorial style - the unmistakable style of Tadashi Suzuki.

### 3. CONCLUSION

Through the analysis and evaluation of *King Lear* and *Three Sisters*, the paper highlights the distinctive, striking, and highly symbolic treatments in Suzuki's staging and directing art. It is precisely this heightened symbolism that astonishes and impresses both Japanese and international audiences, earning admiration for his directorial genius. He transforms the world's classical plays into works that feel both intimate and innovative for audiences in Japan and beyond. In other words, Suzuki has successfully "*Japanized*" Western drama infusing it with newness, uniqueness, and a distinctly symbolic

character through his meticulous handling of each performance layer, stage action, spatial composition, and acting technique. The paper has demonstrated the creativity of Tadashi Suzuki's directing art in his treatment of Western theatrical works through various directorial techniques. Among these, his emphasis on and exploration of symbolism stands out as a key approach, contributing significantly to the distinctiveness and success of his theatrical art and directorial career.

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