

The man of 300 faces

The American press recently labeled Issey Ogata as Japan's Eric Bogosian, the actor/director known for his shocking portrayal of a misanthropic radio-talk show host in the movie, *Talk Radio*. Like Bogosian, he makes social commentary through the theater. But unlike Bogosian, Ogata is not vindictive. From his portrayals of the salaryman to the waitress working at Denny's restaurant, Ogata's one-man vignettes are compassionate reflections of the contemporary Japanese experience.

Having spawned over 300 unique characters, Ogata has cultivated his craft over the years with his friend and now partner in success, his director, Yuzo Morita. They became acquainted with each other in the early 70s, when Ogata used to spend his days as an acting student by night and construction worker by day.

"When I observe people, I look at their build, and imagine what they're like. And, beyond that, I contemplate their occupation. You know how people behave the way they're supposed to. For example you have teachers, water-trade people, and salarymen all behaving how they are expected to behave. Salarymen have to bow so it shows in their posture. Bar-hostesses, on the other hand, have their unique way of relaxing and so on."

The first character Ogata portrayed was a bartender, a sketch that lasted for two hours. The response was mixed, but it was Ogata's first taste of artistic achievement. "Through the bartender, I was able to present a microcosm of society. It was really about discovering what it is to be human."

Recently Ogata took his one-man exhibition of characters, *A Catalogue Of City Life*, to the US and Europe. One of his shows was performed in the basement of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. "I found it a challenge because people were moving in and out of the room, and there was even a baby crying there. But that didn't seem to bother the audience. They were really attentive despite the distractions. So I think I tried harder than ever."

Although the language barrier, which was tackled by providing simultaneous

translations through headsets, appeared daunting, it failed to block Ogata's genius from transcending national barriers. The *Observer View*, a UK publication, described Ogata's frenzied performance of an anguished salaryman riding the train during rush hour as the "metropolitan version of Munch's Scream."

Ogata feels confident that after a few successful performances abroad, he is contributing to shedding stereotypes of the Japanese. "I have been told by many people that Japanese are this sort of unfathomable mystery. But then again, we Japanese have these images that all Americans are perpetually cheerful, all Germans are difficult, and the British are all pompous. But in the theater, stereotypes do break down."

For the Japanese people, though, he obviously strikes a more resonant chord. Since the art of parody, which edifies people when it works, is usually lost here, where the genre of comedy has been stagnating at slapstick levels for very long, the public has never been treated to a looking-glass view of themselves in the way Ogata allows. Perhaps for this reason, the TV world has never quite accepted him fully, labeling him a subversive. After Ogata performed his politician sketch for NHK, in which he abandons words for sheer gibberish lasting 10 minutes, an NHK senior producer warned him, "The trouble with you is that you tell the truth too often", according to an article in the *Guardian* newspaper.

This truth can be stranger and sadder than fiction, as seen through Ogata's eyes. While making us laugh, he asks the perennial question through his craft, "Who am I?" In Japan, where the banner of individuality, or *kosei*, is being waved almost fanatically to escape the specter of institutionalized uniformity, the question has never been more urgent.

Ogata recently put on a show at Shibuya's Jean Jean theater to show some of his new works probing into such quantum realms of the human psyche.

The gut-wrenching laughter took a while to subside when Ogata came back on stage as an obnoxious teenage waitress. If we forgot the slightly hairy legs and masculine jaw, the willing suspension of disbelief was quite easy. Ogata portrayed a rugged individualist, who dishes out reprimands from her boss like a diner dishing

out scrap to a dog under the table. "I really feel that young kids today mix up assertiveness with aggressiveness. It's assertiveness that makes an individual individualistic, and not aggressiveness," says Ogata reflecting on the character, who was most popular with girls, according to a post-performance survey.

After the curious portrayal of the salaryman, Ogata treated the audience to a grand finale. In the Western Man sketch, he portrays a man in love with the spirit of the wild west. Age around 80, a guitar in hand, he cranks out some weepy tunes, singing for an audience of children and their parents at an amusement park. He's got the looks and the charm, but the music is out of tune, resonating a timeless harmony of yearnings for a misunderstood romance, imbued with hints of *enka*.

Ogata, who lives in Tokyo with his wife, enjoys a fan club numbering around 40,000 nationwide today. But unlike many stars, who regret the loss of anonymity, such stellar fame is not a problem in the least for him. "I have no problems walking outside or riding the trains. Nobody recognizes me." For a man of 300 faces, that's hardly surprising.