

Empire of the Son

Using Research-Based Theatre to Explore Family Relationships

by

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the degree of Doctorate of Philosophy
in Language and Literacy Education

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Abstract

My father died on September 18, 2015. Less than three weeks later, I stood onstage at The Cultch's Culture Lab in East Vancouver and shared with an audience of theatregoers the story of his death and his life. At the centre of this dissertation is *Empire of the Son*, a theatrical script that explores my contentious relationship with my Japanese father. This exploration is based on memories, interviews, and artifacts such as photographs, documents, and letters. Within the spectrum of research-based theatre, on one end there is a body of plays created by researchers for specialized audiences within such academic disciplines as healthcare or education resulting in most often "closed/conference performance based on systematic research" (Lea, Belliveau, Wager, & Beck, 2011, p. 695). On the other end of the spectrum, well known plays such as *The Laramie Project* (Kaufman, 2010), or the work of playwright Anna Deveare Smith have been annexed by research-based theatre scholars in response to those who continue to question its legitimacy "as a credible genre of research reportage" (Saldaña, 2008a, p. 203). In other words, research-based theatre tends either to be created by academic researchers for conference/stakeholder audiences (Lea et al., 2011), or created for mainstream audiences by theatre artists who do not self-identify as researchers. *Empire of the Son* is uniquely positioned as a play created by a self-identified arts-based researcher yet has managed to reach mainstream audiences. At the time of this writing, it will have played in 17 cities, and across four countries. Rarely has a dissertation play been so widely seen. Developing, performing and touring *Empire of the Son* has allowed me as an artist/scholar to navigate the territory of mainstream theatre through a bewildering variety of circumstances and terrain that remains largely untrammled by

arts-based researchers. These developmental and experiential contributions are theoretically and methodologically informed by research-based theatre (Ackroyd & O'Toole, 2010; Belliveau & Lea, 2016). This exploration forms the spine of this research as I examine key moments, tensions, and epiphanies I encountered while conceptualizing, performing and touring this research.

Lay Summary

At the centre of this dissertation is *Empire of the Son*, a theatrical script that explores my contentious relationship with my Japanese father. When it comes to Research-Based Theatre, the literature tends to focus on the creation phase: the dramatization of research, the process of taking the raw data of interviews and forging the performance text. But these resulting plays are almost always limited to very specialized audiences, with few performances. *Empire of the Son* is uniquely positioned as a research-based theatre play that has managed to reach mainstream audiences. By the end of my upcoming third national tour, it will have played in 18 cities, across four countries with over 150 performances to over 20,000 people. Rarely has a dissertation play been so widely seen. This research consists of my exploration of key moments, tensions, and epiphanies I encountered while conceptualizing, performing and touring this research.

Preface

This dissertation is original, unpublished, independent work by the author,
T. Shigematsu.

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Within these pages I share a series of concentric stories. At the heart are my father's memories. Surrounding those remembrances are reflections of how it all came together to become a piece of theatre. Finally, there is the meta-story, the experience of living with *Empire of the Son*, and all the new vistas and profound encounters touring has gifted me.

At every stage I have been supported by countless people, from the nurses who cared for my father, to the Teamsters who load and unload our trucks. While I am unable to thank everyone individually, I would like to acknowledge a few in particular.

I imagine other artists more talented than myself must wonder, “What does he have that I don’t?” The answer is my friend and producer, Donna Yamamoto, who has been there at every stage of this extraordinary journey. When we first met in 2011 on Mortal Coil’s production of Salmon Row, you noticed how I refrained from joining the rest of the cast at lunch because I was too busy working on my scholarship applications, and so you began bringing food from home for me. Your support has never wavered and only grown. When we took over VACT, you asked me the one question that would change my life, “What is it going to take to keep you interested in our company?” When I replied that I wanted to do my own solo work, you looked surprised, but you didn’t laugh. And now we find the whole world is within our reach.

Empire of the Son would not be what it is without the collaboration of many talented artists. In particular, I owe a huge debt of gratitude to my dramaturg, Heidi Taylor and my director, Richard Wolfe. Thank you for reaching down and lifting me up.

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I owe a debt of gratitude to my brother and sisters, Ken, Rié, Setsu and Hana, for the many ways they love our parents, and my family.

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Finally, thank-you to my father, Akira Shigematsu, who impressed upon me the importance of developing a scholarly mindset without ever saying a word, and my mother, Yoshiko Shigematsu. Just now here at the beach, I asked my kids how they would describe her, and without hesitating, they replied, “She is super sweet, and kind and fun.”

Dedication

To my wife Bahareh, my love, my inspiration, my everything. Women's labour is so often invisible. It is obvious that I couldn't have done this, or anything else without you, but I want the world to know.

Empire of Rooms

I never went to theatre school. Instead, I was a professional usher at The Centaur theatre in Montreal for 12 years. I use the term ‘professional’ only half in jest because I undertook my responsibilities with the earnestness of a young man eager to find his place in the world. Despite the menial nature of my duties, I had a keen appreciation for how my small role could have a larger impact. For some, an evening of theatre might be the glittering highlight of their social calendar for the whole year, and indeed given the advanced age of some of the subscribers I assisted, perhaps it may have been their last outing altogether. Whether it was veteran theatre mavens, or a young drunk couple who scored free tickets from a radio station, my task remained the same: to guide my audience from one space and into another.

The most important piece of equipment a theatre usher wields is their Maglight. Unlike all other flashlights, an usher’s torch is not for the benefit of the one who wields it. Rather, the beam of the usher’s flashlight serves to direct the theatregoer’s attention, lingering on anything I deem worthy of attention.

For the purposes of this research, I will reclaim my role as a theatre usher, guiding you with my flashlight through various rooms, but these are not rooms in the traditional sense of the word—the divisions of a building. Rather, these are spaces defined by activities they host, despite rapidly shifting walls, floors, and ceilings.

Expanding our understanding of space, Irwin and Springgay (2008) write, “Contemporary art criticism argues that the relationship between artist and place is a complex discourse where place is re-imagined as ‘situation.’ Site moves from a fixed geographical category to a relational constitution of social, economic, cultural and

political processes” (pp. xx-xxi). Similarly, each one of my rooms represents a meta-space, multiply located, and unconstrained by the laws of physics.

By way of example, consider the public bathroom. For all its architectural variety, the sequence of feelings evoked by such a space are remarkably consistent: the realization you are in need; followed by denial; the mental calculation, “Can I wait till I get home?” and the frantic hunt; concluded by a sense of accomplishment, autonomy, and liberation. In this way, all public bathrooms constitute one space given the unvarying grammar of their experience.

Presently, I am writing in one such space. This is my garret, “a room of my own” (Woolf, 1929, p. 3). As a man I am mindful of borrowing the language of a feminist, but as a writer of colour I recognize in her words the liberatory necessity of carving out a material space to think one’s thoughts. My writer’s lair can be in a café, a city bus, or an airplane, but it is usually located in the room adjacent to the kitchen. The smallest room in our house. My study is marked by my Ikea standing desk, which is less the imperial flag pole of the paterfamilias than the detritus of the obstinate squatter who refuses to leave. A contested space, the shelves around me are crammed with my children’s books and toys. A glance to my left reveals a Kenner Millennium Falcon and a Hasbro Darth Vader helmet complete with electronic voice changer.

Before this space became my study, it was the room where my father rested and eventually died. Just as many things can happen in one room, one thing can happen across multiple sites. My father died across many hospital beds, and together they form Plutarch’s ship of Theseus¹. Whether it was the rental bed in my parent’s West End

¹ Born in 45 AD, Plutarch was a Greek Platonist who wondered whether a ship that had every single part

apartment, or a state of the art model in Vancouver's St. Paul's hospital, my father's bed became the fixed centre of our world.

In the fabric of space time, the gravity exerted by my father's hospital bed bent the light of our perceptions. Going away for the weekend, taking the day off, going for a walk, all became impossible. Time itself seemed to slow to an excruciating degree. Such experiences—all centred on my father's hospital beds—have become so stacked in my mind, I can peer through them as if gazing down a toy Jenga tower. It is through such a perspective that I can now recognize the structural consistency of these analogous experiences.

As your Usher, I will guide you now through a series of rooms: spaces marked by encounters; places where an idea or an action has lingered as sites of transformation.

The program will include the following 12 rooms below. Each room becomes a way to describe, analyze, and synthesize meanings that emerged from developing and eventually performing *Empire of the Son*. The rooms act as pivotal moments of insight that reveal and complicate understandings of research-based theatre creation and performance.

The full script of *Empire of the Son* rests at the heart of this dissertation², as this marks the essence of the research, the culmination of my inquiry. Before the script are eight rooms, which respectively situate this work, the conditions that allowed and generated the development and writing of the play. The final three rooms that follow the play are spaces to reflect upon the meanings generated by exchanging the story and performance with audiences across Canada and beyond.

² If the reader is inclined to proceed directly to the play, they are welcome to do so.

Prologue

Room 1: The Workshop Lab

Room 2: The Rehearsal Studio

Room 3: My Parent's Apartment

Room 4: The Antenna

Room 5: The Sealed Doorway

Room 6: The Café

Room 7: Hotel Apartment

Room 8: The Light Lock

Interlude

Room 9: The Stage, Script of *Empire of the Son*

Epilogue

Room 10: The Catwalk

Room 11: Talkback

Room 12: The Dressing Room

Foyer

USHER: Any theatre usher can let you know what time the show will be over, but it takes one truly knowledgeable to direct your attention to the architectural details of a building. Because of the two-dimensional nature of this page, allow me to instead acquaint you with a pillar of the Canadian theatre community.

In addition to being an actor, a professor and scholar, Dr. Jerry Wasserman is also the editor of *Modern Canadian Plays*, the core text for university-level Canadian drama courses around the world. He wrote one of the Forewords for the published version of the play.

Tetsuro Shigematsu's *Empire of the Son* was the surprise hit of the 2015 Vancouver theatre season, selling out its run at the Vancouver East Cultural Centre and earning nominations for six Jessie Richardson awards....It turned out to be a play of great emotional and theatrical intelligence: candid and funny, poetic and quietly moving. And this baby had legs. *Empire of the Son* was almost immediately booked for a 2016 remount at The Cultch, an Ottawa-Toronto-Montreal tour, and publication. These are no –

USHER: Ahem! I'm afraid that's all the time we have, Dr. Wasserman. Thank you for that fine introduction. I will now point my flashlight into the mirror at the playwright.

Although Dr. Wasserman may attribute the success of *Empire of the Son* to my talent as a playwright, from my perspective, there were many other factors at play. In 2015, there was a growing awareness regarding the lack of diversity within Canadian theatre, but reactionaries defended the status quo by citing the failure of past attempts—“hey, we tried...”—implying that non-white shows garner poor box office. “It isn’t racism. This is the market reality.” Belying this perception was the touring success of Korean Canadian Ins Choi’s *Kim’s Convenience* (2013 - present). But was this Soulpepper production of a Toronto-based playwright the mere exception that proved the rule? Theatre activists have always argued that Canadian theatre should diversify, not because it is the right thing to do, but out of enlightened self-interest: more inclusive programming will attract new audiences. After *Kim’s Convenience* played at the Arts Club on Granville Island in May of 2014, offering a glimpse of what Canadian theatre could look like, many in the Vancouver theatre community were primed for lightning to strike a second time. Stoking that interest in his Fall Arts preview, influential theatre critic Colin Thomas (2015, September 16, para. 26) alerted his readers to expect something interesting:

Shigematsu is a theatre newbie, but he has attracted an impressive team to work with him, including director Richard Wolfe and designers Pam Johnson, Gerald King, Barbara Clayden, and Steve Charles (set, lighting, costumes, and sound).

By their friends shall you know them.

Finally, as someone who has been active on social media for years, I have always been very open about sharing all aspects of my life, including my father’s health challenges. The death of my father, happening just 18 days before the world premiere, fueled intense

interest within the local theatre community. The proximity of his death and my subsequent public grieving was the theatrical equivalent of a fiery car crash. People naturally slowed down to take a look. All these factors conspired to create a set of circumstances that can never be repeated. The stars aligned for me.

Although I tell journalists it took two years of work to develop *Empire of the Son* it took decades. As such, many of the references I cite predate my actual time working on this dissertation. Rather than shoehorn in canonical literature, I have attempted to more honestly reflect my true influences. As a result, this research is rife with references to TV shows, documentaries, movies, and YouTube clips, all decidedly nonacademic in nature. Such kitschy shrapnel has lodged so deeply within my gray matter, any surgery to remove them would kill the corpus. These gaudy shards and fragments have not only directly affected the creation of this piece, they have also had a profound influence on my development as an artist. Together, these non-academic references represent my attempt to trace a genealogy of ideas that underpin *Empire of the Son*.

Although this territory of theatre creation has been explored before, I have shunned previously drawn maps, and avoided well-trodden routes. One of the aspects that make this research so ‘pure’ is that I have never had any formal theater training. I have never taken a single class in acting. Metaphorically speaking, I am a castaway who managed to survive on a deserted island without benefit of survival knowhow or Boy Scout training. As such, the peculiar techniques, rhythms, and rituals I have devised through the creation, performance, and touring of this work, I have come by through the lens of other art modalities and experiences. For example, my aesthetic commitment to inventing nothing, my stubborn refusal to lock the script, was a source of frustration for

my collaborators, but by breaking with tradition, I caught glimpses of epistemological frontiers by following ‘desire lines.’ Desire lines is a term from geography that refers to the pedestrian shortcuts that emerge to circumvent constructed routes that are circuitous or non-existent. Developers dislike unsanctioned desire lines so much, they will impose barriers to reroute foot traffic back onto the perpendicularity of sidewalks. Such policing of human movement is everywhere. “The various forms of education or ‘normalization’ imposed upon an individual consist in making him or her change... always moving towards a higher, nobler one in closer conformity with the supposed ideal” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988, p. 129).

If such forces of conformity have the capacity to turn us into automatons, then artists are children who survived. In a childlike manner, my so-called career has been driven by curiosity. Beginning as a visual artist, I then became a filmmaker, a standup comic, a performance artist, a reporter, a broadcaster, and now a theatre artist/scholar. Always I am a scavenger feeding off the carrion of my previous incarnations. It is my hope that readers of this research, whether or not they are interested in this type of research-based theatre exemplified by *Empire of the Son*, will gain insights into the process of creativity, the incessantly recessive nature of truth, and alternative ways of being in the world (Brook, 1968).

The Archeology of Knowledge

Sometimes during post-show talkbacks, I share that *Empire of the Son* was created within the context of pursuing a Doctor of Philosophy degree in Education. Such information can raise more questions than it answers. I then explain that the field of education is much broader than one might assume. Beyond teacher training, or

educational policy, the field of education also encompasses the arts-based research paradigm, which is a recognition that research with and through the arts is a legitimate form of understanding and examining experience.

As a subset of arts-based research, arts-based educational research has its share of detractors. Despite the fact that all research is rooted in autobiography, the explicitly reflexive nature of autoethnography, which Ellis and Bochner (2000) define as an autobiographical genre of writing that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (p. 739) rubs many the wrong way. Delamont critiques autoethnography for paying attention to “social scientists who are usually not interesting or worth researching” (2009, pp. 59-60). He also accuses them of being “literally lazy and also intellectually lazy” (2007, p. 2). Because my life is at the heart of this research, rather than be discouraged, I hold fast to Holman Jones’s (2005) call for autoethnography to make “personal accounts count” (p. 783). As a member of a marginalized community whose stories aren’t often shared on the Canadian stage, I know my responsibility is greater than if I were simply telling my own story.

Autoethnographers such as Chang (2008) and Spry (2011) have met this challenge by situating their personal stories in relation to broader cultural contexts. Spry explains that “plaiting ethnography with autobiography emphasizes the cultural situatedness of the autobiographic subject” (p. 92). But she cautions that however personal such writing may feel, it does not constitute performative autoethnography “if it does not connect these emotions to larger social issues” (p. 108).

In contrast to research designed to prove or disprove theory, contribute generalizable findings, or offer definitive answers to questions, my approach to arts-

based educational research aims to explore and illuminate personal experiences. I share an epistemological kinship with Fels (1998) who explains how performative inquiry—her arts-based research methodology that utilizes drama as a venue for inquiring and learning—is “not a narrowing down but an opening up”, and thus it does not seek final destinations, rather it pursues the “opening of new horizons” (p. 33).

In a similar spirit, Irwin (2008) writes that “a/t/tographic inquiry does not set out to answer introductory research questions but rather to posit questions of inquiry that evolve over time” (p. 77). Not long ago, one of my mature students caught me by surprise. She said, “I’m interested in hearing about how your relationship with your father will develop now that he has died.” That seed of a question—weighing a mere 18 words—has sprouted tendrils within the recesses of my memory, interrupting and entangling settled ways of thinking, enabling me to continue walking with my father despite the borderlands of death.

When my friend Munish Sharma learned my mother was now living with my family, his happiness for me was palpable. He extolled the wisdom of having three generations live together. While the parents are busy working during their peak-earning years, grandparents who live with their grandchildren are ideally positioned to directly transmit their values. Writing about his own parents, Goodall (2005) explains how “what we inherit narratively from our forebears [*sic*] provides us with a framework for understanding our identity through theirs” (p. 497). Extending this concept further, through writing about our parents and grandparents, such understandings can then be passed along to our children. My kids can no longer spend time with my dad, but

because I have recorded and retell his personal stories, they live with him in another way.

How to Evaluate This Work

Even though arts-based research has been part of academic scholarship for a few decades, for many it remains a novel concept. Some still ask, “Is artistic inquiry a legitimate form of research?” If so, how does one judge it? What criteria are in place to evaluate an arts-based thesis?

Body of Literature

There is a growing body of critical literature that addresses the question of how to assess performance-based qualitative research. As pieces that are tasked to carry out both the scholarly work of social science as well as being successful as aesthetic works of art, the following touchstones or guideposts serve as a form of poetics to effectively contextualize such work.

- Does the piece contribute to our understanding of social-life? (Richardson, 2000).
- Reflexivity: Does it make explicit the construction of the research? (Bochner, 2000).
- Does it impact me emotionally and intellectually? (Richardson, 2000).
- Does it express a reality? Does it seem “true”? (Richardson, 2000).
- Does it honour the research context, the fact-fiction balance? (Prendergast & Belliveau, 2012)
- Does it use all the elements of the theater to share the research? (Mackenzie & Belliveau, 2011).

- Does it share the artistic within the academic to provide the reader entry points into the work? (Belliveau, 2006; Irwin & Springgay, 2008).
- Is there a balance between the instrumental and the aesthetic in the work? (Beare & Belliveau, 2008; Saldaña, 2010; White & Belliveau, 2010).

To provide multiple entry points for the reader, at the heart of this dissertation I share an artistic dimension. As such this thesis is partly aesthetic, partly scholarly, and partly theoretical. Such markers can assist the reader in evaluating whether or not this work is successful.

While many arts-based researchers have been influenced by the above criteria, for me such a lens remains a traditional form of assessment. For example, the call to balance the instrumental (research) and the aesthetic (theatre) suggests a dichotomy between scholarship and artistry. As an artist/scholar, these two dimensions are not far apart, and in fact often overlap or are woven.

The work of scholarship involves gathering evidence to prove or disprove certain ideas, while creativity can be seen as the process of adjusting variables to ascertain how to best affect your audience. Both endeavours share a similar cycle of action-research: planning, taking action, observation, and reflection. As a theatre artist, this process of scholarly reflection is set into my creative system because I am constantly testing and revising. The resulting changes could be as minor as the elimination of a pause, or as a drastically new design. Such a recognition may represent a new understanding of how the work of scholarship can fit into the creative process.

Danger Ahead

As you will soon see, the structure you are about to enter is atypical. Architecturally speaking, it will be less Frank Lloyd Wright, and more MC Escher. To construct a more conventional space and write about my play in a systematic way would be to deny the spirit and the form of *Empire of the Son*. From Aristotle's poetics to the well-made play, Western storytelling is largely based upon formula, a tradition for which I have a deep and an abiding respect. Indeed, I count myself to be a true believer in craft, but it is precisely this internalized orthodoxy that I'm challenging.

Classical structure carries its own politics. Form dictates content. For example, had I written *Empire of the Son* in the genre of the well-made play, it would be a reduced theatrical experience. Instead of using just one performer, a realist drama would require an ensemble of actors. In fact, it was the very constraints of the solo work, the monotonous nature of monologues, that forced me to creatively discover other ways in which to open up the story visually, resulting in what Jillian Keiley (2016, December 12), the Artistic Director of the National Arts Centre, called, "exhilaratingly original" (para. 1). By eschewing linearity, an inciting incident, plot points, and act climaxes, my story had to find new forms of internal connectivity. As a result, one theatre critic described it as "poetic, associative" (Thomas, 2016, October 31).

Much like the play, this research travels back and forth through the years, transforming time and space. Similarly, the development, creation, performance, reception, and reflection of this research has never been linear. For example, while on tour, walking back to the hotel from the LSPU Hall in St. John's, I might have a flash of

insight of the play's development. Similarly, without warning, the researcher's textual voice shifts from one persona to another.



USHER: If you look ahead, you will see a dozen passageways, representing the 12 rooms. Before I take you into the first room, I want to linger here for a moment. Notice how this place, this antechamber, exists in shadow—the shadow of a cross.

Airborne

When I was a child I attended the Bible Fellowship Christian Academy, a religious private school. I recall one of the teachers claiming that between the 2,000 year old Dead Sea Scrolls and the 400 year old King James Bible, there was only a 10% drift in accuracy that took place among the countless transcriptions in between. Until this day, I cannot decide whether a 10% drift is a little or a lot. On one hand, a 10% textual drift over the course of 1600 years is an impressive track record, but then again, we are talking about the Word of God—where one word in ten might be off? Perhaps that means I only have to obey nine of the Ten Commandments? Clearly, I was not destined to be a theologian like my elder brother, Reverend Ken Shigematsu.

Either way, that unwavering 90% points towards this underlying idea that the Word of God remains inerrant as a Platonic Ideal, hovering above all the scribal corruption and fallibilities of humankind. Such a reverence regarding the sanctity of text has bled into English itself.

Indeed, Shakespeare and the King James Bible occupy so lofty a perch upon the spire of the Western imagination, it is hard to distinguish them. For example, can you guess if the following quotes are of Biblical or Shakespearean provenance? “Put a knife

Figure 1. Selfie-portrait of the artist as a young man.

to thy throat, if thou be a man given to appetite.” “I am escaped with the skin of my teeth.”³

It has been said that if film is a director’s medium, and TV a producer’s medium, then theatre is where the writer reigns. Indeed, credit requirements usually stipulate that the playwright’s name be no less than 50% of the font size of the play’s title, and that, “No one shall receive larger or more prominent billing.” In theatre, if the playwright is God, their play the Holy Scripture, then the stage manager is the cane-swinging nun, ready to rap the knuckles of any wayward player who dares drop a preposition.

But as someone who is both writer and actor, I am the apostate who knows the playwright is no prophet. On the contrary, as an actor I most certainly know better what felicitous phrasing will fall most trippingly off the tongue beneath the hot gaze of a live audience than that pallid scribe who toils away in monastic silence. Such a binary conception of the self has informed my methodology as a writer.

During workshop presentations, the text I compose is deliberately loose as I know it will mutate the moment I look into the eyes of my first audience. This takes pressure off me as a playwright. In this manner, paper—that most neutral of surfaces—transforms from the tyrannical blank sheet in the playwright’s typewriter into the crumpled crib sheet of the derelict performer who—in failing to be off book—has instead scrawled their best adlibs.

The Wisdom of the Unconscious

Field Marshall Helmuth Karl Bernhard Graf von Moltke once pronounced, “No battle plan ever survives contact with the enemy” (as quoted in Detzer, 2005, p. 233). In a

³ Shakespeare wrote neither. These are verses Proverbs 23:2, Job 19:20.

similar manner, long ago I learned that my most meticulously prepared text reliably crumbles upon collision with a live audience. As such, I refrain from writing down a story for as long as possible.

The first iteration might be recounting a memory to a friend at a cafe. Based on their reactions, their amusement, their bemusement, their laughter, their silence, I would ‘rewrite’ this story in real time, using their micro expressions as a flight instrument to fly through the fog of narrative nascency. Given such evanescent malleability, where does the story exist?

In his book, *Story* Robert McKee (1997, p. 179) asks, what is the “substance” of story? He argues that in all other art forms, the answer is self-evident. A composer has his instrument. The dancer has her or his body. When I was in art school studying sculpture, every semester we changed media: plaster, clay, wood, metal, stone. Whatever visions danced in our heads, the professor reminded us that it was incumbent upon us to “listen” to the materials, “Don’t force wood into doing what comes easily with clay.” Every material, every medium speaks its own mother tongue, its own native language.

So it is with a story. It wants to be something specific. It is within the zero gravity of performance that the text gives birth to itself, seeking its own structure. Spalding Gray worked in a similar manner. He described how, “I speak rather than write” (quoted in Georgakas, Porton, & Gray, 1993, p. 37). He also described how, “none of my monologues have been previously written down. They’re always worked out on stage” (Gray as quoted in Dery, 1986, p. 58).

On stage, within the mild trance of live performance, one has greater access to the unconscious, which is far more capable of iterating text more elegantly—conveying

more precise meaning in fewer words—than the fully conscious act of thoughtfully dipping one’s quill into the inkwell, allowing me to rewrite within the moment of performance. I consciously and unconsciously reshape the story, expanding moments of perceived interest, skipping mundane passages, while filling in the new negative space with adlibs, some of which may be worth keeping.

In his 2013 acceptance speech for the Golden Globe award for Best Screenplay, screenwriter and film director Quentin Tarantino provided a glimpse into his writing process. He reads scenes out loud to his friends, yet he doesn’t solicit their feedback. Rather the awareness of their attention suffices. “When I read it to you, I hear it through your ears and it lets me know I’m on the right track” (QuentinTarantinoFans, 2013 2:24). Tarantino’s relational, yet non-conversational process confirms Bakhtin’s assertion that it is within the space between the addressee and the speaker that meaning is co-created (Bakhtin, 1986; Holquist, 2002), as both imbue utterances with meaning. Explaining this phenomenon Mckee (1997) writes, “For at the nucleus of a story is a ‘substance,’ like the energy swirling in an atom, that’s never directly seen, heard, or touched, yet we know it and feel it.” How? Through “the audience’s reaction to this substance” (p. 135). My desire to keep words airborne for as long as possible is because the only way for me to know if a story sings is by looking into the eyes of my listener.

Focus Group

However informative this intimate process may be, it cannot remain here.

For my purposes, a more reliable test is sharing this process before a group of invited guests. As I migrate these one-on-one performances from the café to progressively larger stages, crossing the threshold from the ostensibly conversational to the explicitly

performative, rather than writing down a draft, I might draw icons or ideograms on my palm to aid me in recalling the structure of the story. The story will change constantly, but towards the end, say after several dozen iterations, this once notional, amorphous, rambling anecdote will have congealed into something hard, with precise phrasing. Through repetition the substance of the story solidifies. At this point, a director can angle the performance in such a way that the subtext suffuses the text with meaning.

As audiences become progressively larger and more anonymous, their role becomes clear. The collective attention of a group of strangers forms a kind of narrative wind tunnel, and only under such conditions can one truly know if their assembly of words can become airborne.

This is my process. But, permit me to continue past this point where my actual writing process ends, and my fantasy begins. Unbeknownst to me, an audio recording would be covertly made, and someone else would secretly transcribe a ‘definitive’ version for the published book version of the play. The living text would continue to mutate, but now only incrementally, reaching immutable status only when every line functions consistently, even in the hands of another actor.

When another tour of *Empire of the Son* is imminent, we will schedule a brief rehearsal period to get the text back into the body. Given how up to a year can go by between tours, it takes discipline not to glance at the printed version prior to performing it for the first time in the studio before my colleagues. Eager to please, actors naturally want to impress the rest of the team by being off-book. But the scholar in me hankers for the empirical data that can only be generated once or twice a year. Diving right in after such a prolonged absence, the most easily recalled passages I deem to be the ‘best

written.’ They possess an internal logic that makes their recollection feel natural, inevitable, even inexorable. Regarding those sentences that seem to defy easy recollection, I am always reminded of Keith Johnstone’s (1981) observation, “if an actor forgot a move that had been decided on, then the move was probably wrong” (p. 24).

Regarding those pesky lines that fail to come back to me easily, I will resist the impulse to calling “line.” Instead, I’ll gamely try out several variations, taking multiple attempts at articulation, until a clear winner emerges as the most natural way to express this idea. What never fails to surprise me is how closely this ‘new’ text, matches word for word the definitive published version.

I remain a big believer in the power of forgetting. When I was the head writer for the Vancouver-based sketch comedy group, *The Hot Sauce Posse*, we always began our writing sessions by going around the table, pitching our best ideas. After the groans and laughter died down and everyone was finished, I asked each person to write down on the back of a napkin as many premises as they could remember, not their favorites mind you, just the ones they could easily recall. After hearing as many as 30 pitches, only a handful stuck in the mind, but they stuck for a reason. In the parlance of programming, forgetting is not a bug. It is a feature. With the text now carved more immutably back into the present, the baton of change now passes into the realm of performance.



Room 1: The Workshop Lab

USHER: Usually patrons don't recognize me without my usher's uniform, but if you and I were to meet outside this two-dimensional portal in the real world, and you found yourself engaged by an anecdote I was sharing with you, chances are, you are in my workshop lab. We could be at a café, on a street corner, on a plane, even your house, we could be anywhere, but if I'm telling you a story, in my mind, our shared environment has been repurposed into an experimental space. Full disclosure, I am taking mental notes. I am paying attention. I am studying your reactions, as I rewrite the story I am telling you. Welcome to my Workshop Lab.

1.A Pre-Airborne

Empire of the Son is a solo theatre work inspired by my father Akira Shigematsu, a man I never really knew. Like many, I never had a single conversation with my father beyond the transactional. When his health began to falter, I dusted off the only object we ever had in common, an old reporter's microphone. I worked for the CBC, my father worked for the BBC. As a second-generation public radio broadcaster, the formality of the long form interview was just the pretext we needed to give ourselves permission to speak to each other. For two years we spoke as if no one else were listening. Eighteen days before the show opened, he died. And *Empire of the Son* took on a life of its own.

Seventeen hours of recorded audio, verbatim transcripts, coupled with my own

Figure 2. Confering with my director, Richard Wolfe. Photo by Raymond Shum.

recollections constitute a dataset of actuality—documentary evidence—a multi-dimensional matrix of “the truth.” In contrast to a fictional narrative, where the author is free to add unlimited new characters and plot developments, I found myself exploring a finite story continent whose geographical features were fixed. For example, my father Akira knew very little about his own father Akio, and there were other incidents he declined to talk about. Such limits constituted no-go zones, narrative shorelines.

Yet within the finite parameters of what remained of my father’s memories, there were vast landscapes. As an itinerant traveler armed with a sketchbook, I could choose how to render them, the theatrical equivalents of pencil sketches, watercolour, or oils. For example, when it came to the audio recordings I could simply play the tape, or I could perform the transcript. Alternatively, I could play a recording of my vocal performance impersonating my father, or I could use a live video camera and stage the scene in miniature and project it against a movie screen. I now had material in hand that I could manipulate theatrically.

Fictional worlds are limitless in their possibilities. By contrast, my father’s life or his original account of it is fixed. The number of minutes recorded, the number of words he used is finite. And of course, now that he is dead, what questions remain, there can be no more answers. Yet freedom remains.

1.B Airborne

Like riding thermal updrafts over such a consistently grounded world, a guiding ethos for me as a writer/performer was to honour my impulse to keep the words airborne for as long as possible. When I recorded my father’s stories, I rarely revisited them. Had I been

a more exacting historian, I would have double-checked the fidelity of my transcriptions, and fact checked his personal memories against the historical record.

Instead, I would contemplate their possible meanings, and learn what they meant to me by relating his recollections to others. By refraining from revisiting the audio recordings of his stories, his memories have become as internalized as my own. Like recalling a vivid car accident, one hour, one day, one week, or one year after it happened, no two retellings of an incident are exactly alike. It wasn't always this way.

1.C The Case for Flight

When I performed on stage, I used to feel like I would imagine a nervous figure skater at the Olympics feels. I was so focused on delivering exact phrases so precisely I could scarcely breathe. Even when I was the author, I still felt constrained by the traditions of theatre where the text was held as sacrosanct, immutable, no different than any other play. I felt like I was holding my breath. I wanted to breathe.

Nowadays I'm in a much different place. If my mind goes blank on stage, I'll let the audience know that this isn't in fact a dramatic pause, but that I've simply forgotten my lines. I reassure them that the words will come back. They always do... eventually. And they wait, their expressions gleaming. In those moments, the quality of their attention makes it feel like I'm basking in sunlight on a summer's day. I can breathe again.

A guiding value for me as writer, and as a performer, is my wish to keep the words airborne for as long as possible. By keeping the script subordinate to the immediate exigencies of moment, I can be present and ideally, my performance can be as supple, relaxed, and responsive as conversations with your best friend.

1.D Final Draft

Whether one is acting or improvising, from the audience's vantage point, such distinctions are rarely obvious. When a theatre audience witnesses a performance, they naturally presume they are seeing the definitive version of a story: The Platonic ideal of an incident's narrative form. In one sense, this misconception becomes self-fulfilling on opening night when theatre critics are in attendance. Ready or not, their account enters the public record as the official description for posterity, even though the work will continue to change.

But, any performance, any draft of a script is more akin to a single page with a flipbook animation. If one could stand outside the dimension of time and see every iteration stacked atop one another, and flipped through it, there would be a clear beginning, followed by a constant evolution of movement. In like manner, Kurt Vonnegut describes how fourth dimensional beings wouldn't see humans being as two-legged creatures, rather they would see them as, "great millipedes--with babies' legs at one end and old people's legs at the other" (1969, p. 87).

In regard to the script, sometimes the ending is less clear. As a writer/performer, I never consider a story finished. They "do not begin or end, they merely change form," (Davidson, 2013, p. 254). Like a cup of coffee absentmindedly placed on the roof of a car, a piece's progress might be unexpectedly interrupted, never again to be revisited, but that is never the intention. Final drafts are recognizable only in hindsight.

Misremembering is usually regarded as a mistake: The failure to adhere to the absolute, a corruption of perfection. As a theatre actor, if I so much as switch the order of two words within a line of dialogue, my stage manager is obligated to inform me of my waywardness. Even if neither the stage manager nor the actor is inclined to be so fastidious, both readily conform to this unquestioned tradition.

Such a ritual speaks to a hierarchy of cultural values that privileges the playwright's text above the physical labour of the actor who functions primarily as a worker, whose task is to carry out the instructions of the playwright and director, little more than a button in the theatre machine (Wirth, 1980). Over the years, as an actor I felt increasingly alienated from the labour of lifting someone else's words from the page. Dissatisfied with being confined to deciding *how* I will perform, in the rebellious spirit of Peter Brook and Jerzy Grotowski, I wanted to decide *what* I performed. By taking over the means of production (writing the script, choosing my director, etc.), I ceased being a cultural proletarian. By doing my own solo work, I am seeking "a greater conscious agency in the lived life" (Buss, 2005, p. 19).

To be clear, this was not simply a matter of an actor arbitrarily shifting genres out of caprice. As a performer inhabiting a racially marked body, I was bound by predefined phenotypical constraints, e.g., no one was going to hire me to play Hamlet at The Stratford Festival. Nor do I bemoan this. As an actor who belongs to an underrepresented community, the decision to be entrepreneurial contains the promise of social equality. As the South Asian actor Mindy Kaling (2011) advised, "Write your own part... It is much harder work, but sometimes you have to take destiny into your own hands" (p. 87).

Much harder work indeed. Because the process of creating a new solo work takes me at least two years, I continue to act occasionally in other productions. What is the biggest difference I have observed between performing my own work verses in others? Within the closed creative ecosystem of the writer/performer, the traditional binary of playwright/actor and its implied hierarchy collapses yet traces of this duality remains in the rubble. In practical terms, when my stage manager dutifully points out textual inaccuracies after one of my own performances I can playfully reply, “let’s consider that another rewrite, shall we?” Although glib sounding, such a declaration speaks to an underlying tension between divergent traditions, and the tectonic rift between epistemological continents.

1.E Dramatic Theatre and Performance Art, what’s the difference?

What is the difference between theatre and performance art? Some have defined it as the difference between acting and action. Others have suggested it depends on the colour of the walls: black means theatre, white means performance art. Although flippant sounding, such a superficial distinction speaks directly to their divergent provenances.

In his book *Postdramatic Theatre*, Lehmann (2006) describes performance art as one example of “postdramatic” theatre, an increasingly used reference point within the discourse of contemporary theatre. As Lehmann describes, “Postdramatic Theatre refers to theatre after drama. Despite their diversity, the new forms and aesthetics that have evolved have one essential quality in common: they no longer focus on the dramatic text” (2006, p. i). Such a distinction represents a major shift in Western theatre.

For centuries, theatre and drama appeared so closely related, that despite radical transformations and evolutions of theatre, the concept of drama—the model of

suspenseful dramatic action, predominantly told in dialogue—endures as the normative conception of theatre. Indeed, many continue to use ‘drama’ and ‘theatre’ interchangeably.

In performance art the focus is not on the drama itself, but rather the text of the performance is considered in relation to the situation of the performance and the stage. By pushing back against the traditional hegemony of the playwright as *primum mobile*, postdramatic work shifts the focus away from the primacy of the written text, and instead strives to produce an effect *between* the audience and performer. Gone is the corpus, in its place, maximum corporeal presence.

As an unstable object of study, performance art defies easy categorization, but Lehmann points out how such examples of the postdramatic consistently tend to reveal “more presence than representation, more shared than communicated experience, more process than product, more manifestation than signification, more energetic impulse than information” (2006, p. 86).

1.F Never studied

When a new cast first assembles for the inaugural table read, a familiar query during the first Equity-union mandated break is, “Where did you study? What theatre school did you attend?” In any theatre town, the semiotics of local acting programs are well known enough that they provide an efficient shorthand: who taught them, their methodologies, their aesthetic sense, and perhaps even what they might be good at.

When I’m asked where I studied, I cheerfully reply, “I didn’t.” Occasionally I will ask other cast members if they have ever worked with the likes of me: someone who has never formally studied acting. The answer is always no, but according to Lehmann

(2006) my experience is not unique. He points out how given the postdramatic emphasis on staging scenically dynamic formations over illustrating stories, “it is no coincidence that many practitioners of postdramatic theatre started out in the visual arts” (p. 68).

True to form, in my college days in Montreal, while my close friends were attending theatre school, I was in art school where my instructors became more interested in my explanations of my artwork than the artwork itself. Excitedly, they would point at me—rather than my artwork—and say, “That! Do more of that!” To give me a better idea of what “that” was, my professor, Corinne Corey lent me her VHS tapes of New York monologist Spalding Gray.

While my friends were learning Ibsen, Chekov, and Strindberg, I was studying such solo performance artists as Eric Bogosian, Laurie Anderson, John Leguizamo, and Anna Deveare Smith. From what I could gather, it seems this latter group drew their inspiration from everywhere *but* the traditional theatre. Bogosian has been described paradoxically as a “playwright who has seen few traditional plays and an actor who has appeared in even fewer” (Carter, 1987, p. 168). Similarly, Forced Entertainment, regarded as one of Britain’s leading experimental theatre companies, describe their work as accessible by anybody “who was brought up in a house where the TV was always on” (quoted in Lehmann, 2006, p. 10). The combination of decidedly lowbrow influences coupled with a lack of accessibility to the uninitiated, positions performance art at the very margins of culture.

The challenge for many performance artists is that theirs is such an iconoclastic vocation, so underground, so decidedly avant-garde, it would be antithetical to their punk rock ethos to be annexed into staid cultural institutions. Indeed, performance art first

began as a backlash against the excessive commodification of the art world (Goldberg, 2001). In the 1970s, artists wanted to create art that defied easy acquisition. The appeal of performance art is that collectors can't simply hang it above their couches or sell it at a profit.⁴ In other words, performance artists have always resisted repetition, capture or purchase (Parr & Parr, 2005). After all, how would you purchase Chris Burden⁵ shooting himself with a gun, or Carolee Schneemann⁶ pulling a scroll from her vagina?

Terraforming a world within such rarefied atmosphere precludes others from forming a supportive ecology. In other words, there will never be agents for performance artists because 20% of nothing is still nothing. Despite beginning in earnest in the 1970s, with the conspicuous absence of material stakes, performance art has never produced a supportive infrastructure.

Fiona Sturgeon Shea (personal communication, November 26, 2014) explains how in her capacity as Creative Director of the Playwright's Studio Scotland, she has witnessed performance artists coming in out of the cold, so to speak, and learn how to repurpose their skills as solo artists by mastering the craft of writing ensemble plays. Having already accrued cultural capital as mid-career performance artists, they are able to convert this currency and receive conventional theatre grants to pay the rent.

Ironically, the currents of culture are such that theatre itself is slowly turning towards the continent of performance art, or the postdramatic, and it is here within this rift that I find myself caught between two competing traditions.

⁴ A noted exception is Mariana Abramovic who very successfully sells photos, DVDs, and catalogues of her performances.

⁵ See *Chris Burden* (2007), by Fred Hoffman.

⁶ See *Imagining Her Erotics* (2003), by Carolee Schneemann.

Room 2: The Rehearsal Studio

USHER: If one wanted to learn about how a show is put together, they would do well to spend time in the rehearsal studio. If the theatre auditorium is the dining room, then the rehearsal studio is the kitchen. Do not let the fluorescent lights or the casual street clothing fool you, this is where theatre is made. There is no need for ushers here. We are on break now. Feeling convivial, I turn to you, “Seen any good films lately?”

2.A Prelude to Intervention

Akin to the Kurosawa film, *Rashomon* (1950), where multiple characters all offer apparently honest, yet contradictory accounts of the same incident, *Empire of the Son* is a world that self-organizes along the meridians of two seemingly irreconcilable magnetic poles: a commitment to a world where nothing is invented, and an acceptance that the truth can never be known.

In contrast to an ever-changing performance text, I also integrate immutable artifacts: archival radio pieces. During the two year research phase of *Empire of the Son*, while conducting interviews with my father, I learned that a complete collection of my father’s radio programs are archived as vinyl records at the University of British Columbia’s Rare Books and Special Collections.

By sampling my father’s Japanese language radio programs during his years at Radio Canada International, and juxtaposing it with what just happened this morning, I

Figure 3. Behind the scenes at Playwrights Theatre Centre.

was able to remix distant past with the recent past. This may sound convincing on the abstract plane, but my hifalutin reluctance to “stick to the script” didn’t fare so well on the ground.

2.B Show-and-Tell

The run of *Empire of the Son* began on October 6, 2015. Prior to my father’s death on September 18, 2015, I would stumble into the rehearsal space each morning, and I would breathlessly tell everyone what took place during the previous 12 hours: updates on his condition, the latest fight amongst my siblings. Unrehearsed, unwritten, unprepared, these impromptu “morning show-and-tells” were nevertheless performances: barely theatre yet still theatre.

At the same time as I was watching my team listen, I was watching myself with a DuBoisian (1903) double-consciousness. I remember my stage manager Susan Miyagashima standing at the back of the room listening to me with tears streaming down her face. On one level, an outsider may have observed me as someone under considerable strain venting about his dying father, fortunate enough to be surrounded by sympathetic friends. And that would be a pleasant fiction, but reality was more complex. These people weren’t really my ‘friends.’ Like backpacking in your twenties, I loved these people with the ardent abandon that only guaranteed transience enables. This was a temporary workplace. These were my temporary co-workers. Yet this was no ordinary office. Weighted down by the barometric pressure of a looming world premiere, I never forgot that I was a performer, testing out material on them, and the subtext that animated my delivery was always the rhetorical question, “don’t you think this should be in the show?”

The veil between life and art had all but disappeared. The only qualitative metric that seemed to matter to me was, the fresher the better, more recent is more vital.

2.C Fresh, Fresher, Freshest

You know something is awry with your creative process when those you trust become less candid with their feedback. Usually this happens when an artist's ego prevents them from being receptive to criticism. But is it possible to be too receptive? During the final rehearsal for *Empire of the Son*, I noticed my collaborators were becoming increasingly cautious in providing feedback to my stories because my kneejerk response was always, "consider it gone," accompanied by the sound effect of the virtual trash can emptying.

"No, wait!" they would protest. "There was nothing wrong with that story."

"Don't worry," I'd say dismissively. "Let me tell you about something that *just* happened."

We were three weeks out from opening night, and rather than rehearsing a finished text, I seemed stuck in a devised mode, my wheels were spinning us into a deeper and deeper rut as I presented new stories daily under the pretext of urgent personal updates.

2.D Intervention

Despite the impending premiere, the script for *Empire of the Son* remained a highly unstable object. Like a wave cruising along the ocean surface, the contents that constituted its form were in constant churn. Deleted stories were immediately replaced by new ones. Perhaps such prodigious output may have been impressive at first, but quickly grew old for my collaborators.

As rehearsals progressed, I would find myself engaged in increasingly tense battles with my dramaturge and my director who insisted it was time to freeze the script. “No more new stories.” Yes, of course. But life was changing quickly. Things were happening *between* rehearsals. How could I withhold these “updates”? This is real life. You can’t stop real life!

“You have to stop.” My director Richard Wolfe was averse to confrontation, but he was finally staging a long overdue intervention. Jabbing the script with his index finger, he explained, “Every time you change the story,” pulling out the Stage Manager’s production Bible for emphasis, “Susan has to renumber every line *by hand*.”

“From the beginning of the script, or from just the start of each story? Shouldn’t Susan have software that can repaginate automatically?” Of course, these were just thought clouds. I didn’t dare ask such impertinent questions out loud. Instead, I only nodded, feigning a penitent expression. Whatever lead-time we had left to adequately prepare was all but gone. In moments like this, where I am being berated by an authority figure, I occasionally experience time dilation. I have many thoughts quickly.

There was no doubt in my mind that these people I had entreated to accompany me on this journey were my cultural superiors. These senior artists were generous enough to reach down and pull me up, but at this very moment, they may have well been wondering if I were in fact a drowning man about to drag them under with me.

Meanwhile, my stage manager Susan Miyagashima closed her eyes, gently shook her head and waved an imaginary fly away, as if to say, “Don’t worry about me, Tetsuro. I have no problem renumbering lines.” When each person had said their piece, I said, “I understand everything everyone is saying, but my father will be dead in 72 hours.” Facial

expressions changed instantly, followed by an outpouring of sympathy. This wasn't a line. It wasn't a strategic move, but it had the effect of a verbal checkmate. I was no longer on my heels against the ropes. I was repositioned to break up the script again, pieces were once again in motion.

In retrospect, I'm not sure why I remained so stubbornly averse to locking the script. Perhaps it was my subconscious insecurities as a professional actor who had never been trained. "If I tell the audience what just happened, it'll be anything but stilted!" Maybe it was the childlike faith I had placed in my world-class team of designers—truly the grown-ups in the room—who could be relied upon to accommodate my caprices. Perhaps it was my attempt to claw my way from one part of the dramatic spectrum to another: from the realist Strasbergian performance of an immutable text to the post-dramatic turn towards performance art. Or maybe I was simply acting out as a son who didn't know how to better deal with his father dying.

2.E Gilding the Lily

Whatever the reasons, beneath it all, I had a quiet faith that what was happening in my life outside the rehearsal studio was suffused with tremendous vitality. My father was in the process of actively dying. In my mind, his imminent death was so fascinating, there wasn't much left for me to do as an artist. I was reminded how, "in the presence of extraordinary actuality, consciousness takes the place of imagination" (Wallace Stevens as quoted in Lensing, 2004, p. 118). When death happens, creative powers become redundant. In the presence of such profound mystery, there is no need for invention. One simply has to observe and report.

The last story to make it into the lineup describes how the undertakers arrived to pick up my dad's body. I must have retold that story about a dozen times over the course of an hour in the rehearsal studio, with each iteration getting progressively shorter. It was easy to recall exactly what "Josh" had said because it had just happened the day before, but it was also confusing.

2.F What is the Difference?

Such an approach contradicted everything I have ever held true as a writer. My creative writing students have ranged from murderers in prison to housewives in Las Vegas. No matter who they are, I am constantly urging them to graduate from an adolescent notion of "The Truth." That their efforts to recount what "really" happened may be of interest to them personally is of little value to others. We are craftspeople and our toolkit includes conflation, dramatic license, expansion, excision, knives and dynamite. Art is a lie that tells the truth. This is what I believed.

But now I was like a sushi chef suddenly bewildered by my own craft. Here on the counter, an entire salmon lays on my chopping board, so clearly a fish, but with a few cuts, it is now sashimi? How can a single gesture render what was once sea creature into an entrée? Fish, sashimi, fish, sashimi. There is no transubstantiation. Nothing changes but the surface it rests upon. By switching out the wooden chopping board for a ceramic dish, its value increases exponentially.

In the same manner, life, theatre. The changes I had wrought upon the story were so minimal, there was no artfulness to it at all. I had always understood the role of the artist as akin to the artisans of the Colonial economies, where life provided the raw materials of sugar and cotton, and the application of skill and labor turned them into

commodities like rum and textiles. Yet here, I was perplexed that a story could be created with so little value added. Who am I? What role do I play? What am I bringing to the table?



Room 3: My Parent's Apartment

USHER: There is no greater intimacy than inviting you into my parents' apartment. My mom and dad have lived in many places, but it is their place in Vancouver's West End that endures in my memory. Their one-bedroom apartment at 1122 Gilford Street might not be what you would expect of an old-world Japanese couple whose courtly manners had been frozen in time. As you can see, there is no tatami, no shoji, no alcove with an ikebana arrangement in an earthenware ceramic vase. Instead it resembles the den of an elderly Chinese couple eking out an existence in old Kowloon. In their small one-bedroom concrete apartment, a rented hospital bed is their biggest piece of furniture. Lining the walls are Ikea particle board bookshelves that sag beneath the detritus of a life. A binder containing audiocassettes of the New Testament read aloud in Japanese; a dialysis machine the size of an old Apple LaserWriter; a self-supporting white binder that held step-by-step, flipchart instructions on how to do Peritoneal Dialysis without causing the patient a fatal infection; and stacks and stacks of cardboard boxes filled with Baxter brand bags of clear dialysis liquid. The factors that have conspired to produce this precise aesthetic is as follows: advanced age, being immigrants, having little money, not caring and having death as a roommate. My parents are not sentimental hoarders, but if you searched carefully, you might find small

Figure 4. My father Akira, my daughter Mika, and my mother Yoshiko.

mementos of my past achievements. Perhaps an audio cassette tape recording of my very first interview as an artist for a national CBC radio program, or a yellowed newspaper clipping from a community newspaper.

3.A Permission

3.A.1 Rising Son

Long before *Empire of the Son*, I wrote and performed another solo work about my father called *Rising Son* back in the early 1990s, which I now recognize as a kind of prequel.

When I was a teenager, my father and I had a violent, acrimonious relationship, and in lieu of therapy, *Rising Son* was my way to work through my conflicted feelings.

It was too small a show to be reviewed by the major newspaper critics in Montreal, but I did receive one write up by *The Montreal Bulletin*, the local Japanese community newsletter. “Poignant... bittersweet.... dramatic.... This Japanese Canadian is definitely a rising star and his work should be supported and seen” (Horibe, 1994).

Rising Son began attracting attention for me, but then my family staged one of their many interventions.

3.A.2 Stop

One day over our dining room table in Montreal, my mother said to me, “By the way,” such was the preface of her most important pronouncements, “when other people ask about you, dad says ‘my son makes fun of my accent for a living.’”

I didn’t know how to take this remark. I asked her, “Is this dad being sardonic?” He did have a dark, self-deprecating sense of humor. “Or does he really mind?”

My mother was so classically Japanese in her response. Tilting her head to one side, she sucked wind thoughtfully, and said, “I’m not sure.” Translation? “You need to stop, right now.” And so, I did.

Now as a performer, this was a tremendous setback for me. Of all the characters I have ever played, my dad has always been the audience's favourite. There is a thrilling quality to him. Menacing yet adorable, high status but beleaguered, proud yet shy. If my onstage persona "Tetsuro" is a monochromatic drawing, my father "Akira" is a vibrantly coloured Van Gogh, dripping with wet paint. As a young man in my early twenties, I was counting on playing my dad to be my shtick. But if my father wanted me to shut my big mouth, I had to respect that. This may sound rather mature, but in fact I was actually rather petulant. I thought, "If I can't play my father, if I can't tell this story, then I don't want to do theatre."

3.A.3 CBC

The very last time I performed material from *Rising Son*, CBC Radio producer Yvonne Gall recorded me performing *Black Belt, White Lie*, a comedic reenactment of how I exploited the All-Asians-know-Kung-Fu stereotype in an unsuccessful attempt to avoid a street fight in Surrey, a working-class suburb of Vancouver, British Columbia.

When that segment aired, I later learned that Michael Donovan, (the executive producer of Salter Street Films in Halifax), began laughing so hard he had to pull over to the side of the road, which is how I ended up writing for the satirical television program, *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*. From there I was hired by CBC Radio One in Vancouver, where I worked as a show reporter on *The Afternoon Show*, before having the good fortune of being chosen to replace the Bill Richardson on his much beloved national program, *The Roundup*. I did not see this coming.

For a long time, I did not like my father. I vowed to be nothing like him. I went to art school. Got involved with theatre. Started doing comedy, then one day a

producer recorded one of my bits, then BOOM! I found myself working for CBC Radio. How does that even happen? (Shigematsu, 2016, p. 8)

3.A.4 LA

After my years with the CBC, my family later moved to Los Angeles. After completing a passion feature film project, *Yellow Fellas*, I was cast as the impertinent samurai-in-residence on *Deadliest Warrior*, where I talked smack and killed Vikings. According to *The Kansas City Star*, this was a ratings juggernaut for Spike/MTV, attracting some 1.7 million viewers per episode, a 70% surge over the network's regular prime-time ratings (Barnhart, 2010). While waiting in line at Disneyland with my family, disreputable looking young men would approach my wife, hand her their devices, and ask her to take their photos standing next to me.

I was perplexed by this world of flashy broadcast media. I had come a long way from performing at the Yellow Door Coffeehouse in Montreal, but even though my face was being seen all over the world, and my voice had been heard by millions, I still felt silenced.

3.A.5 MFA

During all those years, deep down I wanted to be back on stage. I became tired of show biz because I wasn't telling the story I needed to tell. I was also growing weary of living in such a seasonless place. In Southern California's endless summer, it was either hot or hotter. Before I knew it half a decade had passed in the soporific heat. I longed for the icy winds of the Great White North to reinvigorate my creative spirit, but I would settle for the rain. My family moved back to Vancouver, where I completed my MFA in Creative Writing at the University of British Columbia.

3.A.6 Now or Never

It was during this period that my father's health began to falter. "He had Parkinson's, Type 2 diabetes that left him completely blind, kidney failure, multiple strokes" (Shigematsu, 2016, p. 16).

I began to think about his life, and my life, and how the two formed a kind of rhyme scheme through our work as public radio broadcasters. We both had millions of listeners, but we never spoke with each other. In my whole life, I never had a single conversation with my dad beyond, "Pass the soya sauce." And I was fine with that. He could die with things as they are, and I would be at peace with that. But now that I have two kids, I knew if they are anything like me, there will come a day when they start wondering about *their* cultural identity. They would start asking the same questions I had asked myself, "Who am I? Where do I come from?" They would start asking questions about grandpa, and I didn't want to have to say, "I don't know. I don't know. I don't know."

So, for their sake, I realized it was now or never. Because we didn't really have any practice talking to each other, I deployed the only object we ever shared, a radio microphone. I began interviewing him as if I were doing the longest of long form interviews. Over the course of many hours, I heard him recall meeting the Queen of England, watching Marilyn Monroe sing happy birthday to JFK in person at Madison Square Garden, and standing in the ashes of Hiroshima.

The desire to tell my father's story had never faded away completely, but hearing these stories brought the impulse back to the surface. I felt myself reentering the orbit of my father's narrative world. In a radio piece commemorating Father's Day, I reflected:

They say that people who get lost wandering through the wilderness often end up right where they started. This is because without sidewalks people don't walk straight. Everyone veers to one side, even if it's ever so slightly, and this angle when given enough distance eventually forms a perfect circle. (Shigematsu, 2002, June 14)

3.A.7 Permissions

The writing, performance and touring of *Empire of the Son* constitutes:

a *scholarly* approach to creating **theatre**.

When playwrights ask me about what it is like to make theatre within the context of doing a PhD, I explain the biggest difference is the importance placed on honouring permissions and ethics. When the American writer Anne Lamott declared on Twitter, “You own everything that happened to you. Tell your stories. If people wanted you to write warmly about them, they should have behaved better” (2013, April 23). It was retweeted over 2,000 times. This precise quote has over 15,000 hits on Google. Clearly, this call to arms has struck a chord with multitudes, emboldening the silenced towards acts of literary retribution, but such a creed can ultimately lead to a narrative of solipsistic victimhood, and denies the possibility of intersubjectivity and divergences of meaning.

Insightfully, Jill Ker Conway (1998) asks, “what exactly is the process of questioning the past?” (p. 177). Conway suggests that “cultivation of that voice—the power of speaking for one’s self—is a prerequisite for maturity, because until we've found our own voices we can't settle down to ask ourselves and others probing questions about life in the present” (p. 180). One such probing question might be, how many stories can you relate where the bad guy was you? How many incidents can you relate where the

other person saw you as the villain, or an agent of oppression? How many stories can you tell where you are the antagonist? Playwrights by their very definition must develop the ability to experience phenomena from a multitude of perspectives.

When I was doing an MFA in Creative Writing, my non-fiction professor declared, “Great writing involves great betrayal.” Almost everyone nodded in agreement.

As ethical rigor becomes a paramount value, the ease of having such a cavalier attitude towards the people in your life becomes a thing of the past. These are the notes from the date of the last interview with my father.

3.A.8 Field Diary

Akira Interview Feb 14, 2015

A question for me has been, to what degree have I been forcing my father to participate in these interviews? He's old, and tired, and sometimes our conversations last for hours.

On this last visit, I decided to give him a break. Or perhaps to put it more honestly, I was preoccupied with my own personal work. And I felt, rather than wake him up, and get up from bed, I'd take advantage of this rare “me” time. But very unusual for him, he called me over to his bedside, and he was sitting up. I peered down at him as I stood by the edge of the bed. I asked him what he wanted, “Do you want some water? Are you hungry? Do you need to use the oterai?” He was like a baby who could talk. I went through the usual list but to no avail.

Finally, I asked him if he would like to come and sit out in the living room. He said, “yes!” with uncharacteristic enthusiasm. We were sitting in silence next

to one another on the couch for a while, when he asked me if I remembered his hometown of Kagoshima. I said, "Hold on a second," and I began assembling my recording equipment.

What followed was a remarkable conversation. I finally broached the topic I have been avoiding for two years now.

3.A.9 The Ask

"My son makes fun of my accent for a living." Those 10 words were enough to stop me from telling the story I wanted to tell for 25 years. I was afraid to ask for my father's permission to tell his story. If he said no, I would be pulled back into silence.

Whether or not he granted me permission, I had known for some time now that I would soon have to stop interviewing my dad. Not because there was nothing left to ask, but because I couldn't subject him to this process any longer. He was emaciated. His blind eyes were cataract gray, and he took so long to answer my questions, I had to check in with him to see if he was still awake. In what turned out to be our final interview, I finally summoned the nerve to ask him.

"Dad, haven't you ever wondered why I've been interviewing you all this time?"

"No," he replied.

"As you know, I have been working on my doctorate, but the heart of my thesis is writing about your life story. Do I have your permission to tell your story to others?"

My dad looked so utterly perplexed. He shook his head in disbelief. "I cannot fathom why anyone would have even the slightest interest in my life."

The whole enterprise struck him as preposterous. It was as if I was suggesting to him, "Dad can I take your toenail clippings, and sell them for medicinal purposes on

eBay?” He simply saw no value in what he perceived to be the banality that was his life, and he couldn’t imagine why anyone else would either.

“Dad, I’m sorry, but I think you’re wrong. In fact, I should apologize because I must confess, I have already shared some of your stories, and I can assure you, people find them captivating. And, so do I. So, Dad, do I have your permission to share your story with the rest of the world?”

“Yes!” he exclaimed.

The fact that he answered so quickly made me think he was confused. Perhaps he thought, I was offering him his favorite beverage, 7 Up. By this point in our conversation, my mother had returned from her errands, so I asked her to translate asking him for his permission in Japanese, and again he said, “Yes.”

Permission recorded and in hand, I could have let it rest there, but I knew between my penchant for cowardly procrastination, and his deteriorating condition, we would not revisit this topic again. I needed to be certain.

“Dad, I don’t understand. Twenty years ago, you wanted me to stop playing you. Why are you saying yes now?”

“Because if you tell my story, then my life will have had some meaning.”

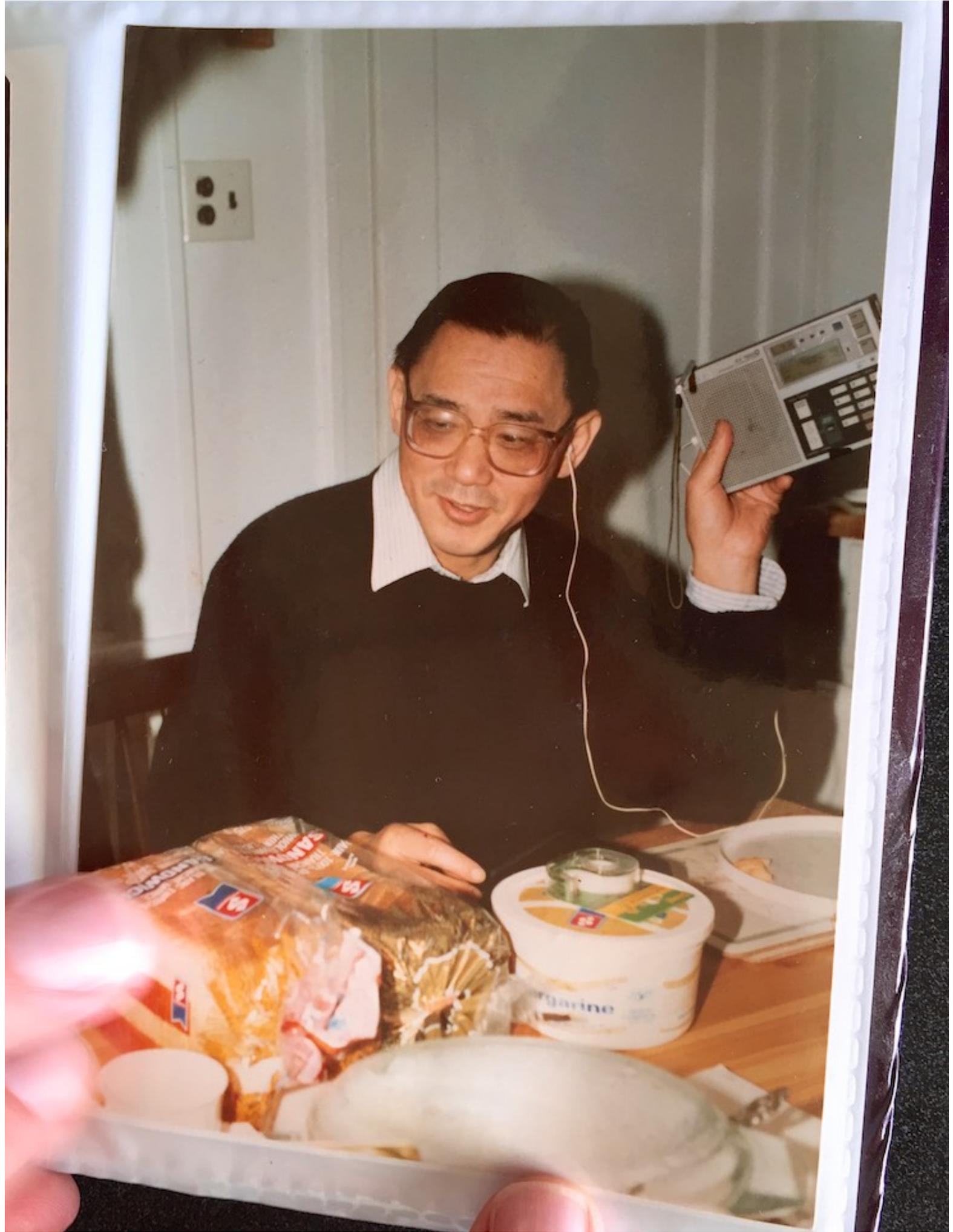
I felt my eyes become hot. All this time I had been looking to my father to provide me with the meaning of life. Because even though I have two children of my own, and I appear to be a fully-grown man, part of me still feels like a kid, and before my dad died, I needed him to tell me that one story, give me that one insight that would help make it all make sense.

When it came to telling my father's story, I always felt so needy. As I asked him question after question after question, I thought I was taking, taking, taking. It never occurred to me that by doing this work, I was providing meaning *for him*.

And in this photograph, I am barely visible, a small infant fast asleep in his arms.

And I'm amazed that I could've ever been so small to have been held, and that he could've ever been so large to hold me. (Shigematsu, 2016, p. 17)

During those final moments of our last interview, I felt a shifting of places. He held me as a child, but now I was holding him. My father never got to see me perform my version of his story, because on Sept 18, 2015, two weeks before *Empire of the Son* opened, he died.



Room 4: The Antenna

USHER: As an usher, I'd like to now direct your attention to the air around you. Listen closely, that sound you hear, consists of air particles vibrating. The atmosphere is also filled with electromagnetic radiation. Radio waves are all around us. You cannot see them, but all it takes is a simple transistor radio to hear them. Consider the humble radio antenna, a telescopic piece of metal. It is quickly becoming a heraldic object. Pity, as it is a tangible interface between the visible world and the invisible.

4.A Time Traveler

In 2007, I was listening to one of my favorite radio programs, *This American Life*. On this episode, *My Brilliant Plan*, I was fascinated to learn about an African American scientist named Dr. Ron Lawrence Mallett, who lost his father to a heart attack when he was only 10 years old. This loss would lead directly to his life's work of inventing a time machine. Single-minded in his determination, he received the proper education to figure out the math, so he could invent the technology that would enable him to travel back in time to warn his father about his impending death.

It is a scenario he has imagined repeatedly. After knocking on his childhood apartment door 11B, he would explain to his father:

You know, I know that you're going to have a hard time understanding or believing this, but I am your son... And I come from another time. And I'm here

Figure 5. My father with his beloved shortwave radio.

to tell you that you are going to die... in the near future.... if you don't take care of yourself, you've got a very weak heart. If you change, you will live. And that's what I've come here to tell you. (Glass, 2007)

I found Dr. Mallet's story to be a moving reminder of how research is so often inextricably rooted in personal biography, how the questions we ask can be inspired by our wounds.

Ten years later in 2017, I was listening to the BBC podcast, *Shortcuts*. This episode featured a different man named Andrew Nissenbaum, similarly obsessed with the possibility of time travel. In response to the question, "Can you tell me the first time you thought of time travel?" he answered, "I started taking it very seriously after the death of my daughter," who was only seven-years-old. "It was the worst thing that ever happened to me. ... Losing a child is just unimaginable... I would do anything to bring a dead child back" (Long, 2017, November 28).

When I juxtapose these two stories of time travel and personal loss in my mind, they form one idea. Is this what happens when you experience profound loss, but you have no religion to give you solace? Is this what happens when you want the impossible, but you do not believe in an interventionist God? These two men remind me how faith—the belief in something for which there is no proof—is not the exclusive domain of the religious. In the absence of a comforting system of belief, hope can be powerful. It defies gravity, resists entropy, finds cracks within dimensions. It bends time itself to its will. Because if there is a hidden path that leads back to your loved one, then hope coupled with imagination multiplied by creative intelligence will not be denied.

I do not believe in heaven, nor do I believe I will ever be reunited with my dad,

but in my own way, I realize I am making my own way back to him. As explorers, we only blaze the trails we can imagine. To traverse the abyss of death, if we cannot imagine being carried by the wings of angels, we must find other ways. For some, such a bridge is made up of mathematical equations, for others it is the numinous power of words.

Every night as I stand in the wings, listening to the Front of House speech, I feel a sense of apprehension, not because I am about to step out on stage all alone, but because I might not be. At its most powerful, a performance of *Empire of the Son* has the potential to be a kind of séance.

After my father died, my close friends would periodically check in on me.

“How are you doing these days with your dad and everything?”

I would honestly reply, “I’m fine. I never think about him.” I now realize such a reply may have sounded callous, but I knew that with every new city marked on my calendar for an upcoming tour, those evenings would be spent with my father.

Sometimes as writers we feel guilty for being lifelong spies, we take and we take and we take, but now I’m not so sure. I think it might be more accurate to say, we don’t steal, we apprehend, we seize, and we perceive. If life itself is formless, inchoate, through story we give it form. We imbue it with meaning. These words that we weave, these tapestries are the only blanket we can share with each other against a cold and an indifferent universe.

When I perform my father on different stages, I can often feel his spirit. When I look up, it is easy for me to imagine him looking down between the twin amber lights above the chair on stage right, a constellation which remains constant for me no matter what the time zone. Knowing I have his blessing allows me to meet his imaginary gaze,

and channel him with abandon. Reflecting upon the loss of his own family member, I join Belliveau in declaring, “We’re still connected” (2015, p. 9).

4.B Candle

USHER: If ushers carried candles instead of flashlights, how much more magical would an evening at the theatre be?

4.C Magic Spell

4.C.1 Incantation

A question I often hear is, “Doesn’t performing *Empire of the Son* over and over get old?” One would think so, but the answer is no, not yet. The reason why it has yet to grow old for me is because I do not think of myself as a hapless actor doomed to recite the same text every night. Rather, I have come to see this ritual through an occult lens. Like an accidental sorcerer, I now realize that the text of this play works like a spell.

spell /spel/

noun

a set of words used to invoke some magical effect, such as summoning a spirit.

This definition resonates for me. The historian/poet Al Cummins explains:

One of the biggest principles of Western Forms of Magic is this idea of reflection.

As above so below, in being like something, that thing moves towards you, and is more inclined to lend you some of its power.” (Long, 2017, November 21)

If I could begin my performance of *Empire of the Son* by channeling my father I would, but where would I go from there? Reverting to me would be anticlimactic for the audience. So instead, I perform a full five minutes on stage as myself before I borrow his

power. The second time I bow on stage, I descend deeply as myself, but I rise as my father, announcing sternly to the audience, “My name is Shigematsu Akira. Please do not call me Akira. You may refer to me as Mr. Shigematsu” (Shigematsu, 2016, p. 5). With these 11 words, I summon the spirit of my father.

This is the ideogram for my father’s given name.



Figure 6. The kanji for Akira.

Science fiction writer Philip K. Dick wrote, “There exists, for everyone, a sentence—a series of words—that has the power to destroy you” (1981, p. 68). For my father, it took only one word to shatter his equanimity: hearing his own name. Only my father’s own father could call him Akira. My mother called him *Akira-san*. Whenever anyone else who had the impertinence to address my traditional Japanese father by his given name sans honorific, this pierced him like a poisonous thorn. “Akira” was a three-syllable trigger that would make his cortisol spike. “In the middle of the night, he would yell out in his sleep—Don’t call me Akira!” (Shigematsu, 2016, p. 38). Meta-culturally

speaking, Cummins offers an explanation regarding how an utterance so simple could spark such a powerful reaction:

Some words are considered magical. Most typically, the names of spirits, or the names of god, or if we think about the idea of knowing something's true name it gives you some kind of sense of, if not authority over it, then at least the ability to call it effectively, and then it has to come. (as cited in Long, 2017, November 21)

Names have such power. Words have such power. Bound up within its syllables are lost etymological histories of how they came to be. Even without fully understanding their meanings, their sonic vibrations wield minute magnetic fields. Combined in concert, they have the power to sway the course of causality. The text of *Empire of the Son* is 10,000 words long. As far as spells go, this makes for an exceptionally long incantation, but its magic is deep.

This magic does not take place on stage, but within the mind, within the recesses of memory. This is not the magic of sleight-of-hand, or hocus-pocus, but it does exploit the trope of misdirection. If I have any power on stage, it is because I do not self-present as a magician, or a Bodhisattva, but as an impertinent adolescent, the ironic fulfillment of that universal blessing/curse, "may your dreams come true." Immigrants sacrifice so their children can have better lives, but what they do not anticipate is the shallowness of character so often begat by the comforts of suburbia. As a teenager, I patiently explain to my father the reason I am unable to do yard work.

4.C.2 Skateboarding



Figure 7. Enabled by a live video feed, this is what the audience see as I re-enact an acrimonious exchange between my father and my teenage self.

“There’s a new flavour of Slurpee, I have to go try” (Shigematsu, 2016, p. 19). The audience can clearly see I am nothing but a fool. As I prance about on stage, aimlessly musing about such trivial matters as the minutia of my workout routine, or how I prefer shirts that accentuate my biceps, the audience is lulled into false sense of security. Once their guard is lowered, 75 minutes is enough to change someone. Repeatedly, I have learned how people behave differently because of one line near the end of play, “Every day my kids hug Grandma good morning and good night. My mom can survive anything, but no one should live without being touched” (Shigematsu, 2016, p. 46).

4.C.3 Touch

I have learned how a friend of a friend, now makes a point of touching her mother each

time she visits her. It is a new tradition. Something neither mother or daughter was comfortable with at first, but such awkwardness is now being tempered through repetition. Irwin and Springgay (2008) remind us how, “Touch becomes a mode of knowing through proximity and relationality and poses different ways of making sense of the world” (p. xxi). If we are fortunate, touch is something we can take for granted as children, but as adults we soon lose touch with touch. A man in Edmonton shared with me excitedly, “my mother is in a long-term care facility. When I go see her, I’m going to...” And with that, he touched me on the shoulder so lightly, I could scarcely feel it. Small steps.

4.C.4 Daughters

As part of her foreword to the published version of *Empire of the Son*, my producer Donna Yamamoto wrote:

One of Tetsuro’s closest friends is a Tibetan artist named Kalsang Dawa, who didn’t hesitate to express his disappointment in *Empire of the Son*. Kalsang had witnessed Tetsuro do incredibly witty impromptu performances. So after waiting to see what Tetsuro had been working on for two years, he said, “I just expected a lot more.” Are your friends that honest? But there’s a postscript to this story.

Kalsang is a new father. His partner, Aranka, has just given birth to their second daughter, and he admitted to Tetsuro that even though he knows it’s stupid, he couldn’t help but feel a twinge of disappointment that she wasn’t a boy. Kalsang is self-aware enough to recognize this as an outdated idea, but having grown up next to China all his life, he couldn’t help but be influenced by a culture that prizes sons over daughters. Seeing Tetsuro onstage for less than seventy-five

minutes was enough to change his mind. [Weeks later], Kalsang confided in Tetsuro that now he realizes “having daughters is a good thing.” This is the power of art. For all its bedazzling spectacle, its technical wizardry and all the powerful emotions it evokes, *Empire of the Son* is also a remarkably subtle piece of social criticism. (Shigematsu, 2016, p. xiv)

In his text *Theatre, Education and the Making of Meanings: Art or Instrument?* (2007), Anthony Jackson describes educational theatre as having the power to catalyze “attitudinal or behavioural change on part of the audience or in the creation” (pp. 1-2) If Kalsang’s youngest daughter Saskia grows up beneath the clear sunlight of her father’s love, unclouded by old fashioned notions about gender, my sisters are to thank.

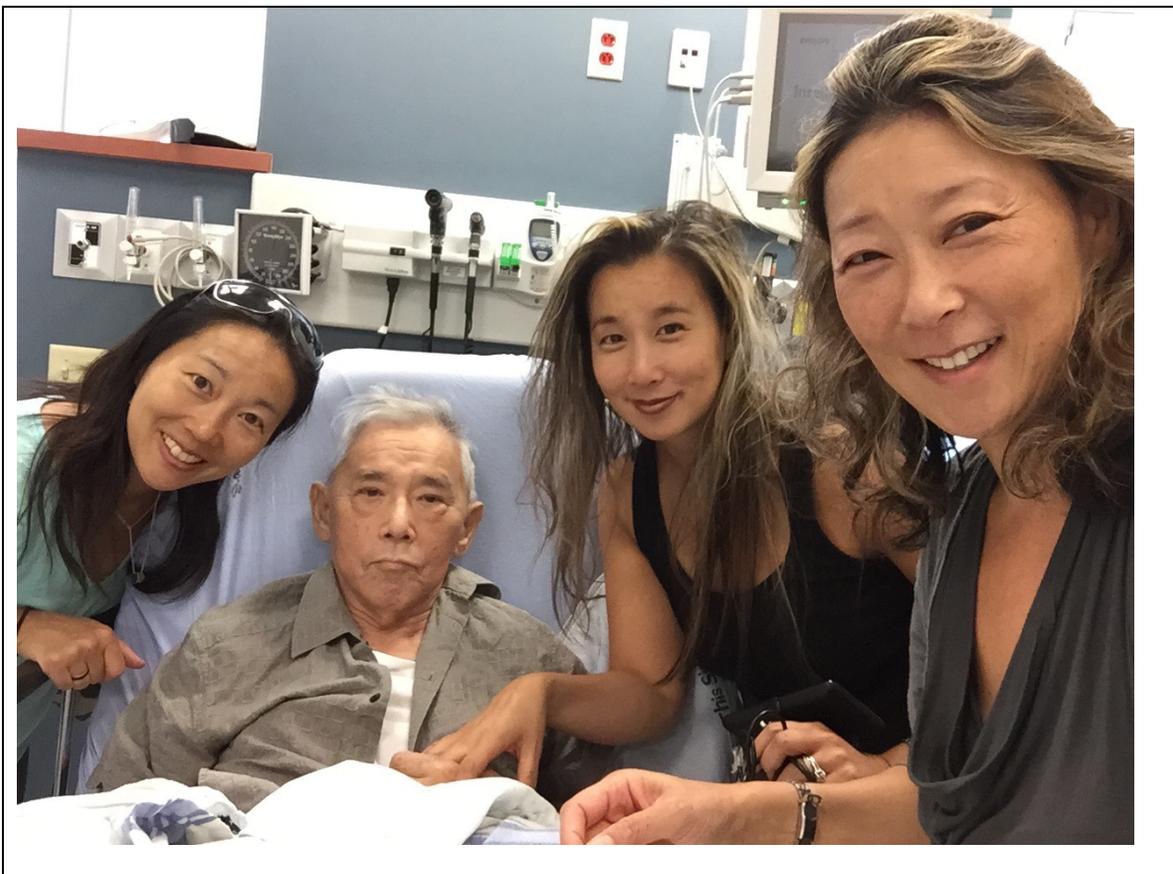


Figure 8. During a family reunion, my father became so dehydrated he had to be hospitalized. My sisters noticed he was lethargic. My brother and I did not.

4.C.5 Owed to My Sisters

When did this change in my friend take place? In the play's only spoken-word passage, *Ode to My Sisters*, I contrast the medicinal magic of daughters' affection, against the emotional distance of sons. When I deliver this passage before an audience, I always search for a woman whose sad expression betrays the experience of having endured what I have only observed. When we make eye contact, I feel the flame of my own compassion leap. And for a few moments, the entire theatre lights up.

My sisters are multilingual in the languages of love.

They coo, and cluck, and purr with mellifluous felicity.

They speak in tongues,

not because the Spirit has descended upon them,

but because it never left.

Make no mistake, my sisters are grown women,

mothers but not matronly, but maybe magicians, maybe wiccans,

because in the blink of an eye they become little girls again.

“Goodnight, Daddy, otosan, I love you, ai shtitru,”

cooing affectionate little girls,

while my brother and I remain like British Beefeaters,

arms by our sides, silent,

while my sisters shapeshift into a basket full of kittens,

and with every kiss they bring him back from the brink of death,

and if this isn't magic, then I don't know what is.

(Shigematsu, 2016, p. 43)

For this story alone, I am grateful for the role of art in my life. For it has allowed me to “journey well in the world by learning to journey well in words” (Leggo, 2008, p. 12). Without words I would be lost. The culture of our family is such that I cannot simply tell my sisters, “Thank you for the way you loved Dad.” I cannot. It is inconceivable. But I can tell this story, and my family can hear it. During the premiere run in 2015, there were 18 performances, and my eldest sister Rié watched 16 of them. (She skipped matinees explaining, “Twice in one day would be too much.”) Of all my siblings, she was the one who fought most vehemently to keep my father alive. I believe that her experiencing the text again and again was her way of healing. Seeing my father’s life on a continuous loop, life and death, life and death, allowed her to break out of her own cycle of doubt and regret. If it took me a thousand performances to help my sister make peace, that would be no chore.

Because my mom lives with my family now, when I leave to go on tour, it falls to her to pick up my parental slack. She claims not to mind. My mother describes my father to others as the best man she has ever known. She expresses this sentiment with a vehemence that suggests others might not believe her. And so, as strangers across the country “laugh, cry, feel excessively uncomfortable and mourn for a man they never knew” (Law, 2015, October 16), my mother takes solace in this.

Truth be told, when I read through the text of *Empire of the Son*, I tend to shrug my shoulders. My reactions span from, “it’s not bad” to “it’s pretty good.” As a performer, I suppose it is hard for me to get excited about words on paper. It isn’t that I’m not capable of being amazed, or filled with wonder, on the contrary. The people in the front row do not have the best view. I do. I can see each person’s face, and how their

expressions change.

4.C.6 Give Me a Minute

During its initial run, the box office staff at The Cultch reported behaviour they had never witnessed in their patrons before: A rush to buy tickets immediately *after* the show's performance. People wanted to share the experience they just had with others. As theatre critic Colin Thomas wrote, "I'm telling all of the people I love most to see this show" (2015, October 9).

The Front of House staff also had to adjust their post-show routines. Usually after the show, the house lights fully illuminate to allow patrons to gather their belongings and leave the theatre, but after most people left, the lights were dimmed to half to accommodate those who weren't getting up from their seats.

Because I had returned backstage to my dressing room, I never saw who stayed behind, but my stage manager Susan Miyagashima couldn't help but take notice. Given the intimate size of the VanCity Culture Lab, her booth was merely curtained off in the last row. Susan couldn't step out until the last patron left the theatre. She recalled, "It was all the dudes who sat in the theatre who needed time." They required about 10 minutes of sitting alone in the darkness with their thoughts to regain their composure before rejoining their wives and their daughters. Does a wizard grow weary of reciting lengthy incantations? Not if the magic works.

4.C.7 Quantum Theatre

At the Vancouver Art Gallery, there is always at least one dark room with a film looping. You can peer in, sit down, leave, sleep, make love with a stranger. The film is indifferent. Your presence changes nothing.

During the final rehearsals before the opening night of *Empire of the Son* I too was on a loop. In the rehearsal studio at Playwrights Theatre Centre, I was doing dry runs repeatedly for the benefit of the design team. Periodically, my producer Donna Yamamoto would poke her head in and ask if someone else could sit in. She never had to ask. During that period, I was always so grateful for that one person who had not yet heard the words. It didn't matter if it was an intern, or the partner of one of the designers, the presence or absence of that one stranger made all the difference.

Theatre is quantum theory in action. Through the very act of watching, the observer affects the observed reality, transforming its very nature. In *The Empty Space*, British theatre director Peter Brook (1968) wrote, "A man walks across an empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged" (p. 72).

Seeing that one person listening for whom the words were new, whole regions of my brain lit up. I am no longer reciting text by rote. I am now explaining, cajoling, flattering impressing, teasing, persuading. Far from reciting lines, I am actively trying to touch them, move them, push and pull them with everything but my hands as I usher them into a shared experience.

During talkbacks, the one thing I always want to impress upon the audience is how integral they are to the creation of the theatrical moment. People sitting in the

darkness naturally assume they are a neutral observer. Far from that, “Stanislavsky calls the audience the ‘third artist’ in theatre, the first two being author and actor” (Carnicke, 2009, p. 157). In an ensemble show, the first actor to exit the stage, gets asked by his castmates, “How is the house?” The answer is never, “There are two people asleep in the front row. The rest of the orchestra appear on the fence, but the people in the balcony seem ready for a good time.” No, the audience is always a singular entity. In my experience, they are like a leviathan. The larger they are, the more slowly they react, but those reactions are bigger. “To act without a public is like singing to a place without resonance. ... The audience constitutes the spiritual acoustics for us. They give back what they receive from us as living, human emotions” (Stanislavski, 1936, p. 204)

The presence or absence of an audience is so key, so perplexing, sometimes, I’ll conduct the following thought experiment. It is a slow night on tour. Outside a snowstorm is raging, or perhaps a swine flu pandemic. For whatever reason, we begin the show with an empty house. I stop and ask my stage manager if we should simply call it a night? She points out that latecomers are admitted five minutes into the show, so let’s keep going and if no one shows, we’ll take it from there. At the five-minute mark, sure enough one lone theatre patron is ushered in. With all the empty seats, they plop down front row, centre.

Grateful to have an audience member, I continue the show revitalized. Unfortunately, this person cannot stay awake. As she drifts in and out of consciousness. I too, shift from dry run to performance and back again, based upon her level of consciousness.

As she begins to close her eyes, I can feel myself becoming transparent. When she nods off, I would tell my stage manager to radio the Front of House and bring in some coffee and chocolate for the patron. I will gladly pay. I will even happily endure the crinkling of unwrapping the candy bar, and the loud sipping of hot coffee. I need her to stay awake, because without her attention, I do not exist. I am a dream, and she is the dreamer.



Room 5: The Sealed Doorway

USHER: If you look closely at this brick wall here, you will see variations in the brickwork. Do you see it? That's okay if you don't. Some say this was a staircase that led to a subterranean passageway used by bootleggers. Others say this was a former entrance that lead to the upper balcony, where non-white people had to sit back in the day. I've heard another usher claim there's a body of an old stagehand back there who fell from the riggings, and if you listen closely enough you can hear him moaning. I have my own theories, but until someone takes a sledgehammer, we'll never know what kind of spaces are back there.



Room 6: The Café

USHER: I don't drink alcohol, so I almost never go into bars. I don't drink coffee either, but I'm in cafés all the time. Coffeehouse culture has a long history as an inclusive meeting place for writers, artists and intellectuals. In contrast to boozy alehouses where brawls could break out, coffeehouses have always fostered a meeting of the minds. There is something about the stimulation of people milling about, coupled with the physical constraints of two people sitting at a small table that enables a conversation to meander far and wide: emotional milestones, the semiotic of tears, old documentaries, past careers, Zen parables, the art of movie editing, and different approaches to acting. Before you know it, cups are empty and flocks of words have flown past.

6.A Emotional Distance

6.A.1 Still Crying?

My friend Julia recently asked me if I still cry during my performances of *Empire of the Son* these days. "These days" being several years after the death of my father. I always assumed that the further away the day of his death receded in my rear-view mirror, the less affected I would feel in the moment of performance, and the harder it would be for me to get there emotionally, but unexpectedly, that has not been the case.

Figure 9. My spouse Bahareh emailing on behalf of VACT.

6.A.2 Archival Video

When I watched the archival video for *Empire of the Son* for the first time, a full year after its original premiere, I observed in my performance things I was not aware of the first time around. On opening night, less than three weeks after my father died, I could see how my body appeared to be clenched tight. I scarcely had my lines memorized, the blocking was not in my muscle memory. My already limited capacity to multitask was being stress tested. I was anything but playful. I was rigid. From an actor point-of-view, I was barely holding it together.

6.A.3 Waterfront Theatre

Fast forward a couple of years later to a reading I was invited to give at the Vancouver Writer's Festival in October of 2017. My wife and daughter were sitting in the front row at the Waterfront Theatre. I performed the following excerpt from *Empire of the Son*.

6.A.4 Ode To My Sisters

Every time my father went into the hospital, it seemed less and less likely that he would ever come out. Conference call with my sisters. "How is Dad doing? Should we come?" And I stopped.

My sisters never ask my advice about anything. I'm the baby of the family. But here they were. "Tetsuro, tell us. Should we come?" If they don't come and something happens, I'll never live it down. But for some reason I can't bring

myself to say it. So, I say, “Listen closely because I’m only going to say this once. No one here is telling you *not* to come.”

My sisters booked their flights from all points to Vancouver, indirect flights, weird connections, and by some coincidence all three sisters landed at YVR within thirty minutes of each other. As we all piled into my car, everyone was giddy, literally giggling. Sure, the circumstances were crappy, but this was an impromptu family reunion. We only saw each other once a year if that. But now we were all together, and everyone was so happy.

PROJECTION: STILL IMAGE of TETSURO’s sisters, HANA, RIÉ, and SETSU, and TETSURO in the car.

As I began driving towards St. Paul’s, one of my sisters said—

SOUND: AUDIO CLIP of HANA, RIÉ, and SETSU talking with TETSURO in the car on the way to the hospital.



Figure 10. In matters of intervention, it is the prerogative of the twin sister to disregard personal boundaries.

HANA: *(recorded)* By the way, we are not really here for Dad. That was just a pretext.

RIÉ: The real reason we're here is because we decided it was time to stage an intervention on your moustache.

SETSU: We're serious, it's over the top. We think your facial hair is extremely aggressive, and aggressively antisocial. It's really going to limit your opportunities.

HANA / SETSU / RIÉ: Yeah, you look really untrustworthy / dubious / supercilious / insouciant / oleaginous.

Did I mention my sisters all scored within the top one percentile on their SATs?

(on mic, looking at photo) What are you talking about? This is a handlebar moustache. It's a classic gentleman's moustache.

SOUND: AUDIO CLIP continues.

HANA: *(recorded)* Maybe that's the look you're going for, but as an Asian it looks like you have two question marks on your face.

RIÉ: Questionable look, questionable character.

PROJECTION out.

When my sisters say stuff like that, deep down, I know they're probably right. They're always staging these interventions on me, half-joking, half-serious. But secretly I was just happy not to have to talk about my father's condition. They'd see for themselves soon enough.

When we got to my dad's hospital room, without a word my sisters dropped their coats and their bags and they climbed into bed with my dad. That blew my mind. They could've levitated and I would've been less impressed.

But they lay in bed with him. And they touched him the way daughters touch their fathers when there's a lot of love. All these hours I'd been spending with my dad: bringing him heated blankets, feeding him chips of ice, describing the weather outside his window, I can honestly say it never occurred to me to climb into his bed, to lie next to him, to touch him.

In the way we express affection towards our father, my brother and I are like characters trapped in a Frank Capra movie. My brother Ken is a pastor and his favourite film is *It's a Wonderful Life*, and together we are about as fulsome in our expressions of affection as Jimmy Stewart. "Gee, Pa, just try and hang in there, will ya? And hand to God, you'll be as right as rain." Our brotherly affection is in black and white, but my sisters' love is in Technicolor, and in surround sound.

This story is one I have performed numerous times outside the context of theatrical runs. It is one of my 'go-to' excerpts, because it stands alone, and for me it is emblematic of the play.

6.A.5 Watershed

When I began performing this story on this occasion at the Vancouver Writers Festival, partway through, I paused mid-phrase for such a long time, my wife and daughter became convinced I had forgotten my lines. I hadn't. I simply couldn't bring myself to say another word. I felt physically powerless before the intensity of my feelings. Time was when I had to search within, use memory to return to a place in order to experience something anew. I had to use my imagination's divining rod to seek out fresh imagery,

new perspectives that would allow me to find untapped wells of emotion. But now feelings were surging through me unbidden, uncontrollably.

Standing on that stage on Granville Island, before the smallest of audiences, tears streamed down my face, and I spoke through my lines with the measured care and deliberate breathing of an old dancer whose body knows the choreography, but every movement injures her further, slowing her down even more. I could scarcely get through that performance. I could see my wife's sad expression in the front row. She was looking at the stage, but not at me.

I could only regard her for a moment. To have made direct eye contact would have made the energetic loop circling between us accelerate out of control. Do I still cry during my performance of *Empire of the Son* these days? More than ever. This irony is not lost on me. When I first began performing in 2015, soon after the death of my father, my *inability* to cry was the catalyst for the play. At the beginning of the show I explain to the audience:

I'd Like to Be Able to Cry

So now my father's funeral has been placed upon my timeline, and I'm watching it approach. And when that day finally comes, I'd like to be able to cry. I haven't cried since I was a kid. So, I'm not gonna be able to just do it on the day of the funeral. Because if I do start to lose it, I'm gonna think oh wow, it's happening, I'm actually doing it. "Quick, someone take a photo! Instagram me!"—Ah, forget it, moment's passed. For me to really cry at my father's funeral without self-consciousness, I figure I got to cry at least a couple of times, so on that day, it'll be no big deal, just another emotion. So, I want to thank you for coming out.

Because this is not something I can do on my own. I just can't stand in front of the mirror at home and *will* myself to cry. Maybe that's something actors do. I don't know, I've never been to acting school. But I do have this 'actorly' intuition. My sense is, if I open myself to you, and you open yourself to me, then maybe together we can summon a spirit I haven't felt since I was a kid. I have two kids, and they're gonna be there at my father's funeral. And when my kids see me being all friendly, shaking hands, making jokes, everyone else will be thinking, "Oh look at the good son, putting on such a brave front," but my kids will be thinking, Daddy really is a sociopath, superficially charming, but fundamentally lacking true empathy. Can't even cry at his own father's funeral. So, for me this capacity to cry isn't just a trivial matter, because I think the tenderness of our hearts is directly related to our capacity to feel joy. I mean, if there are no valleys within, can there really be mountain peaks? Maybe my interior is just a well-groomed golf course with slight undulations. So tonight, we are going to explore geologically unstable territory. Together you and I will do a little jig over some fault lines and see what happens.

Vancouver theatre critic, Colin Thomas, took note of this challenge I issued for myself and wrote:

Shigematsu's script includes a central conceit: he has never cried as an adult, but his dad died on September 18, and he wants to weep without self-consciousness at the funeral—so these performances are an opportunity to rehearse. Within that container, the storytelling is poetic, associative—and often funny. (Thomas, 2016, October 31, para. 7)

Thomas observes how I am attempting to share the burden of my anxiety with the audience, i.e., by not crying, by being so tightly bound by the constraints of masculinity (Shields, Kuhl, & Westwood, 2017), I am dooming myself to an arid interior life. To make matters worse, by being an emotionally remote father, what damage was I inflicting upon my children? By being yet another emotionally absent father within a long chain of Shigematsu men who do not cry, what kind of psychological oppression was I reproducing?

6.A.6 Empathetic Nervous System

I am not a neuroscientist, but I have long believed that empathy—the ability to feel what someone else is feeling—may have a distinct nervous system. Certainly, it is clear when this most human of capacities is absent. Psychopathy is a personality disorder characterized by a lack of empathy.

6.A.7 Looking for Richard

I first began to wonder if empathy might be its own discrete system within the body when I first watched the 1996 documentary *Looking for Richard*, wherein the American actor Al Pacino explores William Shakespeare's enduring impact on popular culture. In a memorable scene, Pacino walks the streets of New York City, and asks passersby for their candid opinions on Shakespeare. An African-American panhandler earnestly declares:

We should introduce Shakespeare into our academics. You know why? 'Cause then the kids would have feelings. We have no feelings. That's why it's easy for us to get a gun and shoot each other. We don't feel for each other. If we were taught to feel, we wouldn't be so violent. (Pacino, 1996)

These words have stayed with me for more than 20 years. This insight didn't serve as a personal reminder of the cultural value of Shakespeare, but the phrase, "then the kids would have feelings," did cause me to wonder if our lifelong capacity for empathy can be traced back to a single catalytic moment.

6.A.8 Toes Clenched

In 2016, I was attending the Magnetic North Theatre Festival in the Yukon, when a fellow theatre artist related to me a fascinating experience. During a talkback after a play she performed, a teenage boy shared how distraught he felt for one of the characters in the play. In fact, he didn't realize he felt this way until the very end, when he discovered his feet were aching due to his toes being so tightly clenched within his Doc Marten boots. He was amazed at how visceral a response he had to what transpired on stage.

If theatre has a special role to play in education and social development, I believe it has a singular capacity to function as a stimulus to activate a young person's empathetic nervous system (O'Toole, Adams, Anderson, Burton, & Ewing, 2014).

6.A.9 Laughter

When you hear laughter ring out at another table in a restaurant, we naturally assume someone said something funny. Perhaps they told a joke. Likely, there was a punch line. Such inferences show how narrowly we define laughter. To prolong the collective enjoyment of ridiculing a friend, we make the distinction, "we're not laughing *at* you, we're laughing *with* you." The interchangeability of prepositions suggests that there are only two meaningful categories of laughter: derisive and friendly.

However, if you observe social interactions closely, it becomes clear we laugh for a great many reasons: to ease tension, as a social lubricant, the spontaneous laughter

between friends versus the volitional laughter between strangers, or as a sign of *satori*—the sudden recognition of a truth. Indeed, for me as a performer, I’ve learned to use laughter as a barometer to signal when the audience is connecting with a story on a personal level.

Rather than crafting setups and punch lines, something I learned to do in the writers’ room at *This Hour has 22 Minutes*, I try to tell the truth as honestly as I can, and then let the audience tell me where the laughs are. Indeed, veteran improvisers come to understand that the biggest laughs come not from the witty riposte, coruscating repartee, or the most strikingly clever ideas. They tend to come from the most honest reaction in the moment, e.g., “Uh, what?” A simple truth unadorned, however inarticulate, tends to trigger the loudest laughs.

6.A.10 Ensoulment

In his book, *Sudden Glory* (1996), historian Barry Sanders wrote that according to Aristotle, the moment of “human ensouling”—when a soul enters the body—occurs about 40 days after birth, and is marked by the sound of the baby’s first laugh. Ancient Greek philosophers are not the only ones who believed a baby’s first laugh signaled ensoulment. In her story, *A Radiant Curve*, Navajo poet laureate Luci Tapahonso described the first time her grandson, Isaiah, laughed.

One fall afternoon in 1998, my daughter Misty called to tell us that her infant son Isaiah had just laughed aloud. It was anticipated, because when a Diné, or Navajo, baby laughs aloud for the first time, a First Laugh ceremony is usually held.... because before this first genuine expression of emotion, the infant still “belonged to” and lived in the world of the Holy People. The first laugh marks the first step

of his or her moving away from this sphere and the beginning of the child's participation in the human family's network. (Tapahonso, 2008, p. 7)

Aristotle and Navajo philosophy are just two examples of the sacred function of laughter, which suggests its function as an index⁷ in the semiotic sense of the term, akin to a solar eclipse: a perceivable indicator of a larger cosmological occurrence. Even if we consider laughter in only its most narrow sense of the term—the involuntary sound we make when we find something funny—our contemporary culture richly rewards those individuals who can incite such pleasurable states at will.

6.A.11 The Great Manipulator

It is revealing that there is no word in the English language for the following concept: the ability to make other people feel what you are feeling. The closest term I have encountered comes from the American singer Aretha Franklin, who defined “soul” (Sheafer, 1996, p. 35), as the performer's capacity to incite specific emotional states in the audience at will.

Now as someone who may well suffer from blunt affect (having less than average emotional expression), this does not preclude my ability to make others feel. On the contrary, emotional detachment may well be necessary to consciously orchestrate the feelings of an audience with volition and virtuosity.

⁷ According to Pierce's Theory of Sign Relations, an index refers to their objects via an actual causal link: smoke is an index of fire, a weather vane is an index of wind direction, a thermometer is an index of body temperature. The relation is actual: the object really affects the sign. (Cunningham & Shank, 1997, p. 4)

When I worked for CBC Radio One as a network host, one of my producers Ross Bragg, ridiculed another host for crying into the microphone. He regarded such behaviour as self-indulgent because “no one cared.” Just because you are feeling something intensely doesn’t mean others will feel it too. In contrast, he expressed his admiration for my so-called ‘technique’ thusly, “You feel nothing, but you can make the entire country weep.” Ross was referring to the last program we recorded together, the final taping of *The Roundup* where in the closing minutes of the final show I addressed a question that was on many listeners’ minds. Now that *The Roundup* has come to an end, what will Tetsuro do now?

Ross knew I was planning to move to Los Angeles to finally complete an independent movie I had been working on for many years, but sharing such a scenario struck me as tone-deaf, pretentious and so very un-Canadian. It would be the radio equivalent of donning a pair of Ray-bans and waving, “See ya!” as my convertible peeled out of the parking lot.

Instead, I described how sitting behind this microphone, I so often envisioned all the small transistor radios that sat on wooden shelves in old boat sheds, the receivers perched on messy kitchen counters, the dusty bedside clock radios that never changed stations. Now that I’ve had the privilege of having my voice squeak out of all those countless little speakers, I wanted to see those places for myself.

I talked about maybe taking a road trip that would begin with me standing on the peak of Grouse Mountain, looking out across the Georgia Strait, past Vancouver Island to Japan, the place of my ancestors, and driving all the way to Peggy’s Cove in Nova Scotia, where I would look across the Atlantic to England, the place where I was born. I

told my listeners if they happen to see an out of place looking long-haired Asian man pumping gas in their hometown, it might be me.

Concluding a national Canadian radio program by taking an apocryphal road trip wasn't a bad conceit. In reference to our call-in line, 1800-SAD-GOAT, I said flatly, "The goat is dead," followed by dial tone. From behind the mixing board, Ross pressed the button for the talkback mic, and said that the entire country was now misty-eyed, but I think that was his way of admitting he felt something.

I must admit I was surprised by the sheer number of invitations I received to stay at people's family homes. Initially, I questioned their wisdom. They don't know me. They might have children! But as I thought about it further, such offers of hospitality began to make sense.

When we were newlyweds, and our lax schedule permitted regular late-night television watching, my wife and I wouldn't have hesitated to let American talk show host Conan O'Brien babysit our future kids. This is the power of parasocial interactions (Auer, 1992), where the many can get to know the one, and that relationship can feel as real as the connection you enjoy with your closest friend. During a meet-the-public event, I once met a carpenter who diffidently confided that he listened to me everyday in his workshop alone while working. I was struck by what an intimate privilege this role afforded me. Spending two hours with a lone listener every weekday is a tremendous amount of quality time. In *The Atlantic*, David Foster Wallace wrote:

Consider the special intimacy of talk radio. It's usually listened to solo—radio is the most solitary of broadcast media.... This is a human being speaking to you,

with a pro-caliber voice, eloquently and with passion, in what feels like a one-to-one; it doesn't take long before you start to feel you know him. (2005, para. 26)

Wallace frames this type of connection as one sided, and thus reinforces the prevailing perception that such seemingly personal interactions are in fact “illusory and are presumably not shared by the speaker” (Horton & Strauss, 1957, p. 580). As someone who sat behind the microphone, I like to think that I did feel something, but apparently my producer did not concur, “You feel nothing, but you can make the entire country weep.” Although intended as a compliment, at the time I wasn't comfortable with my colleague's characterization. I thought it made me sound manipulative. However, I must admit I rarely felt emotion in the studio. Between the text that I wrote, which I deemed sufficient, and the performance where I knew exactly what not to do, feelings simply weren't necessary to accomplish the task at hand and move the audience.

Looking back, I may have been subconsciously modeling my behaviour after a scene I found mesmerizing in the 1988 movie, *Talk Radio*, written and starring the monologist Eric Bogosian. In fact, in retrospect I may have even internalized the protagonist's values. Bogosian plays an infamous talk radio host, Barry Champlain. He leans into the mic.

6.A.12 Talk Radio

BARRY I'm not going to cut you off, Betty. You're too interesting to cut off...

What you are saying reminds me of a little story ... *(Pause. He looks at his drink, swirling it in his glass.)* Two years ago, I visited Germany, never had been there and wanted to take a look at Hitler's homeland. Are you familiar with Adolph Hitler, Betty?

BETTY I'm familiar with Hitler.

BARRY Good.... Now, although in fact, I'm not Jewish, I decided to visit what is left of a concentration camp on the outskirts of Munich. Dachau. You join a little tour group, go out by bus, everyone gets out at the gates.... It's rather chilling. A sign over the gate says: "Arbeit Macht Frei." It means "Work will make you free," something the Nazis told their prisoners.... Of course, most of them never left.... Are you still listening, Betty?

BETTY I hear all your lies ...

BARRY Good. I want to make sure you're not missing any of this.... Now, as I walked along the gravel path between what remained of the barracks, where the prisoners slept, and the gas chambers, where they died, I saw something glitter in among the stones of the gravel. I bent over to see what it was. What I had found was a tiny Star of David. Very old. Who knows, it might've belonged to one of the prisoners of the camp, perhaps a small boy torn from his parents as they were dragged off the slaughterhouse.... I kept that Star of David... I know I shouldn't have, but I did. I keep it right here on my desk. I like to hold it sometimes.

(Swirling his glass of booze and studying it) In fact ... well, I am holding it right now.... I hold it in my hand to give me courage... maybe a little of the courage that small boy had as he faced unspeakable evil can enter me as I face the trials of

my own life ... when I face the cowardly and the narrow-minded... the bitter, bigoted people who hide behind anonymous phone calls full of hatred and poisonous bile.... People who have no guts, no spine, so they lash out at the helpless... The grotesquely ignorant people, like you, Betty, make me puke... People who have nothing better to do than desecrate history, perhaps... Only to repeat it... Are you still with me, Betty? *(Pause) Betty!*

BETTY keep talking, Jew boy. Life is short ... *(Click)*. (Bogosian, 1994, p. 25)

On one hand, we root for the talk radio host Barry Champlain—progressive champion of the underdog, defender of the oppressed against the intolerant. He is a rhetorical gladiator slaying our ideological enemies with such panache on our behalf. Yet we are also wary of him because we can see he is lying. Barry is *not* holding a Star of David, he is swirling a glass of booze. Only someone without integrity could exploit human tragedy so glibly. Emotionally manipulative, his histrionics—the showing of emotion purely for effect—displays such virtuosity, we can't help but be bedazzled by the magic even as we are shown the trickery behind it. And herein lies the paradoxical truth that made this scene so riveting for me—the artful telling of a lie to convey a truth. It makes me wonder, what is the mental state one must attain to play upon the feelings of an audience with such agency?

6.A.13 Bilocation: The Art of Being in Two Places at Once

During the run up to the premiere of *Empire of the Son*, my dramaturg Heidi Taylor recommended I watch the video: *Deborah Hay, not as Deborah Hay | A documentary by Ellen Bromberg*.

You know when you are in a relationship with someone else I find either my attention goes to the other person, and I forget about myself or my attention is on myself and I don't give enough attention to the other person. When I practice dance, I am practicing both of those things at once.... and so my practice is really about being here and being in relation at the same time. And I think one of the things that you see a lot for instance in dance is you see performers either kind of looking out into some kind of fake reality, a fantasy world of out here... they are not seeing the audience, or they are seeing the audience and they are entertaining the audience... nice and jazzy, but the attention is not here, as a dancer, as a performer, as a choreographer my practice is that I have to be here, in order to be in relationship with you, and it's that juggling if that how can I be here and be in relationship with my audience at the same time. (dance-tech.TV, 2012, 9:12)

I have watched this video several times in an attempt to better understand how to do “both of these things at once.”

6.A.14 Jupiter's Travels

Sometimes when I am on stage, I ask myself, “am I as comfortable as if I were sitting in a La-Z-Boy reclining chair?” Admittedly, this is an odd question to ask, but I trace this

query to a book I read while living in Japan during the 1990s, *Jupiter's Travels, Four years around the world on a Triumph*, by Ted Simon. There is one passage that remains forever highlighted in my memory.

One morning in June 1977, I rode over the Jura Mountains into France. The Triumph had stopped protesting and was running freely. All my equipment was in working order. I sat in the saddle with the same ease that others find in an armchair, and could maintain that position comfortably for twelve hours or more. (1979, p. 442)

Imagine, riding around the world on a motorcycle, but being as physically comfortable as if you were sitting in your own living room. Being out there, on the very edge of yourself, yet feeling completely at ease is the most optimal state you can experience as a performer, or as a spiritual seeker.

6.A.15 Zen Staring Contest

A Buddhist girlfriend of mine once related to me a version of the following parable.

During the civil wars in feudal Japan, an invading army would quickly sweep into a town and take control. In one particular village, everyone fled just before the army arrived - everyone except the Zen master.

Curious about this old fellow, the general went to the temple to see for himself what kind of man this master was. When he wasn't treated with the deference and submissiveness to which he was accustomed, the general burst into anger. "You fool," he shouted as he reached for his sword, "don't you realize you are standing before a man who could run you through without blinking an eye!"

But despite the threat, the master seemed unmoved. “And do you realize,” the master replied calmly, “that you are standing before a man who can be run through without blinking an eye?” (N.A., 2016, Aug 26. para. 8)

When I first heard this story, I scoffed. What a simplistic display of macho one-upmanship. Mockingly, I recursively continued the story, “And do you realize,” the samurai whispered, “that you are standing before a man who could find himself in hell without blinking an eye?”

6.A.16 In the Blink of an Eye

Years later, my cynicism about this story diminished when I read about how the renowned film editor, Walter Murch, discovered one of the most important creative insights of his career. While he was editing Francis Ford Coppola’s 1974 film, *The Conversation*, he realized that every time he decided to make a cut, Gene Hackman’s character, Harry Caul, would blink very close to the point where he used the razor, leading him to conclude that people blink each time they have a new thought or emotion. Murch came to regard the act of blinking as emotional punctuation in relation to editing.

Our rate of blinking is somehow geared more to our emotional state and to the nature and frequency of our thoughts than to the atmospheric environment we happen to find ourselves in. The blink is either something that helps an internal separation of thought to take place, or it is an involuntary reflex accompanying the mental separation that is taking place anyway. (2001, p. 62)

Murch’s theory that people blink for reasons beyond ocular lubrication is shared by others. According to researchers, we blink in order to gather our thoughts and focus our

attention, (Nakano, Kato, Morito, Itoi, & Kitazawa, 2013), and after—but not during—the telling of a lie (Leal & Vrij, 2008).

For me, these similar insights from the disparate worlds of film editing, brain physiology and deception research shed new light upon that old parable. If one accepts the premise that the centuries-old practice of Buddhism is a kind of proto-neuroscience for bringing the brain under conscious control, then rereading this fable: “And do you realize,” the master replied calmly, “that you are standing before a man who can be run through without blinking an eye?” suggests that the point is not simply winning a staring contest, but effortlessly maintaining a serene state of mind, no matter how fraught the circumstances. In his book exploring Zen Buddhism, Sayama describes this central concept.

Samadhi is a Sanskrit term [and] can be described as a relaxed concentration in which a person does not freeze because of fear or cling because of desire. In samadhi a person transcends dualism, is fully present moment by moment. (1986, p. vii)

I have become conscious of achieving a state of relaxed concentration that is so maddeningly elusive in performance yet is so utterly natural in everyday life. This is one of the paradoxes of mastering any artistic practice: what is effortless in daily life is often nearly impossible in art. Picasso said, “It took me four years to paint like Raphael, but a lifetime to paint like a child.” Through performing *Empire of the Son*, I have come to understand, our work as artists is to journey outward, and if we venture far enough, our work will eventually lead us back to where we began.

6.A.17 Listening to the Body

Nowadays, when I am reunited with an old friend after a period of prolonged absence, I try to notice my body: how I am both relaxed and alert at the same time and remember what that feels like. It is a good feeling. It feels good for my friend too no doubt. To be the object of someone's undivided focus is an increasingly rare experience these days, as the French philosopher Simone Weil reminds us, "attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity" (Pétrement, 1976, p. 462).

Using that memory as a form of calibration, I aim to achieve a similar state before an audience. Once the text is in my body I try to exercise the discipline of *mushin*, or "no thought." I already know beforehand the feelings I wish to incite in the audience moment by moment. If I focus my attention on the audience, while coaxing my body to relax, by holding this space, I can surprise myself as invention springs forth unbidden.

During an initial table read, the mark of the beginning actor is the one who fails to read ahead, and when it comes time to read their part aloud, they resort to "sight reading" in the moment, betraying their lack of understanding of the text, as they phrase things incorrectly, conveying mistaken assumptions about the meaning of a line that is contradicted by new information revealed at the end of the sentence.

The more experienced actor reads ahead, gets an understanding of their section, and knows how to "reach" for the end, making clauses and thoughts subordinate to the overall thrust of the passage, and the scene. But the truly grounded actor superficially resembles the ill-prepared amateur on the surface. They do not read ahead. Instead they listen intently to their fellow actors, inspiring them to react truthfully in the moment.

Often such choices may be “wrong,” or inappropriate, but such commitment lifts the words off the page, giving rise to unexpected moments that are alive. It is magical to behold such vitality because everyone in the room recognizes they are witnessing something so authentic it can never be repeated.

In a similar manner, when I am on stage and there are a few minutes where I do not have to talk because a recording is being played, the journeyman professional in me is always tempted to “read ahead:” silently queuing up the next few lines of text into my Random Access Memory as a safeguard against every actor’s worst nightmare: “corpsing”—blinking on stage. A storyteller must resist this impulse.

Although such a precautionary process is too subtle for an audience to notice, they can absolutely feel its antithesis. Once the text is in the body, if I am in the right place: Centred, in a state of relaxed concentration, in the moment of performance I feel so tranquil and energized, I do not know what is going to happen next. The moment I inhale, I truly do not know what I am about to say until this seemingly new thought ‘occurs’ to me in the moment. I speak with the same feeling of spontaneity with which one converses in real life where no rehearsal is required.

This stunt, this tempting of fate, is so subtle, so miniscule, perhaps only fellow actors can appreciate such technical minutiae: a delicate tightrope balance visible to none but felt by all.

After seeing my latest theatre work, *I Hour Photo*, Joel Wirkkunen, host and co-founder of *The Flame* storytelling series in Vancouver, wrote to me, “You are the most relaxed, most skillful storyteller I have ever seen.” I highly doubt I am the most skillful

person at anything, but I will concede it is hard for me to imagine feeling more comfortable on stage than I do lately.

In kyudo, popularly known as Zen archery, the target merely serves as an outward manifestation for an internal state of mind. In like manner, never stumbling once over the recitation of 10,000 words is a similar kind of bull's-eye, as I direct the target of my focus over the course of 75 minutes.

If the audience is fully engaged, they couldn't care less if you occasionally stumble or stutter, but knowing they are in the presence of someone who is in control enables them to relax and enjoy themselves. As Calgary theatre critic, Louise B. Hobson observed:

Tetsuro loves to tease. You can see his eyes twinkling and a slight grin under his handlebar moustache, so you always know you're in the presence of a master manipulator who knows just how far and how long to play a certain heartstring.
(2018, Jan 17)

Here again, I wince at the term "manipulator," but if I think of the word in its primary sense, "control in a skillful manner," then it enables me to think of myself as a metaphysical masseuse for the audience, as I remove emotional obstructions, and restore their natural flow.

One of the most impressive pieces of acting I have ever seen is Willem Defoe's depiction of Jesus delivering the Sermon on the Mount in Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*.⁸ This "Blessed are the Meek" scene is one of the best-known passages in the Bible, but Defoe somehow manages to make it sound like he is

⁸ You can watch the video clip here: bit.ly/2EVo3ty, or search for it on Youtube using the terms: last temptation sermon.

improvising. Thinking out loud, he is skinlessly alert to all those around him. He sparks off their doubts and reactions, until he becomes incandescent with the excitement of experiencing one epiphany after another. This is not an actor who tore out a page from the Bible and memorized it. This is an actor who is vividly imagining a world where this canonical text hasn't yet been embroidered into folksy wall art. These wild, unorthodox notions are only just dawning on him in that very moment.

6.A.18 Tears

Tears are held in such high regard among actors, they are practically fetishized. A common question from young actors is, "how do you cry?" Even the renowned actor Meryl Streep was not immune from such speculation.

I know that when I was in drama school, the big thing was how to cry. You get to a certain point in a play and you're supposed to break down in tears. And I remember when I first came to New York I saw Irene Worth in 'Sweet Bird of Youth ,' and I went back and just kvelled, I made a fool of myself. I said, 'I don't know, I just think you're the greatest actress I ever saw!' I said, 'But you know, how do you cry like that?' And she said, 'How can you not?' (Attanasio, 1986)

Such a sphinxlike response may not have been of immediate help to the young Ms. Streep, but eventually it would be. In the realm of performance, be it sleep, death, a yawn, laughter, a sneeze, physical violence, each of these behaviours or responses can be artfully feigned, but not tears. This physiological response that manifests itself in shining rivulets is held in special regard because one cannot simply fake it convincingly.

In order to cry, an actor has to go deep, plumb depths, return to the scene of an emotional crime, or imagine something truly heartbreaking, but even the saddest of

scenarios soon lose their potency. Like a drug addict who is forever chasing the dragon, an actor must find within her emotional store of memories ever fresh, newly affecting scenarios to induce this state. But at what cost? Should one *really* cry?

This question of what is happening in the mind of a performer in the moment of performance, and whether it is relevant to an audience is a matter of ongoing debate between actors. In 2011, I witnessed a fascinating argument unfold backstage for Mortal Coil's production of *Salmon Row*.

6.A.19 Crocodile Tears

The question at hand was this: when called upon to cry, should an actor *really* go there, or is it better to simply fake it? For the uninitiated, the answer seems obvious, 'faking it' is offensively ersatz, deceitful, a falsehood, a lie. We want our art to be truthful, but if one has been exposed to the full range of acting performance your opinion becomes more nuanced.

As I stood there watching this argument unfold, I recalled a young woman enrolled in John Abbot's theatre program in Montreal. Sobbing hysterically, she was really having a moment on stage. It was likely a breakthrough for her as an artist, a necessary step in her development as an actor, but in that moment for us as an audience, all we felt was a mingling of pity, concern, and mild irritation. When watching good theatre, we feel empathy for the character on stage, but here we felt "fremdschamen"—embarrassment for the actor. It broke the story trance.

Back to the greenroom of *Salmon Row*, as the debate regarding "to fake or not to fake" raged on, the older of the two debating actors proceeded to demonstrate. She covered her face with her hands, dropped her head to her knees and began bouncing her

shoulders up and down, while moaning. Such an engineering-like description cannot do this demonstration justice because the effect was utterly convincing and immediate.

She then raised her head perfectly composed and asserted that it simply doesn't matter what the actor is feeling, as such preoccupations are entirely self-indulgent. All that matters is what the audience experiences. Equally important is an actor's responsibility to protect their instrument, their body, their psyche. Protect? Protect from what? In that moment, I did not know what she meant.

Fast forward a couple of years later during the premiere run of *Empire of the Son*. Cindy Reid, the Managing Director of The Cultch, stopped me outside the theater and offered me tickets to take my entire family to see one of the international circus acts that was running concurrently in their other theatre space, the York.

Surprised by her generosity I said, "Thank you so much! You're making me feel like an important person." Cindy touched my arm, and replied with an unexpected degree of gravity, "You *are* an important person. All of us up in the office are concerned about you." I must have looked perplexed because Cindy went on to explain that what I am doing is very unusual.

Every night when I am on stage, I am on the very edge of myself, revisiting such fresh wounds. I suppose that was true. My father had died only several weeks prior. But the concern with which she spoke, seemed to be less about an actor performing in a show, than the distress over a naïve mystic gulping down the South American hallucinogenic ayuwasca six nights a week. Apparently The Cultch's staff was concerned for my psychic well-being. Until that conversation, I never really paused to consider the precarious nature of what I was doing on stage.

Sometimes, I think of performing *Empire of the Son* on tour as taking a nightly beating, but not all beatings are created equal. Injury results from the body being suddenly forced to move in ways beyond its accustomed range of motion in the midst of chaos or violence. In order to protect itself, the body clenches tight, creating knots which ultimately restricts movement, making one even more prone to injury. The body becomes rigid, vulnerable, and prematurely old. Beatings tend to be costly, but sometimes, directed, focused and rhythmic poundings can make your tendons suppler, more lithe. Increased flexibility results in the ability to execute acrobatic feats that were not previously possible.

6.A.20 Red Sky at Night

Red sky at night,
sailor's delight,
Red sky in morning,
sailor's warning.

This adage continues to serve as a mnemonic device for anyone going out to sea, increasing their chances for a safe return. There are equivalent understandings in theatre. For example, theatre mavens know to avoid seeing plays on Tuesdays because Mondays are dark⁹, and few ensembles have the discipline to run Italians¹⁰ on their one day off. From the actors' side of things, there are other omens of which to be aware: a bad preview usually heralds a good opening. Conversely, a great preview often foreshadows a lackluster opening night.

⁹ Usually, Mondays are the working theatre actor's day off.

¹⁰ To do an Italian is to recite the play's entire text *allegro*, at a brisk pace.

For the premier run of *Empire of the Son*, I had the dubious fortune of a great preview. In light of the short window of time between my father's death on September 18, 2015, and the world premiere 18 days later, I changed the script's beginning, end, and part of the middle. Usually a text is completed at least five months prior to rehearsals, but we locked the text only 48 hours prior to our preview.

I managed to memorize my lines well enough that I could execute the dexterously challenging business of manipulating the live cinema camera, perform puppetry with miniatures, and recall my blocking well enough that I managed to find the pools of light in which to stand.

From a macro perspective, if the show didn't do well enough to dramatically change the fortunes of our producing company, Vancouver Asian Canadian Theatre would likely come to an end. Such pressure was entirely my own fault. A couple of years prior, I had asked VACT to back this idea of mine, "Ignore all these other proven plays. Instead, let me do a one-man show about my dad." Recklessly, the company agreed to bet everything on this elevator pitch. We were all in.

During that first and only preview prior to opening night, I managed to cry, despite or perhaps because of all the tremendous pressures I felt. My director Richard Wolfe once lamented to me how unfair opening nights are. After only two weeks of rehearsals, all the critics gather at the very beginning of a run, and no matter how much the show matures, only the critical impressions of that one unripe performance enters the public record for posterity.

Now that I have performed *Empire of the Son* well over a hundred times, I know by mid-show whether I will cry by the end. There are certain pressure points along the

body of the performance, and if I can hit most of them, I can get there. By the time I am nearing the end of the show, my self-control will be riddled with a spider web of fractures, and my emotions are ready to flow. That is how I previously defined a “good” show.

On that first opening night, I took my first mighty swing: Describing the aftermath of the incendiary raids on my father’s hometown of *Kagoshima*. Nothing. “That’s okay,” I reassured myself, “There’s more emotional targets to come I can still hit.” *Ode to My Sisters*—celebrating my sisters’ medicinal affection, *The Train Station*—how my dad waited for his dad for over a year, *West End Apartment*, but each time, I felt nothing.

I could recognize the critics in the audience scribbling away in their notepads. My ambition was to circumnavigate the world with my show, but I wouldn’t be getting out of the harbor if the all-important opening night reviews didn’t give me red skies. In situations like this, the temptation is often to act *harder*, more vehemently, more emphatically. What an actor lacks in feeling, they often compensate with sheer volume. Instead, I took a step back. Although I am not a trained actor, when in doubt, I believe it is better to go smaller, to be still, and become a Noh mask upon which the audience can project. If a tsunami is to come, it is caused from earthquakes *beneath* the surface of the sea. No amount of howling wind upon the waves can summon it.

As I recall, the audience was very quiet that night. I walked off the stage feeling like I had struck out. Much to my surprise, the reviews for *Empire of the Son* were superlative.

The Vancouver Sun hailed it as, “A powerful display of emotion... a riveting, emotional theatrical experience” (Thorkelson, 2015). VanCity Buzz declared, it as “understated perfection... poised to be one of the most important of the season,” (Lu, 2015, October 9).

As an actor, such a disconfirmation was revealing for me. During that opening night performance, I felt emotionally impotent. And yet, the experience for the audience was all the more powerful compared to the “successful” preview where I had managed to cry openly. I recalled when my director Richard Wolfe asked me to think about all the times I watched interviews of survivors in conflict zones, how they display no emotion at all, recounting what happened catatonically, and yet our hearts go out to them. We think, “what if it was my loved one who died?” Empathy travels beyond halfway.

If I stand before the audience, overcome with tears streaming down my face, it may be fascinating for them voyeuristically, to see an emotionally constrained man finally break down, but then it becomes all about me.

Extending Bakhtin’s (1986) notion of a chain of utterances, I have become conscious of this sphere of emotion that moves between the performer and the audience. It is a locus of affect, that shifts back and forth during the performance, and its location determines their aesthetic experience. I describe this ball of energy to young people in terms they can understand. Assuming the stance of Ryu, the legendary hero of the *Street Fighter* videogames, I place my wrists together, and thrust my palms outwards and release a fireball while yelling “Hadōken!” They immediately get it. Although esoteric sounding, the father of modern acting Stanislavsky himself became convinced that the Hindu practice of yoga and its conscious manipulation of invisible forces held the key to

unlocking the actor's subconscious. "In a successful performance, he explains, *prana* rays (*luchi*) pass between actors and their partners and between actors and their audiences, thus becoming the vehicle for infecting others with the emotional content of the performance" (Carnicke, 2009, p. 178).

When that first-year actress was having a breakdown, that sphere was entirely within herself. No doubt she was having an illuminating moment as new alloys were being forged within, but it left us in the audience cold. So now, I no longer fret over whether I'm feeling the emotions or not. It's an inconsequential coin toss, because it works either way.

Nowadays, as an actor, I have come to have more faith in the power of the text. Sometimes, this means getting out of the way, and allowing the words to do their work. Calgary theatre critic Hobson observed, "Because these moments are recalled without emotion they have their own emotionally devastating impact, as do so many of Shigematsu's observations" (2018, Jan 17, para. 13). While such a mode of performance requires less energy in the moment, to arrive at that state, takes the unexpectedly hard labor of doing nothing.



Room 7: Hotel Apartment

USHER: Although I have stayed in many places while on tour, the memory of one apartment hotel eclipses all others. It was turgidly named “The Icon Towers” in downtown Edmonton. If I wanted to inspire unrealistic envy of the touring lifestyle, this outlier of an apartment would be the place I would invite you to come visit me, “Oh this old place?” I would comment breezily as I ushered you through all the different rooms. The view is panoramic. The only downside of such spaces is eventually you have to return to your lesser dwellings, but for now this is home. Welcome.

7.A Glass of Water

The emotional labour of performing *Empire of the Son* is such when I step on stage, I need to be as clear as a glass of water. This purification takes all day. Whether in my hometown or on the road, my day should be unmarred from microaggressions, unstimulated by flirtations, completely uncoloured from all social interactions. On tour, ideally, I never have a single conversation until I arrive at the theatre. At the beginning, this new discipline of deliberately doing nothing was conceptually challenging. I had to abandon the very work ethic, the same workaday rhythms that made *Empire of the Son* possible in the first place. This is harder than it sounds.

No matter how often an actor experiences it, the transition from weeks of long rehearsal days being suddenly replaced by one performance in the evening is surprisingly

Figure 11. A winter in Edmonton, plus a beautiful apartment, plus writing deadlines, equals staying inside 20 hours a day.

abrupt. Your days are yours again, and not a moment too soon. By the time the run commences, there is a backlog of errands and social obligations to catch up on, but for *Empire of the Son*, I needed to be derelict in those duties.

7.B Preshow Ritual

After a day of austere emptiness, when the clock strikes 4:00 PM, the countdown begins to my 8:00 o'clock performance. First a shower, then a nap.

At the beginning of the premier run for *Empire of the Son* in 2015, I noticed how helpful it was if I fell asleep in the car as I was being driven to the theatre by my wife, Bahareh. A more attentive husband might have spent that time catching up on all that I had missed during intensive weeks of rehearsals—what was happening with the kids, etc., but I discovered that if I said nothing, and only slept, that nap had the function of dividing the day anew.

Such temporal mitosis reminded me of the insight the American self-help author Steve Pavlina had when he experimented with polyphasic sleep—the practice of sleeping twenty minutes every four hours. He explained that being awake while others were fast asleep afforded him a new perspective, “I saw time as passing continuously.” Pavlina’s observation helped me realize to what degree my own perception of time, however widely shared with others, is not objective.

Specifically, I do not see time as passing continuously, but broken into fragments, the largest being entire days. I experience every square on the calendar as a lifetime writ small, born anew in the morning, and falling dead asleep at night. Even our idioms reflect such a rhythmic conception of time, reassuring us not to worry, because “tomorrow is

another day.” Sleep it off,” we are told, “you’ll feel better in the morning.” No matter how bad a day we are having, each morning, the slate gets wiped clean, and we get to start over, as if every day was New Year’s Eve.

It is always easy to recognize someone who has just woken up. There is a telltale blankness to their expression, as even the most familiar of surroundings now seem bewildering. Like waking up to freshly fallen snow, naps erase the steady culmination of a day’s extraneous details.

My preshow nap is followed by a walk to the theatre alone, often through inclement weather¹¹. Such nap-induced blankness grounds me for performing *Empire of the Son*. Usually, the well-prepared actor asks herself, “Where was I? What was I doing just prior to my scene’s entrance?” She wants to know her prior emotional state that will in turn colour her performance in the here and now. But the emotional labour of this performance demands I arrive on stage *tabula rasa*.

¹¹ The seasonal windows for touring Canadian theatres tend to be late fall, and early winter.



Room 8: The Light Lock

USHER: As an usher, one of my main responsibilities is to seat latercomers. During an appropriate moment in the show, I'll guide patrons through this first set of doors. Once those outside doors close, my colleague sitting in the auditorium will then open the inside set of doors. This simple two-step procedure stops light and noise from flooding in and breaking the spell of the performance. Making theatre magic is a team effort! We all have a part to play. Like a dark room, the light lock is simply two sets of doors that protects the artistry inside from being overexposed. In our smaller studio space across the way, in lieu of stage wings, there is also a light lock for the actors that leads to the stage. In fact, let me show you.

As you can see this is a very plain space, not much bigger than an elevator, lit by this here blacklight. That music stand holds the wireless headset for the Assistant Stage Manager who announces to the Stage Manager that the actor is in position, and ready to go. If you're high strung, or given to Obsessive Compulsive Disorders, this is where all your unproductive thoughts will occur. This light lock is the Rubicon, the torpedo tube, the high diving board, the sprinter's starting blocks, the downhill skiers starting gate. A fraught space that spawns endless

Figure 12. Teamsters accustomed to assembling minimalist fabric backdrops for touring solo-works, are often surprised when they encounter our 1000 lb. set.

metaphors. Standing here, you can almost feel the residual manic energy every actor who ever stood here, poised like astronauts ready for their spacewalk, skydivers poised on the threshold. This antechamber to the stage is a place of maximum anticipation.

8.A Thunder Clouds

Every night, as I listen to the Front of House speech while standing in the light lock, I feel a touch of apprehension. Not because I am walking out before an audience all alone, but because I may not be. I do not believe that I will ever see my dead father ever again, but as I count down the bars of music to my entrance, it is also the countdown to a séance. I do not know what I will see. I do not know what I will feel.

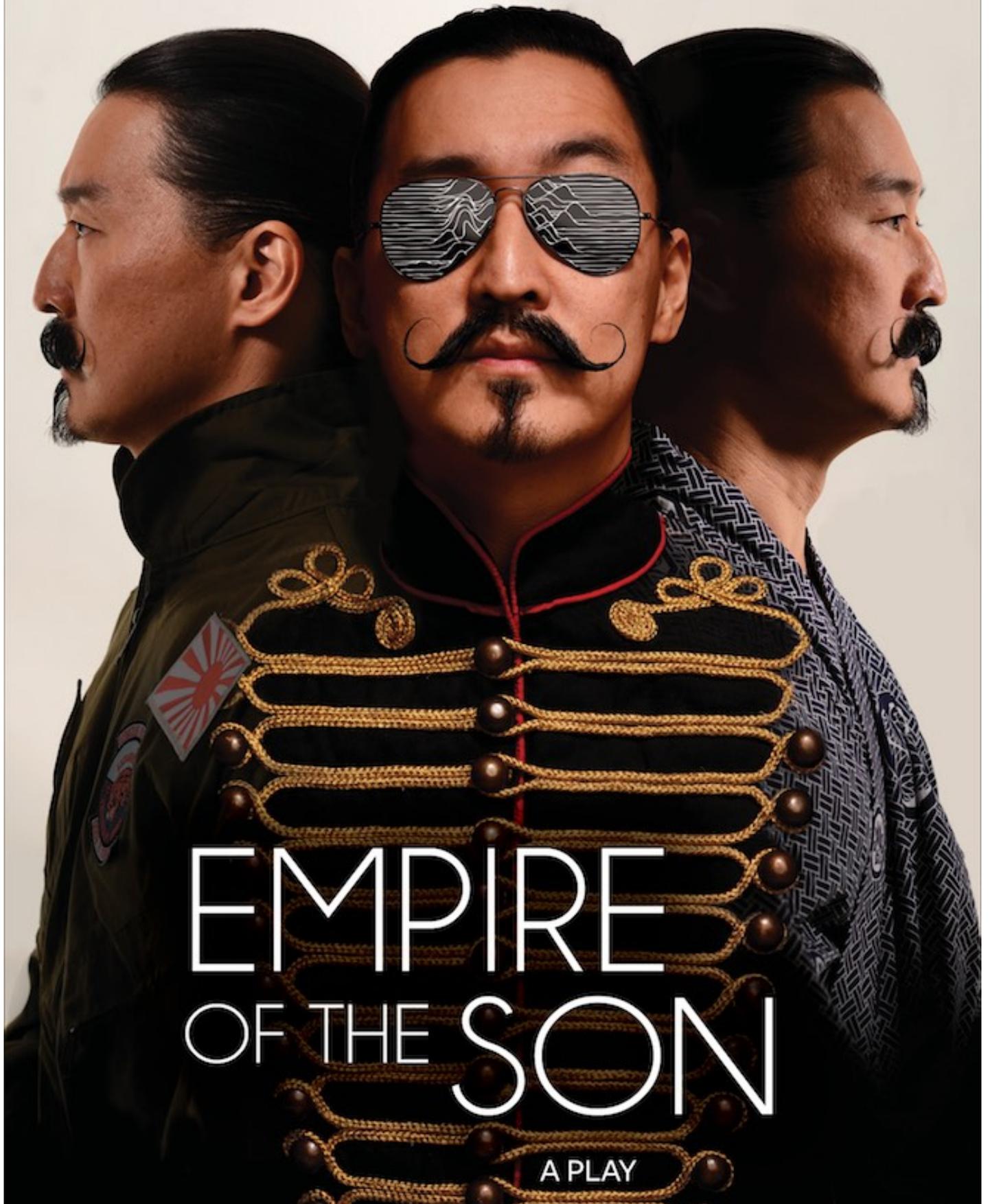
Room 9: The Stage, *Empire of the Son* Script

USHER: We hope you enjoy *Empire of the Son*, written by Tetsuro Shigematsu.
Please turn off your cell phones.

"Exhilaratingly original ... the personal becomes magical."

—Jillian Keiley, Artistic Director, National Arts Centre

TETSURO SHIGEMATSU



EMPIRE OF THE SON

A PLAY

Acclaim for *Empire of the Son*

“Exquisite.”

—Colin Thomas, *Georgia Straight*

“Understated perfection.”

—Cecila Lu, *Vancity Buzz*

“Grief stripped raw in all its beauty.”

—Erika Thorkelson, *Vancouver Sun*

“Gorgeous storytelling.”

—Mark Robins, *Vancouver Presents*

“A profound piece of theatrical,
technical, and literary mastery.”

—Olivia Law, *The Ubysey*

“Using cameras, miniatures and projectors,
Shigematsu and his crew create entire worlds in the
imaginings of the audience, from the combination
of deep listening and hypnotic imagery.”

—Nicole Alivojvodic, *The Source*

Nominated for six Jessie Awards,
plus the *Georgia Straight*
Critics’ Choice Innovation Award

EMPIRE OF THE SON

TETSURO
SHIGEMATSU

Foreword by Donna Yamamoto
Introduction by Jerry Wasserman

Talonbooks



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In the end, I am not interested in that which I fully understand. The words I have written over the years are just a veneer. There are truths that lie beneath the surface of the words. Truths that rise up without warning like the humps of a sea monster, and then disappear. What performance in a song is to me, is finding a way to tempt the monster to the surface. To create a space where the creature can break through what is real and what is known to us. This shimmering space, where imagination and reality intersect, this is where all love, and tears, and joy, exist. This is the place ... this is where we live.

—NICK CAVE

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When Everyone's Story Gets Told

Tetsuro and I joke it took an “arranged marriage” to bring us together. An occasional actor, Tetsuro auditioned to play my husband in Mortal Coil's production of *Salmon Row* by Nicola Harwood in 2011. This site-specific play, set in and around Britannia Heritage Shipyards at the mouth of the Fraser River in Steveston, relates the history of diverse communities of people who profited from the seemingly endless resource of salmon. Our show had a huge cast, but Tetsuro stood out for several reasons. He spoke so eloquently, and he could often be seen scribbling observations in his Moleskine notebook, plus he had a wicked sense of humour.

Cast friendships can be intense but are almost always short-lived. When *Salmon Row* came to an end, Tetsuro invited me to join the board of Vancouver Asian Canadian Theatre (VACT). I somehow had never attended any of their shows, though I knew this community theatre group was run by Joyce Lam, who was apparently looking for a successor. Tetsuro had just been elected president, so I went along. As an Asian woman who has been acting professionally since 1987, I understood the struggle. I know what it is like to be marginalized. Putting more Asians onstage? I'd vote for that, but little did I know that Tetsuro's first act in office would be to have me become artistic director. Joyce supported this idea, but I had absolutely no interest. I declined many times, but Tetsuro wouldn't take no for an answer. Finally I agreed. I sensed that a big change was coming. I had been acting for thirty years. TV was changing, film was changing, theatre remained a holdout. Now was the time.

When Joyce Lam graciously handed me the reins in August 2013, Tetsuro was pleased knowing that VACT's future had been secured. Perhaps because of that, I sensed he was losing interest in our organization. Maybe he thought his work here was done. One day I asked him over coffee in Chinatown, "What do you *really* want to do?" A little surprised by the question, he said he'd think about it.

In October 2013, around my kitchen table, what we were calling VACT 2.0 had its first annual strategic planning meeting with Tetsuro and a few core members, including Andrea Yu, Annie Jang, Belle Cheung, and Joyce Lam. I had given everyone a homework assignment: come up with two plays you would like to see VACT produce. We went around the table delivering our pitches, but when it came to Tetsuro, he hemmed and hawed, then mumbled he really didn't have anything. It was very unlike Tetsuro to blow off an assignment, so I teased him a bit before I began to move on to the next person. Suddenly, Tetsuro blurted that he wanted to do *his* show – he wanted to do his own one-man show. There were double takes all around.

Chances are Tetsuro will fade into oblivion like the rest of us, but if on the off chance that you do happen to know his name, then maybe you're thinking, "Yes of course, when Tetsuro Shigematsu volunteers to do a one-person show, you say yes!"

But keep in mind that back in 2013, Tetsuro wasn't Tetsuro Shigematsu – writer and performer of *Empire of the Son*. Back then, he was the only member of our company who had never been to theatre school. Sure, Tetsuro was a capable emcee for our annual general meetings and parties, but doing his own one-man show as our mainstage program? His proposition took us a little by surprise.

Did he have a script? No, but he had an idea. "I plan to discover vast worlds contained within my emotionally remote

father. It will be a funny, emotional portrayal of parent-child relationships, and a reminder that no matter how far we journey out into the world to find ourselves – across decades and continents – we never stop being our parents’ children.” (Yes, believe it or not, Tetsuro really talks this way impromptu.)

Honestly, he had me at “father.” As the daughter of a second-generation Japanese Canadian who is now eighty-nine years old and in his twilight years, I knew how rich and layered this story could be. I don’t think I could ever tell my dad directly how much I love him, but through a great work of theatre, he just might be able to feel it. Plus everyone could relate to having a father. Perhaps sensing that not everyone was equally convinced as I was, Tetsuro stood up and said, “Why don’t I just show you?” He channelled his father arguing with an adolescent version of himself. Soon everyone was smiling and nodding. We took a secret ballot and the results were unanimous.

Empire took countless hours to develop, including experiments in my basement using a live cinema camera and miniatures, readings at Historic Joy Kogawa House, performances at the Flame Storytelling Series, numerous workshops with wonderful creative artists and collaborators at the Roundhouse and the Firehall Theatre’s B.C. Buds Spring Arts Festival, intensive sessions with director Richard Wolfe and dramaturg Heidi Taylor in Playwrights Theatre Centre’s Test Kitchen, and many late-night grant writing sessions.

For two years, VACT bet everything on this one show. We were all in. Even though I supported him in every way, in the end it would be Tetsuro alone onstage. He alone would face the critics, his peers, his publics. As an untrained performer, he had the audacity to ask us for everything, and we were reckless enough to give it to him. If Tetsuro failed, there was no Plan B. VACT would close its doors. No pressure. When

we would jokingly remind him of the stakes during board meetings, he would just shrug. For once, Tetsuro didn't have a witty comeback.

He was preoccupied with bigger pressures. His father's health was declining rapidly. To complicate matters further, Tetsuro had made a philosophical commitment to keeping *Empire of the Son* as factually accurate, real-to-life, and up-to-date as humanly possible. That may sound good in theory, but in reality it was wreaking havoc with his team of collaborators, who all required a final script to be nailed down. But there was simply too much drama happening in Tetsuro's family for him to stop making new additions to the text. When his father died just eighteen days before our run was scheduled to begin, his death left a giant crater in the work. They would have to change the beginning, the ending, everything would be affected. Tetsuro finally locked the script down several days prior to previewing. He had to. Because now he had lines to learn.

Then even before opening night, we began to feel the tremors. Something truly groundbreaking was beginning to happen. Before a single review had been written, *Empire of the Son* made history. To the best of our knowledge, for the world premiere of a Canadian play to completely sell out its entire run before opening, or even previewing, is unprecedented. Not only that, the holdover also immediately sold out.

Critics were unanimous in their praise. The *Vancouver Sun* named it the best show of 2015. The *Georgia Straight's* Colin Thomas called it the most important show of the year. *Empire* went on to garner six Jessie nominations, including Outstanding Original Script, Outstanding Performance by an Actor in a Lead Role, Outstanding Production, plus the Critics' Choice Innovation Award (personally, I won the inaugural *Vancouver Now* Representation and Inclusion Award). From our humble

beginnings in my kitchen, a growing national tour (so far the National Arts Centre in Ottawa, Centaur Theatre in Montreal, Factory Theatre in Toronto, Festival Players of Prince Edward County in Ontario, and Artistic Fraud of Newfoundland), the National Asian American Theater Association Festival in Ashland, Oregon, and this publication, I am still pinching myself in disbelief. But I have always believed in Tetsuro's talent. Tetsuro writes about things that matter to all of us with humour and a poetic grace that lifts the spirit. I am grateful to be a part of this adventure as his producer and friend.

I once observed a fellow theatre artist in the community congratulate Tetsuro on hitting a home run, but instead of simply accepting the compliment, he gave a little speech. "Sure I may have been the one holding the bat, but who surrounded me with a team of all-stars? Who got me into The Cultch, my Wrigley Field? Who made sure all the bases were loaded when I swung for the fences? It was Donna. Without her, this would have been a tiny show that no one ever saw except for family and friends. So who is the real MVP?" That was much more information than a simple compliment warranted, but I know Tetsuro feels strongly about this because I've heard him use this analogy several times.

Tetsuro's impulse to recognize the contribution of others is part of what makes him so easy to work with. In fact, I think many men might find it challenging to work for VACT because we have always been such a staunchly matriarchal organization. During VACT 2.0 all the leadership positions have been occupied by women. Even though Tetsuro has the longest history with the company, and despite being more than qualified, he has never displayed that male tendency to take charge.

One of the reasons Tetsuro works so well with us is that he doesn't take up all the conversation space, which is all the more remarkable considering he speaks for a living. But when Tetsuro

does open his mouth, we pay attention because it's always clear he has been listening so closely. He'll sum up everything we have been talking about before offering his own thoughts.

By hanging back, he enables us to develop and flourish in our leadership positions, from Annie Jang who joined VACT when she was just twenty-three years old, to me, who he personally persuaded to become artistic director. Even though I often introduce Tetsuro as my unofficial co-artistic director, he is always quick to interject, explaining he is simply my *consigliere*, a trusted advisor. And he is. Tetsuro shares his thoughts and opinions with me, but he always leaves the final decision to me. Even when he privately disagrees with my decisions, he publicly champions my choices with enthusiasm.

Even though our company has a cultural diversity mandate, and despite the fact that he publicly self-identifies as an artist of colour, I notice that whenever we hang out, Tetsuro tends to talk about gender even more than race: gendered roles, gendered labour, the gender order. Maybe it's because he has a daughter. Maybe it's because he was raised by the women in his family: his sisters and Yoshiko, his mom. In fact, if you have the chance to meet the women in his family, you'll see that each one is powerful in their own unique way, and they all stand in awe of the most powerful woman in his life, his partner Bahareh.

I believe it's all the women in his life who teach Tetsuro how to be a man, but maybe they go too far? Not only does he have long hair, but whenever I visit him at home he's usually wearing a skirt. But he also subverts gender norms in more meaningful ways.

One of Tetsuro's closest friends is a Tibetan artist named Kalsang Dawa, who didn't hesitate to express his disappointment in *Empire of the Son*. Kalsang had witnessed Tetsuro do incredibly witty impromptu performances. So after waiting to

see what Tetsuro had been working on for two years, he said, “I just expected a lot more.” Are your friends that honest? But there’s a postscript to this story. Kalsang is a new father. His partner, Aranka, has just given birth to their second daughter, and he admitted to Tetsuro that even though he knows it’s stupid, he couldn’t help but feel a twinge of disappointment that she wasn’t a boy. Kalsang is self-aware enough to recognize this as an outdated idea, but having grown up next to China all his life, he couldn’t help but be influenced by a culture that prizes sons over daughters. Seeing Tetsuro onstage for less than seventy-five minutes was enough to change his mind. Kalsang confided in Tetsuro that now he realizes “having daughters is a *good* thing.” This is the power of art. For all its bedazzling spectacle, its technical wizardry and all the powerful emotions it evokes, *Empire of the Son* is also a remarkably subtle piece of social criticism.

The other day, Tetsuro and I were driving to yet another meeting, and I saw this mural that read: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.—Margaret Mead.” Tetsuro and I work unusually well together. I think it’s because we can each do things the other can’t, and yet we share the same values. We believe culture is more interesting when everyone’s story gets told.

If you’re thinking about changing the world, you can do it through art, but you can’t do it alone. If you want to make a change in this world, you have to work across gender lines, across racial lines, across class. Open your eyes. Your potential allies are everywhere. Maybe even within the marriage someone else arranged for you.

—DONNA YAMAMOTO

The Terrible Beauty of Life

Tetsuro Shigematsu's *Empire of the Son* was the surprise hit of the 2015 Vancouver theatre season, selling out its run at the Vancouver East Cultural Centre and earning nominations for six Jessie Richardson awards. *Empire* surprised because it was almost entirely an unknown quantity: the first stage play in more than twenty years by a part-time playwright/actor best known for hosting a CBC Radio show that ended over a decade ago – performed solo by the playwright himself and produced by a low-profile (though rapidly emerging) local company.

It turned out to be a play of great emotional and theatrical intelligence: candid and funny, poetic and quietly moving. And this baby had legs. *Empire of the Son* was almost immediately booked for a 2016 remount at The Cultch, an Ottawa-Toronto-Montreal tour, and publication. These are no small triumphs for a new Canadian play by a little-known writer.

So meet Tetsuro. Born in England to Japanese parents; raised in Montreal and Vancouver with three sisters and a brother; a Concordia BFA in fine arts, UBC MFA in creative writing, and PhD candidate in education; husband to a Persian Canadian wife and father of two children. A sometime stand-up comic, visual artist, filmmaker, and a radio broadcaster like his late father, he thinks of himself as a contemporary inheritor of the samurai tradition; not just because, as a samurai descendant, he once fought a Viking on an episode of the MTV/Spike reality series *Deadliest Warrior* (2009–), but because, he says, the ideal samurai was not only a warrior but a polymath, versed in schools of philosophy and poetry as much as martial arts.

In *Empire of the Son*, a title resonant with intertext and pun, Tetsuro goes to war with the weapons of mind and heart, memory, technology, and some simple and profound theatrical poetry. He mostly battles himself, his own weaknesses. Facing his father's impending death, why couldn't he say "I love you"? And why, even now, can't he cry? A self-deprecating warrior, Tetsuro enlists the audience in this rehearsal for his father's funeral. He also looks to his family – mother and wife, and especially sisters and children – to help him make sense of his father's life and death, their father-son relationship, his own masculinity and identity, and mortality itself: what he calls near the play's exquisite conclusion, "the terrible beauty of life."

The central relationship in this play has echoes for me of English author Helen Macdonald's terrific non-theatrical memoir, *H Is for Hawk*, detailing her profound reaction to her father's death. It also made me think about fathers and sons in other plays like *Death of a Salesman*; David French's *Of the Fields, Lately*; Ins Choi's *Kim's Convenience*. But the training of hawks is not an issue here; nor is desperate failure or intense guilt. Intergenerational conflict is a minor theme and, though intercultural, *Empire of the Son* has no interest in identity politics. Those other plays filter biography and autobiography through fictitious characters and multiple actors whereas *Empire of the Son* is performed with the intense first-person immediacy of the auto/biographer himself in the room with us. Sometimes theatrically embodying his father (reminding me of a character played by Robert Lepage in his solo show *The Far Side of the Moon* transforming before our eyes into his dead mother), Tetsuro also employs recorded voices, photos and videos of family subjects, and props that are genuine relics of his father's life.

A fascinating character, Mr. Shigematsu (he hates being called Akira) is taciturn and emotionally unexpressive yet

happy to share the bathtub with his children. Tetsuro's impressionistic portrait offers tantalizing glimpses of his father's ordinary/extraordinary life's rich subtexts, shadowed by the childhood firebombing of his Japanese hometown and the Hiroshima apocalypse. For Tetsuro, piecing together his father's biography serves more than just eulogy. It provides an ancestral mirror in which he sees himself reflected in a father-son continuum of four generations. Nursing his father through the terrible beauty of his final illness, Tetsuro achieves an awkward, embarrassing, and ultimately revelatory physical intimacy akin to what he has with his young son, Taizo.

Tetsuro's twenty-first century samurai sensibility also finds plenty of room to honour the women in his life. Although mother and wife get less stage time than father, they play central roles. Bahareh convinces Tetsuro to bring his parents to live with them, leading to a lovely moment when his mother exchanges her depressing isolation for a cacophony of grandchildren "more life-giving than springtime or birdsong." Tetsuro's daughter, Mika, becomes an important lens through which he sees his father's world. And if I had to choose a single scene to explain why I love this play, it would be the visit of Tetsuro's adult sisters, who lovingly pile onto his father's sickbed: "As I stand there, slack-jawed and dumb, in the corner of the room, all I can think is there are cultures in this world that prize sons more than daughters. I know because I come from one of them."

That kind of simple eloquence, a hallmark of the play, is also conjured by its vivid theatrical sleight of hand. Onstage, Tetsuro manipulates miniatures and a camera to create projected images of a ship at sea, a gliding ice skater, the Hiroshima mushroom cloud. Credit director Richard Wolfe and his design team together with Tetsuro for these compelling stage effects. A visual arts major in college and one-time feature film

director (*Yellow Fellas*, which he also wrote, produced, edited, and starred in, released in 2007), Tetsuro describes himself as “utterly smitten by the power of the image.” Theatrically, the device is magical. Thematically, it speaks to the creative capacity of the individual to remake the world and therefore him/herself.

Developed and produced by Vancouver Asian Canadian Theatre, *Empire of the Son* marks another small but significant step in the emergence of an exciting, diverse body of theatrical work from one of our country’s most vibrant communities. From its roots in a typically complex Canadian nexus, a crossroads of Japanese, Persian, and Canadian cultures, Tetsuro’s story blossoms into an extraordinary paean to life itself.

—JERRY WASSERMAN

Silence an Ocean Wide

On the morning of October 23, 2015 at 10:23AM I received the following text from my friend Belle Cheung: “I think you should read this. I know her from school and she saw your show last night, sat in the first row.” There below was a link to a Facebook post by someone I didn’t know.

Social media is often decried for being a never-ending river of so much frivolous ephemera, but as a theatre artist I have come to see it as an alternative space – beyond the stage, beyond the lobby – where I can encounter my audience. Compared to the evanescence of sighs, laughter, compliments, embraces, or even bouquets, online remarks have the permanence of cuneiform clay tablets. I have never met Laura, but I have studied her off-the-cuff reflections as if they were the Rosetta stone, a clue to help me better understand an enduring mystery. In an increasingly mediated age, why do we keep coming back to this anachronistic form called theatre? What can happen in the space between the audience and performer that isn’t possible anywhere else?

—TETSURO SHIGEMATSU

Okay, so thanks to **Carolyn Nakagawa** I got to see #EmpireoftheSon and was I the lone hipster girl softly weeping in the front row of one of the most intimate stages in Vancouver tonight? Yes, I was. And I got a little self-conscious that Tetsuro Shigematsu and I could have probably reached out and offered each other a Kleenex, but then I realized it was a play about crying and then I was the girl openly weeping in the front row

aisle seat so absolutely everyone had to walk by me when the lights came up.

Maybe his words could have been my own? Maybe in my imagination, when he told the story of his father running from a burning Kagoshima, and then waiting at the train station looking for his own father after the war, I imagined my grandmother on that very same train several years later. I imagined what it must have been like to search for a home that had already burned, with no coordinates but the stories in her bones from her mother and father, like a salmon looking for a dry riverbed. I looked this man in the eyes and calculated the probability that our ancestors, Shigematsus and Suehiros, might have been friends.

I met a neighbour friend recently whose Japanese family immigrated to Vancouver in the early 20th century around the same time that my grandfather's family arrived, and I calculated the probability that her grandparents and my grandparents might have been friends.

There is a silence an ocean wide in how I *don't* identify as Japanese that I don't quite understand. I think I experienced something tonight that I catch glimpses of once in a while – like last week when Carolyn nonchalantly explained that “YanCha” means “Naughty mischievous imp” and my father has been calling me this all my life (I sort of knew it meant I was a brat).

Is this what cultural belonging feels like? Is it coincidence that a bomb and an ocean can blow us apart, and yet we still keep orbiting each other and finding these connections, almost by chance?

— **Laura Fukumoto**

Production History

The original production of *Empire of the Son* was produced by Vancouver Asian Canadian Theatre and presented by The Cultch, October 6 to 24, 2015. It was produced with the assistance of Playwrights Theatre Centre and developed at the 2014 PTC Writers' Colony in Vancouver. *Empire of the Son* was written in part with the support of the writer-in-residence program at Historic Joy Kogawa House.

WRITER AND PERFORMER	Tetsuro Shigematsu
ARTISTIC PRODUCER	Donna Yamamoto
DIRECTOR /	
ORIGINAL CONCEPT DRAMATURGY	Richard Wolfe
DRAMATURG	Heidi Taylor
SET DESIGN	Pam Johnson
LIGHTING DESIGN	Gerald King
COSTUME DESIGN	Barbara Clayden
SOUND DESIGN	Steve Charles
AUDIO DRAMATURG	Yvonne Gall
STAGE MANAGER	Susan Miyagishima
TECHNICAL DIRECTOR/	
PRODUCTION MANAGER	Jayson McLean
PROPS MASTER	Carole Macdonald
VIDEO DESIGN CONSULTANT	Remy Siu
APPRENTICE STAGE MANAGER	Maria Zarillo
DOCUMENTARY AUDIO	Akira Shigematsu, Yoshiko Shigematsu, Rié Shigematsu Collett, Hana Shigematsu, Setsu Shigematsu
DOCUMENTARY VIDEO	Mika Shigematsu Taizo Shigematsu

Characters

All characters are played by TETSURO, with slight shifts of physicality and voice.

Family members (Mr. and Mrs. Shigematsu, AKIRA and YOSHIKO; Tetsuro's sisters, RIÉ, SETSU, and HANA; his brother, KEN; Tetsuro's wife, BAHAREH; their children, MIKA and TAIZO; and Bahareh's mother, MRS. POUR-GOL), are played by TETSURO.

Audio and video recordings of actual family members are seen and heard during the performance or appear as offstage voices.

EMPIRE
OF THE SON



(above) While standing with my back to the audience at the start of each performance, I take one last sustaining breath and then dive in.

(below) A white tie for weddings, and a black tie for funerals. When my uncle in Japan shared this sartorial tradition with me, I was struck by the symmetrical symbolism of life and death.

A long table stage left is set with several small gooseneck lamps and groups of small objects. TETSURO operates a camera mounted on a slider dolly that rolls along the table, creating live video feeds that are projected on an upstage screen. Stage right, a chair, a small table with a drawer, and a microphone stand, with a brown leather briefcase on the floor. The drawer of the small table contains several objects to be used during the performance.

TETSURO walks onstage and stands with his back to the audience while stepping out of his traditional Japanese wooden geta clogs. Barefoot, he turns to the audience and bows. He remains barefoot throughout the performance.

In Japan, within the closet of any self-respecting Japanese man, you will find at least one black suit. And if you were to search the pockets of that suit, invariably you will find two ties, one in each pocket. A white tie, for all the weddings in his life. And a black tie, for all the funerals.

My father died on September 18. And I failed not once but twice. Two nights before he died, he was experiencing a rare moment of lucidity. So I asked him –

TETSURO: Hey Dad, how are you feeling?

AKIRA: *Ii kibun, ii kibun.*

“I feel good.” And I had this impulse. You should say it! Now’s your chance, just say it. It’s only three words. But that’s not something he ever said to me, so I wasn’t sure how. So I said, “Good night, Dad.” That night, he went to sleep and never woke up again. I didn’t know that would be our last conversation. Two days later, he died. Our whole family was there. My sisters cried. I didn’t. That was strike two. I feel like I have one more chance to get it right.

In Christianity, cremation tends to be frowned upon. But I think my parents may in fact be more Japanese than Christian because if you’re Japanese, there’s only one cardinal sin – to be *mendokusai* – troublesome, a bother. So my father’s instructions to us were to have his body donated to science. Which is great for us, because we save money. The thing is we won’t get his ashes back for a while.

So now my father’s funeral has been placed upon my timeline, and I’m watching it approach. And on that day, I’d like to be able to cry. I haven’t cried since I was a kid. So I’m not gonna be able to just do it on the day of the funeral. Because if I do start to lose it, I’m gonna think oh wow, it’s happening, I’m actually doing it. “Quick, someone take a photo! Instagram me!” – Ah, forget it, moment’s passed.

For me to really cry at my father’s funeral without self-consciousness, I figure I gotta cry at least a couple of times, so on that day, it’ll be no big deal, just another emotion. So I want to thank you for coming out. Because this is not something I can do on my own. I just can’t stand in front of the mirror at home and *will* myself to cry. Maybe that’s something actors do. I don’t know, I’ve never been to acting school. But I do have this “actorly” intuition. My sense is, if I open myself to you, and you open yourself to me, then maybe together we can summon a spirit I haven’t felt since I was a kid. I have two kids,

and they're gonna be there at my father's funeral. And when my kids see me being all friendly, shaking hands, making jokes, everyone else will be thinking, "Oh look at the good son, putting on such a brave front," but my kids will be thinking, Daddy really is a sociopath, superficially charming, but fundamentally lacking true empathy. Can't even cry at his own father's funeral.

So for me this capacity to cry isn't just a trivial matter, because I think the tenderness of our hearts is directly related to our capacity to feel joy. I mean, if there are no valleys within, can there really be mountain peaks? Maybe my interior is just a well-groomed golf course with slight undulations.

So tonight, we are going to explore geologically unstable territory. Together you and I will do a little jig over some fault lines and see what happens.



*The lights shift, and in shadow, TETSURO
pulls AKIRA's glasses out of the inner breast
pocket of his black suit and puts them on.
The lights come up, and he bows slightly.*

AKIRA: (*with a Japanese accent*) My name is Shigematsu Akira. Please do not call me Akira. You may refer to me as Mr. Shigematsu. I take it some of you have paid money to listen to my long-haired son tell you stories. Please keep in mind they are just that. Stories. My son enjoys telling stories. Whenever someone asks me about my youngest child, I tell them: My son makes fun of my accent for a living.

TETSURO: (*removing glasses to indicate he now plays himself*) Oh come on, Dad, do you really think this is a living? This is theatre! I took the bus here.

AKIRA: Need I say more? Imagine if you will, someone who thinks they know you so-o-o well, but in reality they do not understand you at all. Now imagine such a person has the temerity to perform a one-man show about you. Imagine what kind of purgatory that might be. *Irasshaimase!* Welcome to my world.

TETSURO places the glasses on the small table so that they face the audience. He produces a pair of yellow ear protectors from the leather briefcase.

Exhibit A. These are the ear protectors my father, Akira Shigematsu, used at work.

He shows the ear protectors to members of the audience in the front row.

He was not a construction worker. He did not operate a jackhammer. By the time he acquired these, he was on the verge of retirement, pushing a mail cart through the hallways of CBC Montreal. It was the last stop on a storied career as a public radio broadcaster. And these ear protectors were his attempt at social signaling.

TETSURO puts on the ear protectors.

AKIRA: Don't talk to me. Stay away. I bite.

He removes the ear protectors.

(*gesturing to their colour*) Hazard yellow.

This was my family's only heirloom, till last year. When we received a telephone call from my Persian in-laws in Orange County. Now Farsi is a very courtly language. So my mother-in-law said, in the most flowery terms possible.

MRS. POURGOL: *Salam, Tetsuro-joon, bebakhshid,
vali ma beh Newport Beach meeraveem, mifah-mi?*

Translation? “We’re moving to Newport Beach. Come get your
crap, or it’s going in the landfill.”

*PROJECTION:
STILL IMAGE of TETSURO and BAHAREH.*

That’s my wife, Bahareh. Rhymes with *safari*. And together, we
move, a lot. All over the world. I don’t know where I got such a
wanderlust, but it means we’ve accumulated a lot of stuff.

*PROJECTION:
STILL IMAGES of TETSURO and
BAHAREH clearing out strange items.*

Mostly we ended up throwing everything away. But there were a
couple of things I just couldn’t bear to part with.

*PROJECTION:
STILL IMAGE of a braid of hair.*

Not that, this.

TETSURO picks up the brown leather briefcase.

This is my father’s bag. When I was about nineteen years old,
I remember asking my dad if I could use it.

Sure, it was a request, but it was also kind of an offer. We had
been fighting a lot, and it was my way of saying, “Hey Dad, this
thing you own is actually pretty cool. And now that you no longer
appear to be needing it – why would a mail clerk need a briefcase
after all – how about passing it along. Father to son?”

My father refused, saying –

AKIRA: Only employees of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation are legally entitled to use items emblazoned with the official logo of a Crown corporation!

TETSURO: Yeah right, Dad, somehow I don't think the police are gonna arrest me if they see me walking around with your stupid bag. What a loser.

He places the leather briefcase in front of the small table.

For a long time, I did not like my father. I vowed to be nothing like him. I went to art school. Got involved with theatre. Started doing comedy, then one day a producer recorded one of my bits, then BOOM! I find myself working for CBC Radio. How does that even happen?

When I began hosting, management decided my voice didn't sound quite right. So they hired voice coaches who taught me to sound more *manly*. But apparently, I didn't sound manly enough, because they began trying out different microphones. At one point, they even had me speaking into a bass drum mic.

Opening the leather briefcase, he removes a microphone case and then the mic.

Exhibit B.

The second object I managed to salvage from the landfill was this – (*holding up mic*). This is an Akai ACM-300 Electret Condenser microphone. This was my father's microphone. He was a public radio broadcaster.

I was a public radio broadcaster.

SOUND:

AUDIO CLIP of introduction in Japanese to Akira Shigematsu's Radio Canada International program, Canada Konogoro (Canada This Week).

TETSURO plugs in microphone on the mic stand.

Hi, I'm Tetsuro Shigematsu. You're listening to *The Roundup* here on CBC Radio One. Well you just met my father. Soon you'll meet the rest of my family, but first a bit of CanCon. This is Drake doing a cover of an Anne Murray classic –

SOUND:

AUDIO CLIP of Drake / Anne Murray mash-up.



One of the cultural traditions my parents tried to keep alive in our household was bathing together. My mother explained to me that this was a way of preserving a vital part of our heritage. But I think it had just as much to do with the hot-water bill. When we were kids, my twin sister and I used to watch TV together before bedtime. And just when the show was getting really good, my mother would announce –

SOUND:

AUDIO CLIP of TETSURO's mother's voice.

MOM (*recorded*): Bath time!

We would wait until the last second before the commercial began, and then we would jump up, tear off our clothes, leap into the tub, wash our hair, wash each other, swim a few lengths, jump out, towel off, put on our pajamas, all within three minutes, back in time for the show to begin again. Cleanliness may be next to godliness, but we worshipped *Happy Days*.



(above) That's me with the belly hanging over the edge. Already, the body of a god; in my case, Buddha.

(below) When my kids came to see the show, they were not amused to discover that their missing toys had in fact been commandeered by Daddy.

PROJECTION:
STILL IMAGE of all the Shigematsu
children in the tub together, circa 1973.

Every so often my father would join us in the tub. And my twin sister and I would watch wide-eyed as the water level rose higher and higher, and just when we were sure that the entire house would flood, the water level would settle just below the rim, and we would holler, celebrating my father's Fuji-like mass. We took turns washing each other. My sister would shampoo my father's hair, and I would take a plastic cup and pour water down his back. My father was a mountain, a force of nature.

TETSURO goes to the long table and
uses a glass to scoop water from a basin
nested there. He pours water from the
glass to create the effect of a waterfall.

He was my waterfall. Back then, I thought everyone took baths together, until one day, third-grade gym class, this kid comes running up to us, all out of breath.

KID: Hey you guys, I don't believe this myself, but
somebody told me you two take baths together!
That isn't true, is it?

My sister and I looked at each other, not knowing what to say. That night, we took our usual bath together, but we sat at either end of the tub and washed ourselves in silence.

PROJECTION:
LIVE VIDEO FEED of TETSURO kneeling
beside the long table and pushing the
camera past a miniature bathroom set.





For me, these photos represent a time before, when Sundays were spent strolling along the River Thames, and a time after, when Weekends were spent tooling around the junkyard.

PROJECTION:
STILL IMAGE of the Shigematsu
family in London, strolling along the
River Thames in the early 1970s.

This is my family before I was born. I don't know what you see, but when I look at my pre-me family, I see this perfect family leading this charmed life. I mean look at my brother. He's Harry Potter! I think even if you were a racist football hooligan strolling along the Thames and you passed my dad, I don't think you could help but say, "S'aright, for a Chinaman."

This is my father at his maximum portliness. Too much fish and chips maybe? When I look at my dad here, I wanna shout, "Enjoy the view, Dad! Soak it all in, because you'll never be happier than you are right now. Upon the fulcrum of old Big Ben there, your life is in perfect balance." But my mom, bless her heart, she is a woman of faith, and her faith was misplaced.

SOUND:
AUDIO CLIP of TETSURO's mother,
Yoshiko, talking with TETSURO.

MOM: (*recorded*) There was a rhythm method and there was maybe two or three days out of a month that when you DON'T get pregnant, and I was so sure. Dad thought about using precaution but, I thought oh, it's okay, because tonight is the two or three days I won't be able to – I won't be getting pregnant.

I then asked my mom, "How did you feel when you found out you were pregnant with me?"

MOM: (*recorded*) I wasn't uh ... devastated.

Together, my twin sister Hana and I weighed less than one British stone, but that was enough to upset an otherwise perfectly

balanced life. Congratulations on making it to the city of your dreams, Dad, but this won't be your final destination. Oh no, you're headed for the colonies. You fancy Savile Row, do you? How about Sally Ann? Today you are a voice on the BBC, but in your future I see yellow ear protectors.

When I used to look at family photo albums as a kid, the pictures I would always fixate on were of the backyard at 13 Red Post Hill in London.

*PROJECTION:
STILL IMAGES of London home and backyard,
with toddler TETSURO playing in a push car.*

In particular I would always stare at the spectacular toys like the pedal cars, and I'd think how unfair that I used to ride them but I don't even remember. I'd ask my mom, "Do we still have that?" She'd laugh. I knew the answer was no, because I had asked before. But I guess I was hoping her answer might change.



Not long ago an American senator was ridiculed for describing the Internet as a series of tubes, but in a way he was right. There are in fact transoceanic cables lining the ocean floor, carrying ... everything. It's only in the last mile or so that the signals become airborne.

Much more ethereal is shortwave radio. Unlike AM or FM bands, whose signals fade in and out during road trips, shortwave radio has a global range. Its transmissions bounce off of particles in the ionosphere, before heading back down to earth.

When I was on FM radio, my voice would only extend as far as the next transmission tower, limited by the horizon, but my father's voice propagated around the world like a never-ending echo.

When we stand on the edge of a cliff famous for its echoing properties, how quickly we become at a loss for words after –

(echoing through mic) Hello! Echo! Can anyone hear me?

SOUND:

LIVE ECHO EFFECT repeats

TETSURO's question.

A radio host has to be better than that. They have to keep on engaging you, drawing you in. They have to make smooth segues between unrelated ideas.

Lights up.

One of the sadnesses of life is to feel the world move on without you.

My father spent a lifetime honing a set of skills only to see them become obsolete.

He used to cut his radio show together using a razor blade and tape, and now we have digital audio workstations.

In an age of GPS, what becomes of celestial navigation?

In an age of hookups, what happens to courting?

In an age of text messages, when was the last time you received a handwritten letter?

In an age of iTunes, do you even remember silence?

In an age of antidepressants, will you ever know the depths of despair?

When I was a kid, to me the sound of a distant train whistle was the saddest sound in the whole wide world. I had a pretty happy childhood, but for some reason, whenever I heard that sound, I would tear up. Tears would well up, roll down my temples, and fill my ears. There was so little melancholy in my childhood, it makes me wonder, where did such feelings come from?



My dad took a long time to die. He had Parkinson's, Type 2 diabetes that left him completely blind, kidney failure, multiple strokes. When it became clear to us he didn't have a whole lot of time left, I took it upon myself to start recording his stories.

If you upload a recording of an interview to a digital audio editor, it'll look like a mountain range.

*PROJECTION:
VIDEO of wave forms.*

But conversations with my father don't look like that. Our conversations look like Canada. Between my questions, which are the Rockies, and his answers are these long prairies of silence.

*PROJECTION:
VIDEO of wave form moving in
time with an audio recording.*

*SOUND:
AUDIO CLIP of TETSURO
interviewing AKIRA.*

TETSURO: *(recorded)* Did anyone in your family go to war?

A long flat line represents silence.

AKIRA: *(recorded)* Yeah, my father went to the war.

AUDIO OUT.



Years ago, I found a photo which I have since lost. But it's okay because I can still see it. It's this sepia-toned shot of a handsome young Asian man standing on a beach. He is very well-dressed. He has on a white linen shirt, khaki trousers. On the back of the photo it reads "Dad and Hugh, Isle of Wight." – Hugh is my middle

name – I was born in London. And in this photograph, I am barely visible, a small infant fast asleep in his arms.

And I'm amazed that I could've ever been so small to have been held, and that he could've ever been so large to hold me.

I like to think my father is looking out across the Atlantic, trying to imagine what life was going to be like for his young family in Canada.



My dad began writing his memoir. He didn't get very far. Just one page. But I have it.

TETSURO opens the drawer of the small table, picks up a page, and reads.

“My name is Shigematsu Akira, and I am from Japan but my story begins here in England. I had brought my wife and children from Japan to live here in London. For the past five years, I had been working for the BBC as an announcer/producer for external services. But now my contract was up.”

TETSURO continues in character as AKIRA, as the father takes over telling his story.

AKIRA: One day I was walking around the corner of Trafalgar Square when I came across the small offices of Thomas Cooke. The front glass had three large posters.

One was a palm tree tilting over the white crest of a gentle wave.

The middle one was an enticing picture of Australia by Qantas Air.

The one on the right was a bird's-eye view of a white ship cruising through an azure ocean.

I walked into the office.

A middle-aged man was at the counter. I asked, Is there any boat that goes to Canada?

Yes, he said, there is one departing next January, one cruise ship of P&O is sailing from Southampton and is calling Vancouver.

I thought to myself, January is a perfect time. By that time I will be jobless and free to go anywhere.

I had already applied for us to emigrate to Canada. But I do not know what the result will be.

Even if it fails, my family and I can still go there as tourists. Then we can choose Japan as our last destination.

In this age of jet planes it would be a bit of fun to travel by the ancient method of seafaring.

PROJECTION:

LIVE VIDEO FEED of TETSURO placing a small paper boat in a tub of blue water nestled in the long table. Using a drinking straw, he gently blows to move the boat across the water.

PROJECTION:

VIDEO of paper boat as it is blown across the tub and out of view.



SOUND:

AUDIO CLIP of loud 1980s speed metal.

TETSURO moves the camera down the table, and leaps to his feet propelled by the energy of the thrashing guitar.

It's the 1980s, and I'm a teenager! My family is living in the leafy suburbs of Montreal, in a most un-radical 'hood called Pointe-Claire.

Ideologically, as a teenager, I self-describe as an anarchist, and I'm about to express that ideology with my skateboard – when my father steps into the driveway, totally cramping my style.

*PROJECTION:
LIVE VIDEO FEED of TETSURO's two fingers powersliding into the frame on top a miniature skateboard, immediately joined by a second pair of fingers. The fingers represent the legs of TETSURO and AKIRA.*

AKIRA: Where do you think you're going?

TETSURO: Skateboarding. You got a problem with that?

AKIRA: Yes, problem. You skateboard too much! That is problem. Go pull out weeds in vegetable garden!

TETSURO: Aw Dad, can't we get a gardener for that?

AKIRA: Gardener?! When I was your age, we had no garden, no house. Everything was destroyed.

TETSURO: Well duh! Isn't that why you like left Japan? So we could have a better life? Well this is it, Dad. This is it!

Now if you'll excuse me there's a new flavour of Slurpee down at the 7-Eleven I need to go try, so if we're done here, *domo arigato*, Mr. Roboto.



According to my director, Richard Wolfe, apparently I have unusually expressive fingers. Two thumbs up!

And with that he grabbed my skateboard and hurled it across the driveway.

TETSURO flicks the skateboard into his hand.
VIDEO OUT.

My father and I have a tempestuous relationship. I mouth off, and we go a couple of rounds.

He rarely speaks at the dinner table so when he does it's something of an occasion. Usually he's plugged into his shortwave Walkman listening to news reports from the BBC or Japan.

So when he began removing his earbuds, all heads turned to pay attention.

AKIRA: Tetsuro, I have been thinking about this idea for some time now, in fact just over a year, and I think the time is approaching for me to share it with you.

And with that he replaces his earbuds, and resumes eating.

My twin sister Hana begins taunting me, "Ha, ha, you're in trouble!"

It turns out my dad just wanted to go for a drive.

TETSURO: And where would you like to go for a drive, Dad?

AKIRA: I was thinking perhaps Boston. I hear the trees are lovely in New England this time of year.

We never got to Boston. We stopped at a motel on the outskirts of the city. A cheap motel. The kind that would likely offer you a discount if you only needed it for a couple of hours.

My father comes out of the bathroom, hair neatly combed, shirt tucked in. He's ready.

He sits down on the edge of the bed. It's a strange intimacy to share a motel room with your father.

Apropos of nothing, he begins.

AKIRA: If I could change one thing about my life, it would have to be the fact that as a child, I never played intramural sports.

TETSURO: We drove all the way down to Boston so we could talk about your memories of gym class?

AKIRA: As I was growing up I never engaged in many social activities. I see this pattern repeating itself in your life. I do not want you to become what I have become, a social hermit.

The Chinese have a saying: may you live in interesting times. In my life, I have lived in interesting times. In your life, you have lived in the suburbs. The suburbs may produce a Mendelssohn, but they cannot produce a Beethoven. The way I see it, you can go to one of three places: Calcutta, the Bronx, or Winnipeg.

TETSURO: Calcutta, India?

AKIRA: Yes, I want you to work among the lepers with Mother Teresa.

TETSURO: What about Winnipeg?

AKIRA: Ah yes, Mother Teresa has a mission there also.

I found the idea ludicrous and yet strangely appealing. The narcissistic side of me saw India as a backdrop for an epic story in which I would play the main character. Tetsuro of Arabia.

TETSURO: And when would you have me go?

AKIRA: As soon as we get back.

TETSURO: But Dad, you can't afford to send me to India.

AKIRA: Don't worry about the money. That is none of your business!

TETSURO: Fine. What about school?

AKIRA: This will be your education.

TETSURO: But Dad, I've already registered. I'm going into my second year.

AKIRA: Get a refund!

It was the classic parent-child argument but someone had switched the lines. I tried to explain to my Asian father the value of a university education.

AKIRA: Nonsense, you must find yourself.

Back in Montreal, my twin sister Hana asked me –

HANA: Is it true? Are you seriously going to India?

And I remember saying, kind of loudly, "India? Why would I want to go there?"

We fought again. It was bad. No punches were thrown, but we hurt each other in other ways.

In the end my father wrote me this handwritten letter.

TETSURO produces a letter from the drawer.

PROJECTION:

STILL IMAGE of handwritten letter.

He begins to read the letter.

January 4, '93

Dear Hugh,

SOUND:

*AUDIO CLIP of AKIRA (performed by
TETSURO) reading his letter.*

*AKIRA: (recorded) I was wrong in trying to impose a fancy
idea upon you. I withdraw my proposal. You don't have to
contact the Missionaries of Charity. Your trip to India with
your parental support is now off. Enjoy summer as you like.*

Respectfully, Dad

He puts the letter down. Projection out. Lights out.



TETSURO stands at the small table.

*He picks up AKIRA's eyeglasses and
studies them, lost in thought.*

When people tell stories of how they witnessed something important, a brush with death, meeting someone famous, we have this tendency to place ourselves closer and closer to the centre of the action with each retelling.

My father is not like that. He keeps himself on the periphery, which would be fine if it weren't for the fact that, to me, my dad is Forrest Gump, the Zelig of the twentieth century.

For example, did you know my father had tea with the Queen of England? It's true! But to hear him tell it, all he'll say is –

AKIRA: I was not the only one there.

When pressed, the most he'll concede is –

AKIRA: Prince Philip had a very dark tan. Perhaps he had been spending too much time playing polo while the rest of his British subjects toiled indoors.

That's it. End of story. Talk about a waste of an invite.

Did you know my father was there when Marilyn Monroe sang "Happy Birthday" to JFK? It's true. But to hear him tell it, all he'll say is –

AKIRA: I was not the only one there.

When pressed, the most he'll concede is –

AKIRA: Ms. Monroe appeared to be a very passionate woman, perhaps even in love with the president. But how could I enjoy the proceedings when Mrs. Kennedy was sitting right beside him? For me the whole evening felt very awkward.

So I feel like these brushes with history are wasted upon my father. And none more so than August 6, 1945.

SOUND:

AUDIO CLIP of CBC Radio interview between AKIRA and TETSURO. The piece aired with Stephen Quinn, guest-hosting for Kathryn Gretsinger on The Afternoon Show, CBC Radio One, August 6, 2003 (anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima).

AKIRA: *(recorded)* Are you checking about my degree of Alzheimer's?

TETSURO: *(recorded)* He doesn't really have Alzheimer's, just a dark sense of humour.

AKIRA *(recorded)*: August the ... Oh! August the six. That's a, that's a ... Hiroshima was attacked. I was twelve years old. It was just like today's in terms of the brightness



Stage manger Susan Miyagashima spent long nights testing ways to create the impression of a mushroom cloud until she discovered cream injected into water. BOOM!

of sky. It was a very bright August day. The city was flattened, that's all, just darkness, and there was no electricity. And no sign of civilization. I had some physical ailment after the passing of Hiroshima station. I don't know whether it was the effect of atomic radiation or not, but probably not. Probably it was due to some food poisoning.

PROJECTION:

LIVE VIDEO FEED of TETSURO taking a large syringe filled with cream and injecting it into an aquarium filled with water to create a ghostly mushroom cloud.

PROJECTION:

STILL IMAGES of a miniature ruined city fill the projection screen.

VIDEO OUT. AUDIO OUT.



Interviewing my dad. I'm a pretty good son, don't you think? I'm a pretty good father. In fact, I'm just a pretty good, all round human being. Complete. Fully evolved. Or so I thought, until –

PROJECTION:

VIDEO of TAIZO and MIKA, TETSURO's kids, eating pizza with TETSURO behind the camera.

TETSURO: (*recorded*) What do you want to talk about?

TAIZO: Have you ever cried a real cry in your life?

TETSURO: Yeah, of course.

TAIZO: Like a real cry.

TETSURO: Yes.

MIKA: When you were a grown-up?

TAIZO: Yeah, when you were a grown-up?

TETSURO: Oh, uhm. I probably have.

TAIZO: 'Cause I never seen you cry before.

TETSURO: What do you think, Mika?

MIKA: That'd be unusual. You have never crone before in your life.

TETSURO: Why do you think I don't cry?

MIKA: You're like strong like you don't get hurt easily and cry that's what I mean.

TETSURO: But strong people cry. Crying is a sign of strength.

MIKA: Then you're not that strong because you've never crone when you're a grown-up.

TETSURO: I guess so.

VIDEO OUT.

I never gave my kids an answer that day. How come I never cry? I guess the short answer is, I never cry because my father never cried, and he never cried, because his father never cried, and so on, and so on. So it makes me wonder, within my ancestry, who was that original idiot who stopped crying and ruined it for the rest of us? And who is gonna break that chain?

PROJECTION:

STILL IMAGES of Taizo crying.

(with admiration) My son Taizo appears to be going for it. He's eight years old, and he'll cry with very little prompting.

(as TAIZO, crying) There's pulp in my orange juice. I don't like pulp in my orange juice!

That's not fair. Because the one thing I really do admire about my son Taizo is that he isn't afraid to express his emotional needs. Let's say he's feeling all alone. The kind of existential loneliness only a child can feel after having been all by himself on the toilet for a full ten minutes, which in child years must seem like forever, so Taizo will yell out, "I don't want any privacy!" Which is his way of saying "I'm lonely." And when I walk into the bathroom, he'll look up at me and say –

TAIZO: Daddy, will you wipe my buttinsky?

Yes, it's my job to wipe my boy's butt. He loves it! For him, it's like a day at the spa. He'll loll around, and we'll have conversations, like –

TAIZO: Daddy, can I keep this toilet roll?

TETSURO: Sure?

TAIZO: Good, because I wanna use it as a telescope.

TETSURO holds the toilet roll to his own eye. Looks at members of the audience, then up at the moon.



We look at the moon so often, but what does the moon see when it looks down at us? All that time, staring, unblinking. Probably not much. Over four and a half billion years? The drift of continents? Even from a lunar perspective, that's gotta be boring.

I figure there were two events that would have made the moon go, "Huh. Something's going on down there." According to my son, a gigantic asteroid destroyed the dinosaurs and almost everything else here on earth sixty-five million years ago. And then ...

August 6, 1945, Hiroshima, arguably the epicentre of human history. The one moment in time that changes everything. My father glimpsed the end of the world, but to hear him tell it, it was an episode of food poisoning. So my father isn't the best storyteller, I mean, he has a good memory, but he lacks imagination.

My daughter Mika is twelve years old. The same age my father was when he was in Hiroshima. And for me, Hiroshima does not hit home, until I imagine my daughter, all sixty pounds of her, riding alone in a boxcar during the closing months of yet another world war, just trying to get to another place that might be safer. And when her boxcar stops somewhere in the middle of the night, she sees the aftermath of a new weapon so terrible it destroys all meaning. An experience so traumatizing she can't share it with her own children.

My daughter Mika is like me. She doesn't lack imagination. In fact, sometimes she'll become sad for no apparent reason.

Once I came to her at night because she was weeping softly in bed. "What's the matter?" She was thinking about our family ice skating on Grouse Mountain one last time, before the sun came up. Her answer disturbed me because she was reliving something that never even happened. You see she had written this story for school.

SOUND:

AUDIO CLIP of MIKA reading her story.

MIKA: *(recorded)*

The Brightest Moon by Mika Shigematsu

One night after I finished my homework my mom told me to come out and look at the moon. I thought that was weird because my mom claims I don't get enough sleep. People were crowding outside on the street with their radios. So we

decided to get ours too. We turned it on. We heard that the other side of the earth was being scorched by a giant solar flare. That's why everybody was outside in the middle of the night. By sunrise we would be dead. We decided to spend the rest of the night skating on Grouse Mountain one last time. Once we got there, we skated for a bit, until the sun peaked over the mountains. That was the prettiest thing I ever ... (*her voice breaks*)

AUDIO OUT.

Lighting changes. Music up.

PROJECTION:

*LIVE VIDEO FEED OF TETSURO's
fingers gliding between banks of sugar like an
ice skater at a snow-edged skating pond.*

Is the imagination so powerful that it can conjure stories so haunting that they can scarcely be retold? Or maybe my daughter is somehow reliving my father's trauma, a story she's never even heard, yet somehow still echoes inside her.

For my son, the saddest thing in the whole wide world is the extinction of the dinosaurs, and I think the moon might agree. An asteroid colliding with our blue planet must be a terrible thing to witness. But right up there, from a lunar perspective at least, would be the flash of a weapon so bright, so bright it blinds the moon.



January 22, 2015. I'm with my father in the hospital, interviewing him about his hometown of Kagoshima. He had never been so candid. I'd love to play it for you, but I've lost the tape. I find it uncanny that the one piece of audio which captures him completely

unguarded is gone. It's almost as if my father willed it out of existence. But I know it happened, because I have the transcript.

TETSURO gets the transcript from the drawer of the small table and begins reading through a microphone for AKIRA's voice.

AKIRA: On the night of June 17, 1945, in Kagoshima, I was awakened by a bright light nearby our house. It was an incendiary raid. They came in waves. Incendiary is particularly effective for Japanese town which is made of wood and paper. I remember the sound of houses burning down. It is like a huge bonfire. It is getting hot.

We took shelter outside the house, just a few yards away. Because the neighbouring houses were on fire, it was inevitable our house would be engulfed by the great fire. Then Mama said, Let's get out. I remember walking and running. The sky was red. It was midnight. I am always grateful for my mother's decision, otherwise we would have burned alive inside the shelter.

TETSURO: Where did you go?

AKIRA: All the public shelters were flooded from the heavy rains. I remember the families in the streets. The single parents cannot take care of all of their children, so a mother or father would try to give their child away. They asked passersby to take care of some of their children. They just take no responsibility for the safety of their neighbour's children. That's how some of the children lost their lives.

TETSURO: How long did the fire last?

AKIRA: Maybe twenty-four hours or more. The next morning the asphalt was still hot beneath our feet. My last memory of my house – was still intact – but a few hours

later it was completely burned down. That was the end of the world.

TETSURO returns the paper to the drawer, pausing for a moment.



SOUND:

AUDIO CLIP of loud workout music.

TETSURO leaps to his feet and shadowboxes.

I work out. Obviously. Maybe you think I'm vain. You have no idea. I am deeply shallow. This is how shallow I can be. When I shop, I only look for short-sleeved shirts. I don't even bother trying them on. This is what I'll do. I'll slip my arm into the sleeve from the outside and if it's baggy then forget it, but if it's snug, if it starts getting really tight at the top of my flex, it is on! We are taking a trip to the cash register.

Working out is a pretty recent development for me. So I don't know what the rest of you think about when you work out. But me, I think about my dad.

He would fall down and have to go to the hospital. So that leaves me a lot of time alone with my father. Now I don't know if you've ever done a bedside vigil, but a strange thing happens to time about five or six hours in, it's as if the second hand of the clock goes tick tick ... tick.

Now I'm no foodie. Maybe I'll bring in a meal of dry chicken breast over some brown rice, stick it in the fridge. But I'll start thinking about that meal like it's a lover calling to me. I'm not even hungry, but I'll find myself longing for this meal. When time becomes interminable, you start looking forward to the smallest things.

I'll be in the middle of one of these reveries when my father will wake up and say "B.M." Times like this, there is no time to page a nurse. Stand up. Clear a path. Lower the bed rail. Swing his feet over. Put my hands beneath his armpits and lift.

*TETSURO's arms rise as if they
were tied to helium balloons.*

I feel like I could carry him with one hand. He's never been so light. I've never been so strong.

We're in a tiny hospital bathroom. I lift up his blue gown, pull down his diaper, and my father keeps saying "I'm sorry, I'm sorry." And I want to say, "You got nothing to be sorry about, Dad. I got this. I can carry you. I can carry Mom. I can carry my kids. I could put all of you on my back and crush ten reps." But that's not what I say. I'm not here. I'm in a tiny hospital bathroom. And my father keeps saying "I'm sorry, I'm sorry" and I don't know what to say.



*SOUND:
AUDIO CLIP of TETSURO's mother
reading Momotaro in Japanese.*

When my twin sister and I were four years old, my mother was reading us a story before bedtime, *Momotaro* – a Japanese storybook, which we could kind of understand, but not completely. "English, read it to us in English."

And I remember the look on my mother's face. She was tired. We were being whiny.

*TETSURO becomes his mother
reading Momotaro.*

MOM: Once upon a time, there was an old couple, who did not have any children ...

That was the last time my mom ever read to us in Japanese.



The one time I remember being really impressed with my dad was when he brought home two grocery bags, not the plastic kind you get today, but two big brown paper bags – like gigantic lunch bags – and they were full of mail. Fan mail. Handwritten letters, maps of hometowns. Hockey magazines in Japanese! But mostly I remember the portraits, selfies really. Men in Japan of all ages would enclose photos of themselves posing next to their shortwave radio setups. These were the *otaku*, highly intelligent, but socially inept ultra-geeks, and my father was their king.

There is a part of the Japanese brain that has a special affinity for the idea of Canada. If you're a salaryman in Japan, leading a life of quiet desperation, riding crowded subways, sleeping in capsule motels – the wide open spaces of *this* country, with its dude ranches, its leaping salmon, its noble moose – all this holds special appeal. Canada is the anti-Japan. Unlike his legion of listeners, my father managed to leave planet Tokyo. He achieved escape velocity during a time when its gravitational pull should have been at its very strongest.



It's the mid-nineties, and I'm teaching English in Tokyo. Evening rush hour. I'm wearing my navy blue suit, briefcase in hand. I'm admiring my reflection in the window, when I realize it's not me. From all the other salarymen, I can't pick myself out. We all have the same hair, same clothes, same posture. And for a moment, it's easy for me to imagine that I'm not just looking into a mirror, but through a window into the past.

PROJECTION:

LIVE VIDEO FEED of a miniature Tokyo subway train that is glued to the display of an iPhone that plays a video of the passing cityscape.

I can see my father riding this same train. He's a young Keio University graduate in Tokyo during the post-war economic miracle. He's the right age, at the right place, at the right time. "Why did you leave, Dad?" The train lurches. I look around and see what he must have seen. People with the same hair, same clothes, same posture. Is it me, or is there not enough air in this car?

Video out. Lights up.



It's my father's back I remember most.

In our home in Surrey, B.C., his desk consisted of a red door resting on a pair of cinder blocks. On top of it sat this big reel-to-reel tape recorder where he'd take his raw tape and splice together his radio program. As a kid, I would sit in the hallway just outside his office and play with his shortwave radio. It had this giant knob on the front, and when I turned it, it was like I was turning the world.

PROJECTION:

VIDEO of a mandala of radio waves expanding endlessly on the projection screen and beyond to the entire wall.

TETSURO speaks quietly into the microphone, but his voice fills the space as if he were whispering directly into the ears of the audience.

Between clouds of static, I could tune into more languages than I knew existed. The tappings of Morse code, the chatter of amateur radio operators, fishermen sending out SOS on storm-tossed seas.

It was like closing your eyes and swimming through the world's fevered dreams.

But it was between the signals where I lingered. Because there in the static I could hear barely human, sentient entities. Their moaning, plaintive cries terrified me and yet I couldn't pull away. I thought I had stumbled into purgatory somehow. These were the souls doomed to wander the netherworld, blindly careening off the ionosphere, completely oblivious to a little kid tuning into their suffering via shortwave radio.



I've been Googling my father's radio program for years now, but nothing ever came up. Turns out I was spelling it wrong. It's not *Canada Kono Goro*, *Canada These Days*. It's *Canada no Wadai*, *Current Topics on Canada*. Duh! When put in quotation marks, Googling "*Canada no Wadai*" yields one result –

PROJECTION:

STILL IMAGE of a radio show episode list.

This is a PDF hosted by the library of the University of British Columbia. Jackpot. This document is an inventory of the Radio Canada International Recordings Collection, which is where I found this –

TETSURO goes to the leather briefcase and produces a vinyl record of his father's recording.

SOUND:

AUDIO CLIP of segment from Radio Canada International's Canada no Wadai (Japanese Topical Discs, JTD 90, Radio Canada International Recordings Collection, 1977–1987, University of British Columbia Archives). AKIRA's voice in Japanese.

My father began broadcasting with the BBC before I was born.

And he only stopped when Mulroney shut down RCI's transmitter twenty years later.

Two decades' worth of programming is a lot of shows, but I never listened to a single minute until a full quarter century after he stopped broadcasting. I'm not proud of this, but it has been theorized that echoes never disappear completely.

For my father, some echoes never stopped. In the middle of the night, he would yell out in his sleep –

AKIRA: Don't call me Akira!

At the end of his career, due to cutbacks, my father was demoted, from voicing and producing a radio program with the second-highest ratings in its category worldwide, to pushing a mail cart.

For my dad the biggest loss was having to leave behind the silence of the recording booth. Because now he was subjected to the casual intimacy of hearing his given name again and again.

TETSURO speaks through a handheld mic with an echo effect.

SOUND:

LIVE ECHO EFFECT intensifies TETSURO's impression of CBC Radio employees' playful attempts to banter with AKIRA.

AKIRA's CO-WORKERS: *(echoing through mic) Depeche-toi, Monsieur Akira! Ça va bien, Akira? Comment allez-vous, Akira! Akira, Akira, Akira.*

It was too much. He couldn't just flip a switch or pull a fader, so in the end, he attenuated the signal.

TETSURO puts on the ear protectors.

PROJECTION:

*LIVE VIDEO FEED of TETSURO walking
his fingers slowly across the camera's frame,
then pulling a miniature red wagon that
carries two brown paper bags full of mail.*



Every time my father went into the hospital, it seemed less and less likely that he would ever come out. Conference call with my sisters. "How is Dad doing? Should we come?" And I stopped.

My sisters never ask my advice about anything. I'm the baby of the family. But here they were. "Tetsuro, tell us. Should we come?" If they don't come and something happens, I'll never live it down. But for some reason I can't bring myself to say it. So I say, "Listen closely because I'm only going to say this once. No one here is telling you *not* to come."

My sisters booked their flights from all points to Vancouver, indirect flights, weird connections, and by some coincidence all three sisters landed at YVR within thirty minutes of each other. As we all piled into my car, everyone was giddy, literally giggling. Sure the circumstances were crappy, but this was an impromptu family reunion. We only saw each other once a year, if that. But now we were all together, and everyone was so happy.

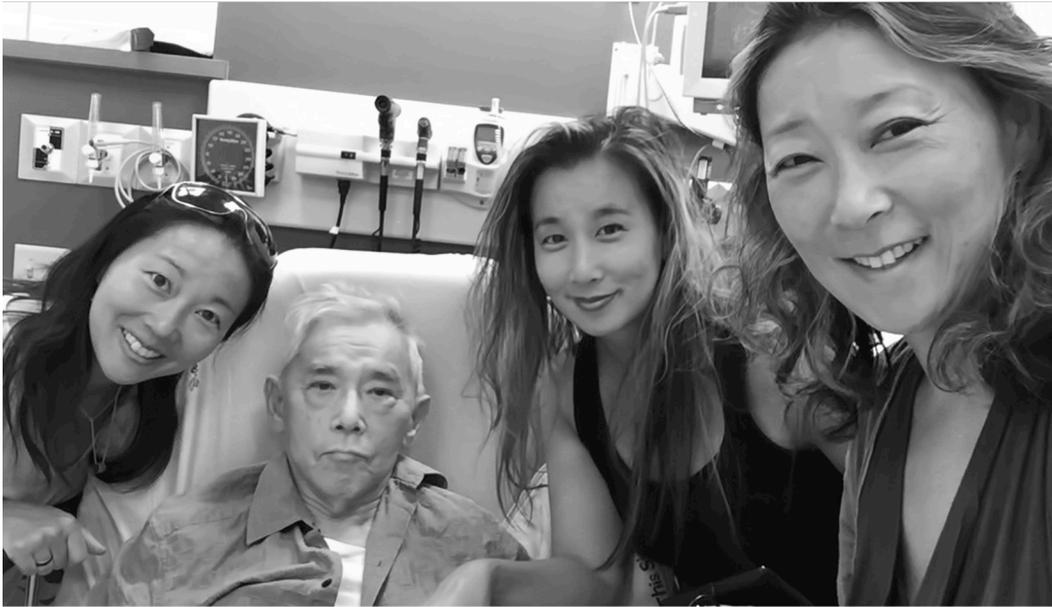
PROJECTION:

*STILL IMAGE of TETSURO's sisters, HANA,
RIÉ, and SETSU, and TETSURO in the car.*

As I began driving towards St. Paul's, one of my sisters said –

SOUND:

*AUDIO CLIP of HANA, RIÉ, and
SETSU talking with TETSURO in the
car on the way to the hospital.*



(above) In matters of intervention, it is the prerogative of the twin sister to disregard personal boundaries.

(below) Dad was so dehydrated he needed to be hospitalized. My sisters noticed he was lethargic. My brother and I did not.

HANA: (*recorded*) By the way, we are not really here for Dad. That was just a pretext.

RIÉ: The real reason we're here is because we decided it was time to stage an intervention on your moustache.

SETSU: We're serious, it's over the top. We think your facial hair is extremely aggressive, and aggressively antisocial. It's really going to limit your opportunities.

HANA / SETSU / RIÉ: Yeah, you look really untrustworthy / dubious / supercilious / insouciant / oleaginous.

Did I mention my sisters all scored within the top one percentile on their SATs?

(*on mic, looking at photo*) What are you talking about? This is a handlebar moustache. It's a classic gentleman's moustache.

SOUND:

AUDIO CLIP continues.

HANA: (*recorded*) Maybe that's the look you're going for, but as an Asian it looks like you have two question marks on your face.

RIÉ: Questionable look, questionable character.

PROJECTION out.

When my sisters say stuff like that, deep down, I know they're probably right. They're always staging these interventions on me, half-joking, half-serious. But secretly I was just happy not to have to talk about my father's condition. They'd see for themselves soon enough.

When we got to my dad's hospital room, without a word my sisters dropped their coats and their bags and they climbed into bed

with my dad. That blew my mind. They could've levitated and I would've been less impressed.

But they lay in bed with him. And they touched him the way daughters touch their fathers when there's a lot of love. All these hours I'd been spending with my dad: bringing him heated blankets, feeding him chips of ice, describing the weather outside his window, I can honestly say it never occurred to me to climb into his bed, to lie next to him, to touch him.

In the manner in which we express affection towards our father, my brother and I are like characters trapped in a Frank Capra movie. My brother Ken is a pastor and his favourite film is *It's a Wonderful Life*, and together we are about as fulsome in our expressions of affection as Jimmy Stewart. "Gee, Pa, just try and hang in there, will ya? And hand to God, you'll be as right as rain." Our brotherly affection is in black and white, but my sisters' love is in Technicolor, and in surround sound.

My sisters are multilingual in the languages of love. They coo, and cluck, and purr with mellifluous felicity. They speak in tongues, not because the Spirit has descended upon them, but because it never left.

Make no mistake, my sisters are grown women, mothers but not matronly, but maybe magicians, maybe wiccans, because in the blink of an eye they become little girls again. "Goodnight, Daddy, *otosan*, I love you, *ai shtitru*," cooing affectionate little girls, while my brother and I remain like British Beefeaters, arms by our sides, silent, while my sisters shapeshift into a basket full of kittens, and with every kiss they bring him back from the brink of death, and if this isn't magic, then I don't know what is.

And as I stand there, slack-jawed and dumb, in the corner of the room, all I can think is there are cultures in this world that prize sons over than daughters. I know because I come from one of them. So stupid.

PROJECTION:
STILL IMAGE of sisters (from left to right,
SETSU, HANA, and RIÉ) in hospital
with Mr. Shigematsu (AKIRA).

When my father's condition stabilized, my sisters had to go back to their regular lives. But let me tell you, their example was not lost on me. I mean I didn't want to do it right in front of them, but as soon as they were around the corner, I was on that bed. Right on the edge. And I leaned over, and I patted his knee like no one was watching.



SOUND:
AUDIO CLIP of historical recording of the
Emperor of Japan's surrender speech.

A common memory that my father shares with many Japanese of his generation in Japan is hearing the Emperor's voice on the radio for the very first time, announcing Japan's defeat, Japan's surrender. So while everyone else is crying around him, my dad is secretly hopeful, because he's thinking, "Well now that the war is over, maybe my father will finally come home." My grandfather was a prisoner of war.

Now back then in my father's small hometown of Kagoshima, the only form of transportation left intact was the train system. So once a day the train would make a stop at their local station. And my father being just a kid, not knowing any better, would go down to the station to look for his dad.

TETSURO: Now, Dad, I'm not saying yours was a fool's errand, but you didn't know if your dad was alive or dead, so you go down to the train station on the off chance that he'll just show up, but you're doing this every day, you're

twelve years old! How long can you keep this up? A week, a month?

AKIRA: Oh, not very long. Perhaps, just over a year.

TETSURO: Why did you stop?

AKIRA: There was only one person left on the platform that day, far too old to be my father, but I could see it was him.

TETSURO: Dad, did you run to him? Did you hug him? Did you say I love you?

AKIRA: No, of course not!

TETSURO: Dad, father and son, parent and child, you haven't seen each other for years. You didn't know if the other was alive or dead. Are you telling me the moment you two saw each other there wasn't a single expression of relief, affection, love?

Pause.

AKIRA: It must have been the late afternoon when we walked home from the station, because our shadows were so long on the road. And although I cannot be certain, I suppose had my father glanced at my shadow, he may have seen a slight hop in my step.



My dad has been dying for two years now, and he's been dragging my mom down with him. Together they lived in a small apartment near Stanley Park. That was their physical address, but in reality my mom was living in a hole in the ground.

I could visit my mom during the middle of a sunny day in their bright West End apartment, but with my father dying in what used to be their living room, the darkness was all around. I could dwell

in that darkness with her, keep her company, but for all my jokes, I was just a tea candle, not enough to change anything.

My kids are special in the way that all kids are special. They don't have to do anything, they can just be. My mom could be trapped in a room that stinks with the stench of death, and I could carry in my sleeping child and their presence alone would banish all shadows.

I haven't told you about my wife because that story would take all day, all night. But if there's one thing I could share to help you understand who she is, it'd be this. One day, she said to me, "I think we should try and find a bigger place to rent, so your parents can live with us."

No, no, no, no! I like to walk around the house naked. How is that going to work? I just can't sit beside my father on the couch wearing nothing. Because even though he claims to be blind, I just know he'll turn in my direction and say something like –

AKIRA: Is it laundry day?

Or if he's feeling more sassy –

AKIRA: Are you going to audition for *Oh! Calcutta*?

Moving in together? That's a terrible idea. But once again, I was wrong. So now my little family lives with my parents under one roof. It's not perfect, but it's better. Especially for my mom. So now Grandma gets woken up early by the chaos of my kids getting ready for school, and she's kept up late by the bickering of my kids as they fight over the family iPad. And together this cacophony is more life-giving than springtime and birdsong. Every day my kids hug Grandma good morning and good night. My mom can survive anything, but no one should live without being touched.



The only exercise my father got during his final days was walking to the bathroom. "Come on, Dad! If you walk any slower, you'll be standing still!" I walk behind him, watch his knees, and when they begin to wobble, I'll pop my head in where his love handles used to be, and say, "Put your arms around me, Dad." And he does.

With soft, cool hands, he'll clasp my neck, and I lift. Just over a hundred pounds. The weight of a supermodel really. Now, if I were walking past a modelling agency that was on fire, am I the kind of man who could save the day? Well, yes I am, yes I am.

And as I carry my father, I think about the terrible beauty of life. I have reached the peak of my physical powers during the very season my father has begun to fall.

My father is like a baby now. Colicky, so colicky, up-all-night colicky. He doesn't cry. This is my father after all. But he has these spells which the doctors never did figure out. So in Japanese, we just called it *kurushi*, agony. *Tasukete! Tasukete!* Help me. Help me. During these spells, which could last up to eleven hours, his blind eyes would blaze, and all the strength he lost through atrophy returned with a fury. He would grab both sides of the bed rails, and he shook the room.

During these spells, there was only one way to calm him down: rubbing his back, which was kind of hard to do over the railings, so I crawled into bed with my dad. It's actually kind of nice. I mean how often does a man get to experience physical intimacy with another man without it getting ... intimate? So there I am, spooning my father, rubbing his back, when his buttocks begin to rhythmically bump up against my groin. It's the Parkinson's. He can't help it. But oh God, so awkward, so weird. This is the worst! But if this is the worst, then here it is. Soon enough I'm not even thinking about my dad's buttocks, I'm thinking about my arms. Marathon massage make your muscles ache. I can feel the

lactic acid building up. I look down at my arms. I am the captain of the SS *Tetsuro*. Carry me. Carry me home. Carry me all the way to the end.



My father was carried from our home for the last time on September 19, 2015. His instructions were to have his body donated to science; specifically, the Department of Cellular and Physiological Science at UBC. So for years I've been waiting for this white van to pull up, and then having to deal with a pair of movers as they manhandle my dad's dead body. But that's not what happened. The doorbell rang and there was a man with all the earnest sincerity of a young Mormon missionary. So I asked him –

TETSURO: How long have you been doing this job?

UNDERTAKER: Four months.

TETSURO: What do you know now that you didn't know before?

UNDERTAKER: Nothing. I mean we all know we're going to die, right? But I will say this – I do appreciate the littler things.

TETSURO: Like what?

By this time we were outside.

UNDERTAKER: Like the rain. Just being able to feel it on my skin because – these bodies I carry out – can't.



SOUND:

AUDIO CLIP of the plucking of a stringed instrument like the pinprick of rain.



(above) Of all our family photos, in this one my father shows an uncharacteristic level of pride.

(below) My father is forty-three years old in this photo. I am forty-four.

TETSURO changes his shirt and puts on his jacket and a black tie during the following.

Seventy-two percent. That's how much water is in your body. And that water has been around here on earth for four and half billion years. That means the moisture in your breath was once at the centre of a glacier during the ice age. In your frozen form, you carved valleys through unnamed mountain ranges.

And as many an ancient text will attest, there was once a Great Flood. You rained for forty days and forty nights, until the whole earth turned blue.

And on another day, a few years before you were born, you were a cloud. And a young girl studied your ever-changing face, wondering, "What will my children look like?"

And on another day, in complete darkness, you were an amniotic sea, the temperature of bloodz, vibrating to the rhythm of two heartbeats.

And one day, the water that is you, will not be you. But if you were loved, maybe you will be the tears of someone who weeps for you. Not because they're crying, but because they're laughing so hard at the memory of how pathetic you looked, that time you got caught in the rain. And as they dab their cheeks, they'll stop to wonder, are you in heaven? When in fact you have never been so near.

*PROJECTION:
STILL IMAGE of AKIRA outside the
BBC External Services offices in London.
TETSURO turns to look at him.*

END OF PLAY

Acknowledgments

TO DONNA, for giving my dad *A Room to Die In*, for giving my family a place to live, and for giving me a reason to rise at four every morning to fight the good fight.

TO RICHARD, for being the first theatre person in this town to take a chance on me. May we have many more collaborations to come.

TO HEIDI, in the heat of creative battle as you keep the forces of chaos and confusion at bay, the twin blades of your incisive questions and conceptual rigour are so sharp, I can shed my trusty armour because I know you will always have my back.

TO HEATHER, for having the courage to bet on our little company and all the big things for which we stand. Your faith inspires us.

TO GERALD, the flock is happy because you take such good care of the shepherd. What a privilege it is to stand in the light of your genius.

TO BONNIE, for your time and for your friendship. Your belief in us sustains our belief in ourselves.

TO WENDY, you have always been VACT's First Friend and our most loyal ally. We strive to be worthy of the trust you have placed in us.

TO ANDREA, before I interviewed my father, you interviewed me, and your stirring descriptions of that which was not yet written remain the heights to which *Empire* continues to aspire.

TO TIFF, for showing me that those inspiring late-night, mind-expanding conversations didn't end with my art-school adolescence.

TO BELLE, new ideas are so delicate. They can be killed by a frown or a smirk. When *Empire* was at its most vulnerable, your vote of confidence was all the affirmation it needed to survive.

TO ANNIE, the least-fake person I know. The sincerity of your smiles, nods, and laughter is the only compass I need to find my way.

TO YVONNE, for being the first person to trust me with a microphone and for your continued recklessness in remaining my co-conspirator.

TO LAARA, of all the extravagant treasures that have come into my life thanks to our mutual friend, your friendship is the one I treasure most.

TO INS, for inspiring me not to be just a better artist, but a better person. Thank you for being our community's Neil Armstrong.

TO JANET, when a stranger handed you *Rising Son* on VHS, you responded by inviting me to your wedding. Your embrace gave me my first sense of belonging, and I have felt at home in the world ever since.

TO ANN-MARIE, for the honour of recognition as a writer-in-residence at Historic Joy Kogawa House, for serving as my trusted editor with a jeweller's eye. Before an artist can flourish, they need someone like you in their life. I bask in your warmth and your light.

TO KEVIN, it would have made my father proud to see me published. Thank you for making his dream a reality.

TO JERRY, for opening doors for me where I saw only walls. Before I had ever conceived of publication, you offered to buy copies of my script to teach to your classes long before opening night. How could I ever repay such confidence in my work?

TO JOSEPH, for always upping my game. I was unduly proud of my grantsmanship until I met you. I remain your biggest fan.

TO JANE and ROSS, for your encouragement, your ardent support, your insightful feedback, and your revivifying warmth.

TO ALLAN, my first mentor. Had you been anything less than magnificent, I would have become a lawyer.

TO HOWARD, for being such a role model of possibility. Your abundant generosity with your wisdom stokes our ambition.

TO THERESA, for teaching me that Italian dads can also be incapable of expressing their feelings, for attending my father's memorial, and for raising the flag on *Empire* so high the whole world could see. You are a true friend.

TO SHELDON and KURT, the spectacle that is *Empire* was built upon a cornerstone made possible by your kindness and generosity.

TO ANNALIES, The Cultch is my artistic home, and all that began when you extended your friendship to me even when I was just another theatre goer in the lobby.

TO JESSA, for your fulsome understanding of my work. It has always made me feel seen.

TO SHELLEY, for always being there when I need you, and I always will.

TO KG, forgive the analogy but you were the prom queen everyone loved, and I was the new transfer student nobody liked. But with every intro (and extra), you made it clear to everyone that you were proud of my antics, and eventually the others came around. I wouldn't have lasted without you.

TO HEATHER K, for plucking me from obscurity and taking a chance on me. I still use the lessons you taught.

TO BILL, for always being so kind, so complimentary, and so generous. I never stopped being star-struck around you. It was an honour to sit in your chair.

TO JOEL AND DEBORAH, for tending the brightest fire in the city, and letting me join the warm glow of your circle.

TO MY PHD COMMITTEE, TERESA, CARL, RITA, and GEORGE, thank you for dissuading me from embarking on a more orthodox thesis and instead guiding me towards the mountain passes of *Empire of the Son*. It is your wisdom “that has made all the difference.”

TO MARIE FRANCE, for your fiery intellect and inspiring words. You gave me the courage I needed to leap into the unknown.

TO DANIEL and DAVE, for the game plan and the pep talk. We wouldn't have had the audacity if you hadn't given us the time.

TO JOYCE and TOM, for approaching me way back when, and inviting me to join the cause. Thank you for giving my life purpose.

TO RAY and TERRY, for being VACT's most loyal artists. Thank you for putting up with me throughout all these years.

TO JAYSON, for being such a badass rock and roller. I want to steal your magical camper truck with you in it.

TO FLO, your style and effervescent personality always make even the shadow side seem glamorous.

TO REMY, I'll be glad of the day when someone replaces me in *Empire*, if only so I can finally see these wonders.

TO CAROLE, your ingenious ability to make real the notions I could only muse on thrilled me to no end.

TO BARBARA, from *Salmon Row* to *Empire of the Son*, you always make me look and feel like a leading man.

TO STEVE, for giving me the best scene partner a solo performer could ever have. Your music provokes me, moves me, inspires me, yet never stands in my light.

TO JAMIE, for inspiring me to one day have conversations with

Mika not just as father and daughter but as colleagues. You're the coolest young person I know. Please hire me one day when you become Queen of Everything.

TO MARIA, thank you for risking life and limb before each show to assist with my unconventional vocal warm-ups.

TO PAM, for beginning a dialogue with the audience before I even emerge from your spectacular set.

TO SUSAN, for being my *oneesan* (even though I'm older than you). When my father died and it felt like the work was about to derail, the fullness of your acceptance and the depth of your solidarity kept me grounded.

TO LAURA, for reminding me that the reflected light of the moon is always more beautiful than the incandescence of the sun.

TO KALSANG, ARANKA, DAN, and ZARAH. For these past couple of years, my life has become so narrowly monastic. Being able to occasionally spend time with such an attractive, loyal group of friends has allowed me to maintain this pleasant fiction of having a well-rounded life. May our children intermarry so we can remain family for always.

TO MAS, for all that you've done, for all that is to come. This next one is for you.

TO RIÉ, for leaving your own family to spend one hundred and one days to be by Dad's side.

TO SETSU, for rescuing Dad from the hospital so he could die at home. Thank you for Japan.

TO HANA, for being Dad's favourite (and everyone else's, including me), and for always being so kind.

TO KEN, for inspiring me to be a better father.

TO MIKA, for allowing me to include *The Brightest Moon*. I look

forward to your maturation as an artist so I can steal more of your ideas. You have the sweet gentleness of Grandma, the loving affection of Mommy, and even more beauty than your father.

TO TAIZO, I hope one day you will forgive me for using you in my show. And may such forgiveness come in the form of your own one-man show about your sadistic father who gleefully humiliated you before hundreds of people. And if you could do it using a Jewish Brooklyn accent, I'll be the one in the balcony giggling with childlike joy.

TO MOM, living with you has been heaven on earth. May God grant Dad the patience he will need to wait for you.

TO DAD, for being the kind of man Mom describes as the finest person she has ever met. I don't believe I will ever see you again, but it is always good to feel your spirit onstage.

TO THE PERSON I will never know. When you sat in the audience, you listened with such luminous intensity I was thrown. My performance shifted into autopilot as I began an internal monologue: Who are you? What are you remembering? What is your story? Even though I will never know the answer to these questions, I take solace in knowing I caught a glimpse of infinity in the eyes of a stranger. For me, this is why theatre will always be more powerful than movies. You were there. I saw you. Nothing stood between us except the air we both breathed and the thoughts we held like smooth pebbles in our hands, dense and invisible.

TO BAHAREH, my empress, the kindest, most beautiful woman I have ever known.

Tetsuro Shigematsu

For more than twenty years, Tetsuro Shigematsu has been telling stories across an array of media. He is a writer, actor, performance artist, broadcaster, stand-up comic, scholar, filmmaker, and theatre creator. Originally trained in the fine arts, he found a similar creative outlet writing for CBC Television's *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*. Then in 2004, he became the first person-of-colour to host a daily national radio program in Canada when he took over *The Roundup* on CBC Radio, where he co-wrote and co-produced nearly a thousand hours of network programming. He has written and produced more than fifty pieces of radio drama as well as the feature film *Yellow Fellas* (2007). He is currently a Vanier scholar and PhD candidate at the University of British Columbia.

As a creator conversant across a wide variety of media, Tetsuro begins by examining the subject matter and asking what form the story wants to take. Rather than forcing narratives into the traditional constraints of that medium, he often innovates new aesthetic forms that express with greater fidelity the contours of lived experience. His resulting pieces are often singular and groundbreaking. His most recent theatre work, *Empire of the Son*, sold out its run before it opened and was named the best show of 2015 by the *Vancouver Sun* before being remounted at The Cultch in 2016. It has been produced across Canada, including the National Arts Centre in Ottawa, Centaur Theatre in Montreal, Factory Theatre in Toronto, Festival Players of Prince Edward County in Ontario, Artistic Fraud of Newfoundland, and into the United States through the National Asian American Theater Association Festival in Ashland, Oregon.

Tetsuro's award-winning body of work in film, television, radio, new media, and theatre continues to be taught in Canadian and American universities as examples of creative possibility.

Follow him @tweetsuro or visit him at shiggy.com.

Room 9A: The Screening Room, *Empire of the Son*

USHER: Despite the thousands who have seen this show live, the view count for this archival video you are about to see will be comparatively low. That is because, this unlisted link below is usually reserved for cultural decision makers who buy shows like this one to program their theatre seasons years in advance.

Archival Video

https://youtu.be/WA_B0ufLCDQ

Trailer

<https://bit.ly/2KRPXND>



Room 10: The Catwalk

USHER: The catwalk is the walkway suspended from the ceiling of the theatre. As an usher, I never visited there. As an actor I still don't, but this is the place where my eyes naturally settle. When I am focused and in the zone of performance, I look straight ahead, but when my thoughts begin to wander, rather than try to suppress them, I find it is best to follow them.

To look down at your feet is the ocular equivalent of slouching, dissipating energy. To look to the side is to suggest there is a more interesting drama taking place offstage. And so, I look upwards. The religious in the audience might think I am looking at my father. Fellow actors might intuit I am letting premature tears evaporate. The truth is up there in the catwalk, my thought bubbles are collecting like helium balloons. The ceiling is full of them.

10.A Crystal Ball

The penultimate story of *Empire of the Son* describes an undertaker taking away my father's body. The emotional power I can summon in this scene is the actorly equivalent of the pole vaulter's sprint. The momentum I attain here directly determines the lift I can achieve during the final moments of the show.

My father was carried from our home for the last time on September 19, 2015.

Figure 13. Checking in. Photo by Raymond Shum.

His instructions were to have his body donated to science; specifically, the Department of Cellular and Physiological Science at UBC. For years I've been waiting for this white van to pull up, and then having to deal with a pair of movers as they manhandle my dad's dead body. But that's not what happened. The doorbell rang and there was a man with all the earnest sincerity of a young Mormon missionary. So, I asked him –

TETSURO: How long have you been doing this job?

UNDERTAKER: Four months.

TETSURO: What do you know now that you didn't know before?

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But I will say this—I do appreciate the littler things.

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By this time we were outside.

UNDERTAKER: Like the rain. Just being able to feel it on my skin because—these bodies I carry out—can't.

AUDIO CLIP of the plucking of a stringed instrument like the pinprick of rain.

During this penultimate scene, the moment I am reliving is my memory of standing at the end of my driveway, watching the undertaker's vehicle pull away. As I stand on different stages in different cities, I am always back on that same driveway. But within this

recurring lucid dream, I have yet another dream. Here within the snow globe of memory, actual occurrences intermingle with things imagined. My sisters and my mother stand in the doorway, their arms folded against the autumn cold. It was raining that day, but in my mind, there are peals of thunder and flashes of lightning.

The young undertaker said, “I do appreciate the littler things: like the rain, just being able to feel it against my skin because these bodies I carry out can’t.”

I imagine raindrops hitting my outstretched palms. I stand in the rain, with my face to the sky. Here, if I am open, then sights and sounds will flash to me unbidden.

I see my mother’s face through a window, as she looks at the vehicle carrying her husband’s body away. I hear my daughter’s voice asking me, “Can you feel the rain?” I have seen towering thunderheads parting to reveal the cosmos. I saw a sudden gust of wind fling open the French doors of the room my father died in. I see rainwater seeping across wooden floors.

I think of all the times I parked the car, and then heaved my father into his wheelchair outside the hospital entrance for one of his countless visits, and how thoughtlessly careful I was to shield him from the rain. I should have taken his hat off.

I see my father’s life unspool like a filmstrip, and the finite number times he got caught without an umbrella. Somewhere in the folds of time, between the sheets of rain, I am there behind a misty veil, shouting at him to remember what this feels like, but he cannot hear me.

The audience is privy to none of this. All they see is me standing on stage, palms upwards, and my eyes focusing REM-like on these things they cannot see. Sometimes, I

cannot feel the rain. The tears are not there, and I am fine with that because the words have been delivered, and the barometric pressure inside them has changed.

10.B Black Tie

During the final moments of the show, I produce one last object from my black suit. When I look down at the shiny black tie in my hand on stage, in my mind I see my son Taizo's face. He is inconsolable. Like an image from a dream that has the power to communicate before it is understood (Eliot, 1929), I will recall this image of my son's expression during my 2018 tour of Alberta. For reasons I will never understand, it made me shudder with sorry. But after a few times, it lost its power.

Years ago, I found a photo which I have since lost. But it's okay because I can still see it. It's this sepia-toned shot of a handsome young Asian man standing on a beach. He is very well-dressed. He has on a white linen shirt, khaki trousers. On the back of the photo it reads "Dad and Hugh, Isle of Wight."—Hugh is my middle name—I was born in London. And in this photograph, I am barely visible, a small infant fast asleep in his arms. And I'm amazed that I could've ever been so small to have been held, and that he could've ever been so large to hold me. (Shigematsu, 2016, p. 16)

10.C Pandora's Box

And so ironically, I find myself in the ideological camp that I continue to philosophically oppose. I maintain it does not matter what the performer feels. The experience of the audience should remain paramount. And yet, I'm beginning to understand that perhaps this isn't a simple binary choice. It is something more complex, and more nuanced than that.

It turns out the staff of The Cultch were not the only ones concerned over my well-being during the premier run of *Empire of the Son*. Other actors after having seen my performance have also offered advice. David C. Jones recommended I get a small box and keep it in my dressing room. He suggested that as part of my postshow ritual, after I undress out my costume, and before I don my personal clothing, to take out my box, and slowly close it, knowing full well it would remain hermetically sealed for 22 hours. Although I have yet to try this ritual, I am moved by my fellow actor's concern for my welfare. Perhaps a part of me revels in the notion of being an emotional daredevil, a metaphysical Evel Knievel, shining as brightly as a red-hot filament. Is this sustainable? Likely not. Should I care? Yes, but the literary Romantic in me would rather quote Edna St. Vincent Millay.

My candle burns at both ends;
It will not last the night;
But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends—
It gives a lovely light!

帝

EMPIRE OF THE SON

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BY TETSURO SHIGEMATSU DIRECTED BY RICHARD WOLFE

AS PART OF THE 32ND ANNUAL HIGH PERFORMANCE PODDIE / PRODUCED BY DONNA YAMAMOTO

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EMPIRE OF THE SON

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The true story of a father and son, and the radio silence between them.

10.D From the Road, Unlocking Edmonton

10.D.1 Audience as Canvas

The loudest audience I ever had was when I performed *Empire of the Son* for a group of Asian American theatre artists. This personal milestone took place in 2016, as part of the National Asian American Theater Conference and Festival in Ashland, Oregon. As an Asian Canadian theatre artist, I found myself surrounded by a tribe of my American cousins. North and south of the border, we were artist/activists fighting the same battle: the cultural underrepresentation of Asians on stage. These were my people.

When it comes to arts and entertainment, even successful Canadian artists are accustomed to languishing in relative obscurity, while those who achieve international renown are mostly Americans. A Juno is not a Grammy. When it comes to cultural output, we are culturally conditioned to think of us Canucks as country mice compared to the big city Yankee rodents. So, imagine VACT's surprise when *Empire of the Son*—the only Canadian entry—became the toast of this Asian American theatre festival, and beyond.

That year, “ConFest” was hosted by the Oregon Shakespeare Festival—the largest repertory theatre in the United States, and our show was heavily promoted to their own patrons as well. But for this particular performance, the audience was filled almost entirely with diasporic Asians whose very *raison d'être* was to see this kind of theatre in the world.

Figure 14. *Empire of the Son* posters.

It was a matinee performance at the Black Swan Theatre, and the audience was so raucous, I didn't know what to do with myself physically because the laughs were so unending. Should I stay in character? Should I acknowledge them? Should I improvise new blocking to kill time? It was unlike anything I had ever experienced before or since.

This audience was so ravenous for these personal stories that reflected and affirmed their existence, I was reminded of what American author Barry Lopez once wrote, "Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive" (1993, p. 48). As a performer, it is always heartening to warm your hands by the fire of an appreciative audience, but their heat singed my eyelashes. As a person of colour who seeks solidarity, that was an awe-inspiring experience, but as an artist who wants to improve my craft, I didn't learn very much.

At the time of this writing, we have brought *Empire of the Son* to 13 different cities. If a play's run can be thought of as a painting in progress, the size of the canvas has less to do with the number of seats, than the length of the run. In other words, there are more lessons to be learned within a 100 seat theatre over three weeks, than a 1000 seat theatre over a weekend. It is the number of performances within a city, not the number of seats in a house which will dictate the depths of the lessons you will learn.

If the calendar print out of my touring schedule runs more than one page, chances are I'll have more than one "supercluster:" a Friday evening performance, followed by two shows on Saturday, then a Sunday matinee. Practically speaking, this means that in within 44 hours, I will perform *Empire of the Son* four times. Although taxing, I embrace

these 444 superclusters because they come closest to approximating the most extraordinary performing circumstance I have ever encountered.

My brother, Ken Shigematsu, is the senior pastor of one of the largest churches in Vancouver, British Columbia. Every couple of years, my brother will hear me say something so spiritually enlightening, he will ask me to share it directly with his congregation. Even though I do not identify as a Christian, I always jump at the chance to “co-preach” with him because there is nothing outside of Christendom I have ever encountered that can approach the madness of his weekly performance schedule. At the time of this writing, Tenth Church has four services in three locations on any given Sunday. That means I can test out the material at 9:45 AM in Mount Pleasant, make changes at 10:45 AM in Kitsilano, and tinker with it further at 11:45 AM back at Mount Pleasant, before taking one last shot at 6:30 PM.

As my brother and I jump into the backseat of the getaway car, whisking us to the next service, I can’t help but feel exhilarated. As a writer/performer always looking to improve my craft, performing four times before four different audiences in a single day is the pinnacle of accelerated learning. If such Sundays are blazing sprints, what then constitutes a marathon?

10.D.2 The Quietest Audience

The quietest audience I have ever experienced was our first preview in Edmonton’s Citadel Theatre, January 31st, 2018. Although *Empire of the Son* is about the death of my father, there are a good many laughs in the show. As my friend Andre once enthused to me, “there are such hard left turns in your show, just when you think things are going to get really sad, you say something really funny.” As a former standup comedian, the

sound of audience laughter is important to me. So, by using the superlative “quietest” I do not mean that as a good thing. Where there was once laughter, there was now silence.

Opening night was much better, but with the theatre packed with so many comped industry people, that is to be expected. The third show was also quiet. On our usual walk home from the theatre, my stage manager, Susan Miyagishima and I shared our observations. We were equally confounded. Was it Edmonton? Was it the fact that the audience was almost completely white? Was it the cabaret configuration of the seating? Did the audience feel extra self-conscious given the fact that their table lamps made them more visible and less anonymous? Was the stage too high, and they felt like I was figuratively looking down on them? We were mystified. Susan noted that my performance that night had been three minutes shorter than usual. We were at the beginning of a three-week run that would cap off a 35-day tour. We both dreaded the prospect of our lengthy homestretch being lined with quicksand.

10.D.3 Semiotics of a Theatre

If you were to explain the semiotics of a conventional theater space to an alien, one might begin by directing their attention to the area between the apron of the stage and the front row. Despite the fact these two areas are adjacent, this borderland demarcates two distinct areas of activity and responsibility. By merely standing on stage, the performer declares their significance: they are worthy of your attention. No doubt many actors would abhor such a self-aggrandizing claim. Be that as it may, paying audience members fully expect an actor to live up to their end of this implicit social contract.

Theatre patrons rightly expect to witness feats for which mere mortals are not capable or are unwilling: the opera singer who can shatter a wine glass, the burlesque

dancer who disrobes publicly. Those onstage must be qualified to be there, and heaven help those whom audiences find wanting.

10.D.4 Confidence Man

I once read about an airline pilot who one day had a sudden insight into the immense responsibility his job entailed: hundreds of lives depended directly on him. His realization was so debilitating, he could no longer fly. In like manner, if I thought about it long enough, I might come to a similar crippling realization about what exactly it is I am doing on stage: Thousands of people pay money for me to hold their attention alone on stage for the length of a movie.

I have come to realize that to summon the required nerve for me to do just that, I have to convince myself that me being on stage—an untrained, middle aged Japanese Canadian—is the most natural thing in the world. Yet, the fact remains that I am doing this within an artistic field where I have no formal training.

Moreover, as a person of colour keenly aware of the racial hierarchy implicit within Canadian theatre, I feel it is doubly incumbent upon me to allay any doubts about a marginalized artist taking centre stage. Hence, the necessity for me to compensate for these seeming shortcomings by projecting gleaming confidence and demonstrating precise control. The one area in which I feel no disadvantage is how I sound.

10.D.5 The Voice

At the top of the show my audience is subjected to a pro-caliber voice at full volume. Even though my everyday speaking voice is unremarkable, after a full 25 minute vocal warm up, my voice expands to become its own character, and one that is perhaps not to everyone's liking. One Toronto theatre critic was taken aback when I opened my mouth.

“His voice is, in the manner of many radio hosts, bizarre to hear coming out of the mouth of a real-life person, a verbal version of the ostentatious, curlicue mustache that he sports” (Nestruck, 2017, January 20, para. 11). Although this critic attributes my vocal quality to my days as a broadcaster, in truth I only discovered the ability to voluntarily drop into this register because of my more recent experiences on stage.

Although I have no recollection of when my voice broke as an adolescent, I do remember the exact moment my stage voice “clicked”. It was during Pi/Rumble’s co-production of a stage adaptation of Haruki Murakami’s *after the quake* in 2009. I was delivering a monologue, when suddenly without any additional effort, my voice became so loud in my ears, I became momentarily distracted. My ever attentive director Richard Wolfe rushed up to me after the performance exclaiming, “Your voice! Your voice!”

Six years later, after a performance of *Empire of the Son*, my former CBC producer on *The Roundup*, Heather Kennedy shared with me how struck she was by my new voice, “It’s not that it is deeper, but it is so much more firmly grounded now.” Resonant voice or not, it appeared Edmonton audiences weren’t with me.

10.D.6 Peter

The breakthrough to unlocking Edmonton audiences came on February 4th, 2018. For this Sunday matinee, when I first walked downstage to survey the audience, I saw an Asian man at the very front smiling up at me. I immediately felt a kinship with him, and I returned his smile. (Although I didn’t immediately recognize him in the dim light at the time, this was my cousin Peter Shigematsu, who I had not seen in over 20 years.) I then began smiling at others. Impelled by the emotional momentum created by this interaction, I delivered my first lines differently.

In Japan, within the closet of any self-respecting Japanese man, hangs at least one black suit. And if you were to search the pockets of that suit, invariably you will find two ties, one in each pocket. A white tie for all the weddings in his life. And a black tie for all the funerals.

Usually, I deliver these lines with all the stentorian gravity of Rod Serling, narrator of *The Twilight Zone*. Instead, I treated these lines as if I were an ebullient birthday party magician, showing the audience a wonderful magic trick by producing my ties out of nowhere. It began to work.

10.D.7 Betty

It took a three-week run in Edmonton for me to realize that all the performance momentum I had believed necessary to overcome the perceptual obstacles of being an untrained person of color on stage, I may have been overshooting my mark. Just as a young woman may be surprised to discover her capacity to intimidate older men, I too have come to appreciate the shifting power dynamics of being on tour. In any audience, there is a very good chance that there is at least one person who has never seen a play before, but here in Northern Alberta, I am likely the first Asian man some people have ever seen on stage.

On Friday, February 9th, 2018, there was a severe looking red-haired woman sitting in the front. “Betty” had the distinctive laugh of a lifelong smoker, and the insouciance to let it ring out while others remained quiet. I imaginatively sketched in her biographical details. Perhaps she grew up on a farm or lived in a doublewide mobile home. She had the unmistakable hardened countenance of a survivor. Indeed, as I looked around, many of the white-haired patrons in the audience may have had tough rural

childhoods. Their bespectacled gaze was not judgmental but filled with wonder. I found such benign curiosity irresistibly disarming.

As an artist who self-identifies as a person of colour, I perceive myself as marginalized, but here in Canada's northernmost metropolis, watching the sun rise and set continuously over the glacier-fed North Saskatchewan River, I am inclined to take a longer view of things. I may not be white, but as a descendent of samurai, my parents became highly educated in the most prestigious universities in the world. This means I too am the beneficiary of countless generations privilege. I remain an educated, able-bodied, married, heterosexual, middle-class, English-speaking, cisgender male. Betty had likely experienced more oppression in her life than I can imagine.

These thoughts are not meant to accommodate white fragility, I merely mean to outline the path that led to me to realize how as a performer, making an aristocratic stage entrance in Edmonton wasn't going to work. I needed to do something different.

10.D.8 What I do differently now.

In the ensuing performances, I became more presentational in my performance. Using looks and gestures I would more explicitly acknowledge the presence of the audience, and their role in co-creating the performance.

Rather than let punchlines sneak up on people, I underlined them with looks and nods. More than using semaphores to show the audience *when* to laugh, I was telling them it was *okay* to laugh. Who knows? Perhaps they have never seen an Asian man laugh before. I also slowed down so I could listen to them more carefully. For example, I noticed in Edmonton, audiences would make a noise, after such seemingly innocuous lines.

“By the time he acquired these, he was pushing a mail cart though the hallways of CBC Montreal.”

or

“I thought to myself, January is a perfect time.”

I would be happy to provide you with more context but let me assure you there is nothing in the previous text that sets up these lines as anything remotely funny. Yet for reasons I have yet to fully comprehend, the audience wants to laugh out loud with these lines. Perhaps by this point in the show, there is a pent-up energy that needs to be released. Like renegade weeds, these responses were never part of the intended master plan of the show, but now that they have sprouted, I make room for them, forcing the runtimes to become longer.

10.D.9 Laughter is no Laughing Matter

“How do I know everyone else is not a figment of my imagination?” Although most of us leave such solipsistic musings behind in adolescence, it is hard to escape such doubts completely. When you tell a story, you can never be certain that your audience is with you. That look of interest may well be confusion. On a one-to-one basis, if you tell an acquaintance about your amusing misadventures, it is hard to distinguish between laughter that is volitional verses spontaneous.

This is why laughter is such a reliable barometer of engagement. It is one of the few ways you can be reasonably certain that your audience is with you. Celebrity comics lament the fact that their loyal fans are so primed to laugh, it is no longer a challenge to perform. Like a basketball hoop that keeps growing in diameter, it becomes harder for them to improve their skills.

As a touring theatre artist, I suffer no such problems. I am usually confronted by a group of complete strangers, many of whom do not want to be there: Grumpy husbands who have been dragged to the theatre by their wives. Often these groups are dissimilar in age, gender, and cultural background, but if I say something that causes all of them to burst out laughing simultaneously, this is about as close as one can get to stability of meaning. Lacan argued that “there is an incessant sliding of the signified beneath the signifier” (1977, p. 154)—stuck with only words to explain other words, the finality of meaning forever eludes us, yet moments of mirth form anchoring points (points de caption) in a discourse which make meanings possible. Laughter has such profound ontological and epistemological implications, it is a match struck in the darkness.

Paradoxically, I have found that an audience that laughs more during a performance is also more inclined to cry. Victor Borge's claim that “laughter is the shortest distance between two people” (Sharma, 2002, p. 7) rings true in my experience, as this involuntary response builds immediate emotional bonds and trust necessary to emotionally surrender.

10.E From the Road, St. John's

USHER: Welcome to the road. I hope you brought a parka.

In my tour to the Atlantic provinces, we sensed a hunger there for the show we were bringing. As my stage manager Susan Miyagashima noted as we walked back to our hotel one night after a show in St. John's Newfoundland, "These audiences have never seen a version of Asian like this before. They may have had interactions with seemingly quiet stereotypical Asians at a restaurant, but no one like you." She then made a gesture and sound effect simulating a head exploding.

I had a friend who tried being vegan for a while to appease her boyfriend. Not surprisingly, she wasn't very good at it. She simply cut out all meat and didn't increase her intake of plant-based protein. The resulting changes in her body chemistry were so gradual, she didn't really notice, until a friend insisted on frying up a bloody steak for her. From the first bite, every cell in her body applauded. She had become anemic but didn't know it.

In a similar manner, the audiences in the Atlantic provinces seemed to be in need for this type of theatre, without even knowing it. Performing at the legendary LSPU in uptown St. John's, the same theatre where the likes of CODCO, Mary Walsh, Rick Mercer, and Christine Taylor all performed, the audiences were tentative at the top of the show. Perhaps they were not quite sure what to make of this strange, mustachioed Japanese man.

Though not intended by conscious design, I now realize in retrospect that I do make an exotic entrance. After all, I step out onto the stage wearing *geta*, Japanese

wooden clogs. Then I immediately take them off, suggesting Eastern ceremony. I stand before the audience neutral as a Noh actor. When I bow to them, it is not a stage bow, but a traditional Japanese display of deep respect. The first two words out of my mouth, “In Japan...”

I begin at a maximal distance, any further and I would be unintelligible. I am other. But with every story, I move one step closer, until they are in my world, and I am inside their world, bumping into things, unlocking their memories. They are having their own lucid dreams, but it is my voice they are hearing. Conway (1998) suggests “the magical opportunity of entering another life is what really gets us thinking about or own” (p. 18). In Edmonton, an African-born Indian man shared with me, “I am listening to your story, but I’m thinking about mine.”

By the time the show concluded, there were standing ovations every night. It was not because my performances were so outstanding, but because *they* had journeyed that much farther. In Vancouver, Ottawa, Toronto or Montreal, it isn’t as big a deal to see an Asian man on stage, but the psychic distance they traversed in 75 minutes was much greater than that. Their journey was that much greater. To go from strange foreigner to trusted confidante, is more than a dramatic a step. It is a giant leap forward, and to take it is to be transformed.



Room 11: Talkback

USHER: It is not an usher's duty to setup the stage for talkbacks. This responsibility falls to the House Technician, who in turn delegates this task to their own minions. Chairs are arranged downstage stage, along with a wireless microphone.

11.A Hiroshima

11.A.1 Talk Back

Talkbacks are usually placid affairs, with audience members asking questions that have been asked many times before: "How does your family feel about the show?" or "Have your children seen it?" But occasionally they can be harrowing, and impact how I feel about the material, especially if I cannot easily dismiss the credibility of the person.

11.A.2 The Man from Hiroshima

During the 2016 remount of *Empire of the Son* in Vancouver, an Asian man sitting in the front row raised his hand during one of the post show talkbacks. He introduced himself by saying, "I am from Hiroshima." I took a deep breath, and thought to myself, "Okay, here it comes." This moment of hesitation, which lasted for only a moment, is one I would like to unpack.

Back in 2003, when I worked for CBC Radio One's *The Afternoon Show*, I wrote and voiced a radio piece to commemorate the anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima. This five and half minute piece of radio begins with me asking my father if today,

Figure 15. Talkback at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa, Canada.

August 6th had any significance for him. He replied in accented English.

AKIRA: Are you checking about my degree of Alzheimer's?

TETSURO: (to the audience) He doesn't really have Alzheimer's, just a dark sense of humour.

AKIRA: August the... Oh! August the sixth. That's a, that's a... Hiroshima was attacked. I was 12 years old. It was just like today's in terms of the brightness of sky. It was a very bright August day. Two weeks later, I was traveling with my family. Open cargo train. When the train passed Hiroshima, it was in the midst of night, so I couldn't see anything. The city was flattened, that's all, just darkness, and there was no electricity. And no sign of civilization. I had some physical ailment after the passing of Hiroshima station. I don't know whether it was the effect of atomic radiation or not, but probably not. Probably it was due to some food poisoning.

Twelve years and several careers later, I re-edited this piece of radio for inclusion into my theatre show, *Empire of the Son*. During the performance, the audience hears an audio recording of my father's voice as he recounts his own memories of visiting Hiroshima two weeks after the atomic bomb was dropped. For brevity, I deleted the crossed-out line.

AKIRA: August the... Oh! August the six. That's a, that's uh, Hiroshima was attacked. I was 12 years old. It was just like today's in terms of the brightness of

sky. It was a very bright August day. ~~Two weeks later, I was traveling with my family. Open cargo train.~~ When the train passed Hiroshima, it was in the midst of night, so I couldn't see anything. The city was flattened, that's all, just darkness, and there was no electricity. And no sign of civilization. I had some physical ailment after the passing of Hiroshima station. I don't know whether it was the effect of atomic radiation or not, but probably not. Probably it was due to some food poisoning.

At the time it seemed like an innocuous change, the mere excising of the line: “Two weeks later, I was traveling with my family. Open cargo train.” But this story, and that detail, has since proven to be a sticking point between me and my older sister Setsu, who is a professor within the Department of Media & Cultural Studies at the University of California, Riverside.

Together we taught a summer course in Japan called *Japanese Media, Film and Cultural Studies: Nationalism, War and the Politics of Representation*. It was a study abroad course where we take a group of UCR undergrads to Japan for a month. The highlight of the trip was visiting the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum.

My pilgrimages to Hiroshima were inflected by my contiguous roles as an artist and researcher. As a playwright researching *Empire of the Son*, I wanted to use this opportunity to retrace my father's journey as a 12-year-old boy whose boxcar stopped at Hiroshima station. I wanted to know how many paces he was from the ground zero to provide Vancouver audiences with a comparable sense of scale.

By my calculations, if Science World's geodesic dome at the end of False Creek was the blinding hypocenter, then my father's boxcar stopped on the pier at Granville

Island¹². As part of my research, I took many photos with my iPhone. By this point in our journey together, some of our students had noticed how my usual avuncular demeanour as friendly tour guide had been displaced by a grim focus. They were naturally curious about my ‘mission,’ and I was eager to share my investigations. As a writer, explaining to the uninitiated is always the first draft of a potential story.

“Ahem.”

A single censorious look from my elder sister/boss was enough for me to change the subject.

As mentioned before, the title of this course was: *Japanese Media, Film and Cultural Studies: Nationalism, War and The Politics of Representation*. Essentially, the students watched feature films, anime, and documentaries about Japan while traveling in Japan, providing them with a critical perspective on Japanese national values. What made this course unique was the fact that my sister and I lectured on the same material but from different perspectives: hers as an academic/historian versus mine as a theatre artist/filmmaker. Refracting a cinematic masterpiece such as Akira Kurosawa’s *Rashomon* through the lens of both Marxist feminist theory and film craft was illuminating for the students, as Japan continues to come to terms with the legacy of its imperial past. But when it came to more personal matters, our disparate perspectives could reach a flashpoint.

Specifically, my sister Setsu objected to me narratively positioning our father in such proximity to the bombing of Hiroshima. Perhaps she believed I did not fully appreciate the social implications of signifying him in such a manner.

¹² Approximately two kilometers.

When asked about *Empire of the Son* by reporters, I metonymically describe my father's journey to Canada as beginning in the "ashes of Hiroshima." My sister believes such a statement implies my father Akira Shigematsu is *hibakusha*, the Japanese word for the survivors of the 1945 atomic bombings.

The three kanji used to write *hibakusha*, 被爆者, can be read separately as *incur*, *bomb*, *someone*, or "explosion-affected people." My sister Setsu is fluent in Japanese and is respected as an expert on certain eras of Japanese history and therefore has a much keener appreciation for the pejorative power of the term. The American historian, Studs Terkel (1984) spoke with survivors of the atomic bombings and observed:

There is considerable discrimination in Japan against the *hibakusha*. It is frequently extended toward their children as well: socially as well as economically. "Not only *hibakusha*, but their children, are refused employment," says Mr. Kito. "There are many among them who do not want it known that they are *hibakusha*." (p. 542)

Even though the rate of birth defects of children conceived from survivors are no higher than the rest of the Japanese population, such discrimination persists due to the public's ignorant belief that radiation sickness is hereditary or somehow contagious. Twice victimized, first by the Americans, and then by fellow Japanese, one could say that the true fallout from the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was the discrimination they faced from their countrymen. For *hibakusha*, injustice has no half-life. To my knowledge, my father never experienced this kind of discrimination.

To be clear, when my sister admonished me not to frame events in such a way that would imply my father was *hibakusha*, the least of her concerns was the prospect of

besmirching our family's reputation, as most Japanese Canadians, let alone North Americans would not be familiar with the term. Rather, as an anti-oppression activist in solidarity with the oppressed and marginalized communities within Japan, she believes hibakusha are a kind of chosen people who have a special role to play. As survivors of the unthinkable, they alone can speak with unassailable credibility to the existential dangers we face in this nuclear age. Therefore, it would be inaccurate and ethically problematic for our family to stand in such a light.

So, is my father hibakusha? I invite you to decide. According to The Atomic Bomb Survivors Relief Law, to qualify as hibakusha, this are the criteria:

11.A.3 Criteria

“Those who entered the city within approximately 2 km of the hypocenter, within **two weeks** [emphasis mine] of the bombings” (Ogawa & Sasaki, 2011, p. 891).

11.A.4 Two Kilometers

After the bombings, my father's train stopped at Hiroshima station, which is precisely two kilometers from Genbaku Dōmu, (原爆ドーム) better known as the Hiroshima Peace Memorial, where the atomic bomb exploded directly overhead. Depending on whether his boxcar was near the front of the train, or the end would have put him either just within the two-kilometer radius, or just outside of it. It is a coin toss.

11.A.5 Two Weeks

As for the timing, according to our original interviews, my father recalls he passed through Hiroshima station two weeks after the bombings. But these were the childhood recollections of my father, who was 72-year-old at the time of the interview. My father's

memory was by all accounts uncannily accurate, but remembering an incident nearly 60 years later, it is plausible he could have been off by a day or two.

Which leaves the second criterion: “exposed to radiation from fallout.” My father is recorded as saying, “I had some physical ailment after the passing of Hiroshima station. I don’t know whether it was the effect of atomic radiation or not, but probably not. Probably it was due to some food poisoning” (Shigematsu, 2016, p. 27).

Again, The Atomic Bomb Survivors Relief Law defines hibakusha as individuals who meet the following criteria: within two kilometers of the hypocentres within two weeks of the bombings; exposed to radiation from fallout. Back in August of 2003 when I first heard my father attribute his sickness to food poisoning, I chalked it up to stoicism. But now I wonder how much the downplaying of his illness had to do with his unwillingness to hemorrhage social status. Being a descendant of samurai provided no armor from being shamed as a social pariah.

Was my father hibakusha or not? It is not my intention to engage in legalistic hair-splitting, rather I wish to illuminate how my father’s memory can be understood as a narrative inheritance (Goodall, 2005), and how my disagreement with my sister is a family dispute over that inheritance. When my father died in 2015, he left our family no money, no financial resources. His only heirlooms were the memories he shared with me in the form of interviews, the stories of a remarkable life. All lives are remarkable in their own way, but his was special only in the sense that circumstances conspired to provide him with someone who had the skills, the resources, the motive, and opportunity to interview him extensively. That person was me. As both researcher and messenger of

this data, I am mindful of the power I wield in curating how our father is known and remembered.

In her autobiographical documentary, *The Stories We Tell* (2012), Sarah Polley explores the question of her paternity. Her extended family cheerfully cooperates offering differing accounts of incidents, which is not only a reflection of their closeness, but what cannot be ignored is Polley's unusual status. From her starring role as a child on *Road to Avonlea*, to her Oscar nomination, the soft spoken Polley is a bona fide Canadian celebrity. Despite its apparently even-handed tone, as writer and director, this is her story to tell. It is revealing that the only person who pushes back against this power imbalance on camera is Harry Gulkin, himself an Oscar nominee. Perhaps it takes one to deal with one?

On a much smaller scale, there is a similar dynamic at work within my family. With my brother Ken being the senior pastor of one of the largest churches in Vancouver, we Shigematus have been long accustomed to having our lives repurposed for the edification of the congregation. But such anecdotes tend to be trifling, comic respites from the high fiber exegesis of Biblical passages. We don't mind. Sunday sermons are evanescent in nature. My brother's prodigious weekly output means that any embarrassing anecdote will be quickly buried beneath the growing mountain of subsequent sermons where we don't merit mention.

Empire of the Son is a different matter though. My version of our family has been seen by tens of thousands of people. When I'm interviewed as an artist on a national CBC radio program, you can add a couple of zeros to that number.

I am by far the poorest of my siblings, and while their fortunes impress me, I take solace in the fact that their capital is merely economic. I tell myself, all that money locked up in their savings, investments, and retirement funds are like molecules in the body. This form of energy neither be destroyed nor kept indefinitely. It is simply a matter of time before those glittering nickels and dimes rejoin the rest of the system like the carbon and hydrogen from my father's body.

Empire of the Son on the other hand might linger. The published form of the play continues to sell well and is now in its second run. It may well end up on the bookshelf of a descendant not yet born. While all our names will soon be forgotten, my version of events will hold sway.

The economic differences between my siblings and I are never more apparent than when we visit. My siblings all own beautiful homes. I do not. To their credit, they do not lord it over me, but perhaps some indignities are unavoidable.

11.A.6 My Marxist Nephew

A story I enjoy sharing publicly is about my nephew Taer. It begins with him sharing with me offhand, "Mom says, you are the smartest and the most talented sibling in the whole family."

Trying not to sound too surprised, I said, "Really?"

Taer went on, "Mom said you're proof that talent or brains are not enough, but you also have to work hard, be disciplined, be polite, not be a jerk, not be rude to people, otherwise you'll end up just like your uncle Tetsuro."

"Okay." I nodded conclusively at my nephew to indicate I had heard enough, but he continued.

Doing his best impression of my older sister Setsu, he asked, “Did you know Uncle Tetsuro is in his 40s and he *still* takes the bus? He might tell you it’s because he wants to reduce his carbon footprint but that’s not true. We all own homes and we all pay mortgages responsibly, but your uncle will be throwing away rent money for the rest of his life and -”

He was about to say more but I cut him off.

“Taer, did you know that some scholars have theorized that the reason why homeownership has been propagated as being synonymous with the American Dream is because it is within the interest of capitalists to have workers buy into this idea? Let’s say you belong to a union, the pay is bad, conditions are dangerous, so there’s a vote to go on strike. Among your co-worker buddies, who do you think will be the first to punk out? The one paying a mortgage. ‘Dude, I know this job might kill me, but I can’t lose my house!’ The greater the percentage of homeowners there are in a workforce, the less likely they are to cause trouble for their capitalist overlords. Just look at Europe! Renting is much more common and guess what else is... socialism.”

I nodded at my nephew knowingly before continuing.

“So, I like to think that renting is my small way of showing solidarity with the workers of the world.”

“Yeah,” my nephew drawled unimpressed. “Mom said you’d find a way to make it sound cool, like it was a lifestyle choice, but she says poor is still poor no matter how you slice it.”

When I share this story, people find it amusing. But what I personally find most entertaining about this tale is the fact that it never happened. When I explain to my sister

Setsu that this conversation with her son Taer never occurred, I just made it up, she remains unconvinced.

“Really?” She said with a mixture of annoyance and incredulity. “Because that sounds like something I would say.”

My twin sister Hana remains convinced it was she who said, “It looks like you have two question marks on your face.” She did not. That bon mot was crafted by yours truly.

And herein lies the secret to changing your family history. Make up stories. Make them entertaining but keep them plausible. And most important of all, give your siblings the best lines. Then sit back and watch as your short story gets told and retold until it becomes inextricably woven into the family myth. South Asian novelist Salman Rushdie (1991, December 12) wrote, “Those who do not have power over the story that dominates their lives, power to retell it, to rethink it, deconstruct it, joke about it, and change it as times change, truly are powerless” (p. A8). But this “power over story” Rushdie refers to, does it not follow that power corrupts?

When it came to my father, I wielded multiple forms of power. During the end of his life, I served as my father’s medical advocate. As I spoke with doctors and specialists to plan his palliative care, his life was in my hands, but now that he has died, I continue to serve as his emissary, his avatar, signifier to his signified.

“Dad wasn’t hibakusha.” “Yes, he was.” “No, he wasn’t.” “Yes, he was.” In my imagination, I feel the spirit of my dead father siding with my sister. So why will I not back down from this? Why am I so recalcitrant in this matter? Why do I persist in claiming “my father stood in the ashes of Hiroshima?” Perhaps the reason I will not

back down from such a claim is because epistemologically I understand Hiroshima to be the pivotal moment of the 20th century.

Without my personal connection to this ontological ground zero, which began the countdown towards the end of humankind, August 6th 1945 would remain as abstract and opaque as any other historical date. Its incandescent meaning would leave me cold. Knowing my father was in a boxcar at Hiroshima station, the same age as my daughter Mika was when I wrote *Empire of the Son*, enables me to imagine the unimaginable: My child at the beginning of her life glimpsing the end of the world.

Sometimes at family reunions my sisters will chide me for staring at the window when there are chores to be done.

“But I *am* working,” I want to say as I get up.

I might have been thinking about the future. I might have been thinking about the past. I might have been thinking about that time my eldest Rié took me to see a small Shakespearean play in London when I was a teenager, when lovely Rosalind consoled poor Jacques, “Then to have seen much and to have nothing is to have rich eyes and poor hands.” Out of the entire play that evening, that was the only line I can still quote after all these years. Maybe it was because I recognized within the symmetry of that verse my life sentence.

* * *

11.A.7 The Devout Atheist

The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows offers the following neologism:

Onism – n. the frustration of being stuck in just one body, that inhabits only one place at a time, which is like standing in front of the departures screen at an airport, flickering over with strange place names like other people’s passwords, each representing one more thing you’ll never get to see before you die—and all because, as the arrow on the map helpfully points out, you are here. (Koenig, 2018, para. 1)

But there are ways to transcend the limits of “onism.” For me, the most obvious ways are by reading, and through acting, which for me hold much in common. Imaginatively inhabiting the role of another person is an effective means to multiply one’s own experience, and thus enlarging one’s capacity for empathy.

When I am on tour with *Empire of the Son*, as I stand on the threshold listening to the Front-of-House speech, I feel a quality of anticipation unlike anything I have ever known. Within an ensemble play, there is a sense of camaraderie as a company of actors readies themselves and each other to do battle, eager to slay the audience. A fearful endeavour, but each takes solace in the knowledge that come what may, your fellow performers have your back. Pity the solo performer who has no such assurances. Should you “corpse”—every actor’s worst nightmare—you die, and you die alone.

And yet, every night when I wait in the wings to do another performance of *Empire of the Son*, it is not the prospect of solitude that gives me pause. As a former broadcaster, I have come to understand the audience as my scene partner. I was eager to get out there and connect. What gave me pause was the prospect of looking at the audience before me, but feeling the presence of another onstage behind me, the ghost of my father.

To be clear, I am not religious. Now that my father has died, I do not believe I will see him again. Nor do I consider myself an atheist. Rather, in my life as an artist and researcher I practice a kind of secularism, observing a separation between church and state, matters of the spirit and critical theory. As a scholar, I doubt the existence of God, but as an artist, all I know is that I do not know. Therefore, anything is possible. As Hamlet reminded Horatio, “There are more things in heaven and earth... Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

In the documentary *20,000 Days on Earth*, the songwriter Nick Cave explained his creative process, specifically the necessity of compartmentalizing to enable different parts of himself to maintain contradictory beliefs. “It’s a world I’m creating... [where] God actually exists.” While he isn’t religious in his “real life,” it would be an oversimplification of his art practice to say that he uses religion as an allegory. When asked if he truly believes in God, he replied:

the idea of there being a divine being is really helpful with songwriting, and with adding a kind of absurdity and strange depth to everything... sometimes the desire for an afterlife, or sometimes a desire that life perpetuates in some way beyond the grave is, absurd as it may be, something we need to believe in. And that need, I think, is a very powerful thing. (Williams, 2017, May 25, para. 40)

As a fan of Cave’s artistry, I am inclined to adopt such a multitudinous and numinous cosmology. But as an artist, I would not go so far as to make the grandiose claim that the theatre is my church, the stage my altar. As someone still recovering from the trauma of

attending a draconian religious private school that literally burned books, such a reverential conception doesn't sit well with me.

Rather, for *Empire of the Son*, I think of the audience as my co-conspirators, the stage our Ouija board, and each performance as a séance. And to genuinely participate in such a ritual demands faith in an ultimate reality that transcends the outward appearances of this material world. And so, *Empire of the Son* has functioned as a catalyst, forcing me to confront the borderlands of my belief. As someone who isn't formally trained as an actor, when I play my father, and my grandfather in the story called *The Train Station*, I cannot "get there" by the usual means, and so I am left to prayerfully call into the past and draw their souls back into me.

A part of me must believe that the spirit can endure beyond death, but to say the soul exists *eternally*—which is to say that it will always be, and always was—is where I stop short. When I look within, do I believe my existence predates the Big Bang? No, I do not. Not even the mystic within me can believe that. But to even ask such a question demonstrates the value of art and theater.

By inhabiting different characters, by making room for contradiction, by being large enough to 'contain multitudes,' allows for multiple ways of knowing, not possible in the harsh light of atheism where there is no God, no soul, no afterlife, no communion, and no séances.

On stage, I become the person who believes in the existence of the soul. This is the only way I can imaginatively connect to my father across the void that separates the living from the dead. By making such a leap, others can make their own connections through me, to my father, and find themselves in Hiroshima, or the charred landscape of

their own wartime memories. Through the mechanism of theatre, the pivoting of my epistemological beliefs enables me to serve as a connecting flight between destinations and dimensions. *Empire of the Son* is a spiritual infrastructure, a portal that shimmers into being and then disappears. Thus far, tens of thousands of passengers have taken this flight as well.

Such imaginative acts have the effect of inspiring me to reexamine my own life as an imaginative act. Performing *Empire of the Son* continues to change me, but it would be overdramatic to claim that the shadow of my father's experience just two kilometers from the hypocenter has been scorched into me like the textile pattern of a family kimono.

Rather, I have discovered that the cycle of performance creates a seasonal tan line that appears and fades. In the cycle of theatrical creation, if being on tour is the high summer solstice, then the months in between are akin to vernal and autumnal equinoxes. I become pale, and I would appear wan and anemic if suddenly thrust onto the stage without weeks of gradual induction. The alchemy of text and imagination forges new insights during the molten moments of performance, but such epiphanies are only fully comprehended during the contemplation afforded by more temperate seasons.

If I were Jewish and my mother had been in a concentration camp, as a storyteller I would surely stand at those gates. Not to editorialize, preach, or pontificate, but merely to recite her words, with every syllable serving as a cobblestone on a path towards meaning. As a researcher, I acknowledge that such historic epicentres have no intrinsic meaning beyond that which we socially construct, but as a storyteller, I am sensitive to their inchoate power, neutral as electricity, agnostic as the sound of power

lines humming in the rain. Like Irwin and Springgay (2008) who write, “meaning is constituted between beings” (p. xxi), I believe meaning is generated from our relationships with other people, and no one exists in a vacuum.

We are shaped by the specificities of time and place. Therefore, it is the world’s outer landscapes and cityscapes that shape the contours of our interior life. Hiroshima is a city out there, but it is now also a place inside of me.

If a reporter asks me if my father was in Hiroshima, I will say yes, but if a grad student asks me at a conference, “Was your father hibakusha?” I don’t know what I will say. The truth is never simple. These were some of the thoughts that flashed through my mind, albeit in a more compressed, less coherent manner when that man in the audience introduced himself during the talkback. This is why I held my breath. Thus far, I had resisted my elder sister’s censorious rebuke about Hiroshima. As determined as I was to hold my ground, I was in fact ready to accept the judgment of a resident. If he objected, I would consider excising it from the show.

What he said was unexpected. He pointed out that stories of Hiroshima tend to follow a particular narrative grammar: what they were doing on that fateful morning, the inexplicable flash, followed by pandemonium and indescribable horror. He observed that my father’s account broke with this convention by addressing none of those things, as if he were attempting to conceal the enormity of it all beneath a cloak of silence. As a citizen of Hiroshima, he found this account much more moving. Of course, I can take little credit for my father’s story, other than having the nerve to ask, the audacity to include it, and the obstinacy to keep it.



Room 12: The Dressing Room

USHER: We ushers are not permitted in the dressing rooms. As an usher, I was never told, “You are forbidden from going in there,” but because there was no reason for us to enter, we refrained.

The dressing room is the actor’s personal space, their home away from home (the hotel), away from home (their real home). If too many people had access to this sanctum sanctorum, then perhaps the actor might become distracted onstage wondering, “Will someone steal my iPhone?” And so, the dressing room either remains locked, or there are drawers or lockers that accept personal padlocks.

“Knock, knock.” No one seems to be using the dressing room, so let’s take a quick peek, shall we?

As an actor, when I invite someone to see my personal dressing room, I have yet to have such an offer declined. Who can resist the invitation to access such a storied space? Like the Eiffel Tower, or a deserted island, the dressing room isn’t so much a place as it is a narrative trope, a *de rigueur* scene in countless tales that attempt to depict the behind-the-scenes glamor of show biz.

Figure 16. Top: St. John. Middle: St. John’s. Bottom: Vancouver.

Minus the feather boas, the gratuitous nudity of showgirls, pancake makeup and sequins, as an actor I can attest that the dressing room is the one place where the fictional version of theatre corresponds rather closely with my reality. Conway (1998) writes, “few of us give close attention to the forms and tropes of the culture through which we report ourselves to ourselves” (p. 178). Indeed, the dressing room is such a semiotically laden space, “we should be wary of the psychological traps inherent in inherited modes of expression” (p. 178). When a visitor stops by to say hello, I see the bouquets of flowers, the bottles of wine, the handwritten cards through their eyes, and think, “Tetsuro may have some fans, but clearly he’s no star.” Still, I do like being seen against the backdrop of a dressing room. Part of me hopes that the radiance of this space might somehow bathe the rest of my dim existence in a soft glow. But what kind of host am I? To give you the full tour, let us step outside and retrace my steps.

12.A Transformation

When I enter the theatre through the industrial backstage entrance, sometimes the security guard will hesitate before buzzing me through because I look like a panhandler. My long hair hangs down beneath my toque. Unwaxed, my mustache resembles a sodden push broom, and my glasses are foggy from the sudden change in temperature. Once in my dressing room, I take a hard, judgmental look at the hobo in the mirror, but my revulsion is mingled with masochism. The more abject I appear when I arrive, the more magical is the effect of transforming myself from “less than” to “greater than.”

The directions are as follows:

PRE-SHOW ROUTINE
call time 90 minutes before show (from door to pretty = 25 minutes) 2 hours allow plenty time for a shave

medicated eye drops
protein powder
NAP - TURN ON GLAM LIGHTS & HUMIDIFIERS
get keys/soundpack batteries/water
brush teeth
remove shirt
pee (bring fine comb?)
wash face
contact lenses
hair
strike toiletries
tape neck
comb ponytail
lip balm
7:10 (45 minutes before show)
mic check/preset geta/buy white shirt
close door & set alarm
lie down w. earplugs/Gymboss

7:30 vocal warm up
while striking for postshow

"15 minutes to places" 7:15
lose watch
don shirt
hanky in unbuttoned pocket
load 3 ties
glasses

chest pump
double check for:
hanky
fly
belt
cuffs
collar
tuck in jacket pocket flaps
button vest/tighten vest straps
Remove tape from face
Visine
juice
lock locker
grab water
switch to geta

POST SHOW
iPhone
gum
pen
leave room unlocked for SM

FINAL SHOW
pack Hussar w. suit
books
hammock in road cases
PACK HANDWRAP SOAP!

Handwritten notes:
Shave
Phl - Re-te Failer
to cry on apus
night -
Nurse
presses
+ comes on
+ do not want
GLASSES!!
MUTE PHONE

Figure 17. This is the checklist you will find in my dressing room when I am on tour. According to my stage manager Susan Miyagshima, my pre-show routine is unusual in its specificity and the sheer amount of time required.

The physical transformation prescribed in the instructions above mirrors an internal transformation. Just as Superman cannot do battle with Lex Luthor while wearing his Clark Kent glasses, I cannot get on stage looking the way I normally do at home. My DuBoisian double-consciousness would judge me too harshly. I would imagine a chorus of whispers coming from the balcony. “What is *he* doing on stage? He doesn’t deserve to be there. Look at him! What’s going on?! We should demand a refund.”

It takes me four hours to fully quell these internal voices prior to a performance, and 75 minutes of that time are spent in my dressing room. I spend 25 of those minutes on my vocal warm up alone.

Thanks to the labours of the backstage dresser, my suit and shirts have already been neatly pressed by the time I arrive. Even though you don’t get to choose your costume, it is important for an actor to like it. This set of clothing functions as your psychological armor. It will serve to either increase your confidence or undermine it. As in life, so in theatre: the semiotics of dress (Rubinstein, 2009) are never neutral. The impact of outward appearance triggers inner feelings, which in turn enable role performance. I may lose track of the dates, cities may blur, the dressing rooms are never the same, but as I look in the mirror, my black three piece suit paired with a lavender dress shirt is always reassuringly the same, the unmoving axis within the whirl of touring.

Like a magician I preset three ties, and a pair of glasses in the various pockets of my suit jacket. Hidden beneath the waist of my pants, is a custom-made mic belt, which holds a wireless transmitter against the base of my spine. It

is attached to my Countryman ear-set via flesh coloured wire and held in place with invisible medical grade tape. With the aid of hairstyling product, combs, contact lenses, and professional grade audio gear, I transform myself into the dictionary definition of a cyborg: One whose physical abilities are extended beyond normal human limitations by mechanical elements built into the body.

By the time I am finished grooming, fully suited, vocally warmed up, and wired for sound, I no longer see a bedraggled hobo in the mirror, but a lifelike android who wouldn't look out of place in the pleasure districts of the future. By the time I execute my opening bow, in my mind, I am gleaming like a jewel-encrusted katana. From what I gather, the effect of such internal visualizations is limited to my perceptions alone. Robert Chafe, the artistic director of St. John's Artistic Fraud shared with me that he found it very assuring the first time I took a sip of water on their stage. He thought to himself, "Oh, he really is human after all." The actor needs a dressing room the way a caterpillar needs a chrysalis.

Contributions to Research-Based Theatre

Part of what makes *Empire of the Son* unique is its methodological integrity. Few works of research-based theatre have had so many performances, over so long a period of time. The clear majority of play-based dissertations feature scripts that never get the opportunity to evolve beyond a first or second draft. Even for mature scholars, the pressure to publish prolifically results in plays that tend to be short lived, with limited performances. However, if arts-based research is to truly honour the artistic spirit, then ideally every work deserves to be invested with the ambition of becoming a magnum opus—an artist's greatest achievement. Such an

outlook suggests a path that is narrow and deep, and a commitment to practice one's craft on fewer works over longer periods of time.

Through abundant good fortune and a team of talented collaborators, *Empire of the Son* continues to reach a wide audience. Not only have I been able to pen the script, perform the script, revise the script, but I have been able to tour extensively. My written reflections on how to engage with audiences according to their regional differences is indicative of how I have been able to re-enter this work with a scholar's intention. As cities blow past me like autumn leaves, I realize there are certain insights only repetition and the fullness of time can permit. In effect, *Empire of the Son* constitutes a longitudinal form of qualitative arts-based research.

How it's already been peer reviewed

In a sense, this work has been peer-reviewed not by just my supervisory committee, but by my sisters, my children and my spouse, the members of my theatre company, the local theatre community, Asian Canadians, theatre critics, the national theatre community, international theatregoers, and now dear reader, you are also part of this expanding circle. Collectively your feedback, though not always direct, indeed sometimes by its very absence, continues to spiral and move this work in new directions.

Looking Ahead

The original intention for this research was to meet the requirements of a PhD, and to be read by only a handful of people, but like the play itself, my intentions

have grown. I would like to see this work go beyond an academic readership because I think it has the potential to serve a larger community.

Film

Currently, I am in talks with Canadian film producer, Helen Slinger, about creating a feature-length documentary that will expand on the Hiroshima chapter of my father's story, and the unexpected ways that event continues to resonate in my daughter Mika's life.

Book

For the past six months, I have been in conversation with Scott Sellers, a Vice President at Penguin Random House, and Martha Kanya Forstner, one of Canada's top literary editors. In January of 2018, Scott happened to see me perform *Empire of the Son* at the High Performance Rodeo in Calgary, Alberta, and Martha has read the published version of the play. Scott and Martha are aware of this research, and the plan is to use the dissertation and the play as a basis for a memoir centred on my relationship with my father. This yet untitled book is intended for the general public.

International Touring

At the time of this writing, our tickets have been booked to travel to Edinburgh, Scotland at the end of summer. The Canadian High Commission has invited us to pitch *Empire of the Son* to international presenters and promoters at CanadaHub, an industry event held in conjunction with the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. We have also been booked to perform in Singapore this fall.

National Touring

Upon our return, we will be embarking on our third national tour. By its conclusion, I'll have performed *Empire of the Son* more than 150 times. Thus far, 16,380 people have seen this show, and we conservatively expect at least another 5,000.

By increasing the number of entry points to this research, I am hoping someone, someday might circle back to the musty pages of this dissertation, and experience the small pleasures that Hollywood prequels grant, the first inklings of what may one day be a book, a documentary, a movie, or maybe even an opera. And perhaps in the future, such iterations may seem obvious or inevitable in retrospect, but from my vantage point they do not. The future is as impenetrable to me here in the past, as the future is to you. For now, if nothing else comes of this research, and that is certainly very possible, the present moment suffices because the audience for *Empire of the Son* is already larger than I could have ever imagined.

An Educational Moment

When I think back to the very beginning of this journey, I recall having a peculiar experience I can only now fully appreciate given all that I have learned. Back in 2011, I had just finished my MFA in creative writing at the University of British Columbia, and I was looking for a way to continue my studies. As I wandered across campus from department to department, every gatekeeper I met was polite and open-minded about the prospect of having someone like myself—my creative

medium was YouTube at the time—joining their intellectual community. As an interdisciplinary artist/scholar I felt like a stateless person.

It was only within UBC's Faculty of Education where I felt that the door was yanked open before I even had the chance to finish knocking. I had the distinct impression that I was being told, "Ah, there you are! Do come in. Your room is already prepared. We've been expecting you." The person who welcomed me was Carl Leggo. For a long time, I was puzzled by how one man's shining countenance could represent a thousand hands extended to me in solidarity. Eight years later it is no longer a mystery.

If western academic research can be seen as a tree with the quantitative and qualitative paradigms as its two main boughs, springing from the latter is a branch known as arts-based research, "an unfolding and expanding orientation to qualitative social science that draws inspiration, concepts, processes, and representation from the arts, broadly defined," (Knowles & Cole, 2008, p. xi). It is here, on the twig of research-based theatre that I have found my place in the world.

Eight years ago, little did I know that not only had I found my people—arts-based researchers—but that I would be under the guidance of my field's leading exponents and practitioners. Because of their writings, many artists all over the world arrive on the doorstep of education. As they peer in, they wonder the same thing I did: is it possible to undertake the work of scholarship, and continue to be an artist? One of the aims for this research is to demonstrate that not only is it possible, but one can use the constraints and affordances of theory to

master one's art form. I also hope that the practice-based nature of my research might provide an example for academics who are attempting to operate in both realms.

Metamorphosis

Like life itself, this nonlinear journey continues. One of the many gifts this research has bestowed upon me is the reminder of how very privileged I am. Not every scholar/artist gets to tour, and not every touring artist has the opportunity to reflect upon their travels. As I pack for my next leg of the tour, I carry with me the words of Michael Finneran:

As with the explorers of old, who were obliged by their patrons to produce great cartographical volumes, neither should our voyages be done unknowingly. Our research discourse has an obligation to produce a range of maps, travel books, special pull-out supplements and chronologies of exploration that inform and excite those amongst us who might next undertake a similar journey. (2014, p. 1)

It is my hope that there might be one person who encounters this work and feels similarly stirred to contemplate undertaking a voyage of their own. As for me, the experience of performing this research will continue to transform me. Whatever possibilities I've experienced thus far from province to province, will certainly be magnified across different continents, as I find new ways to fail, and discover new questions to ask.

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Appendix A: Press Clippings

BEST OF 2015 | THEATRE

Son shone brightest in great 2015

Shigematsu's performance leads list of most memorable experiences of the year

ERIKA THORKELSON
SPECIAL TO THE SUN

When it comes to theatre, 2015 was a year of searing autobiography and frothy musicals, a year of ambition, success and a little bit of failure. Here are my 10 most memorable theatrical experiences of the year.

TOP PICK

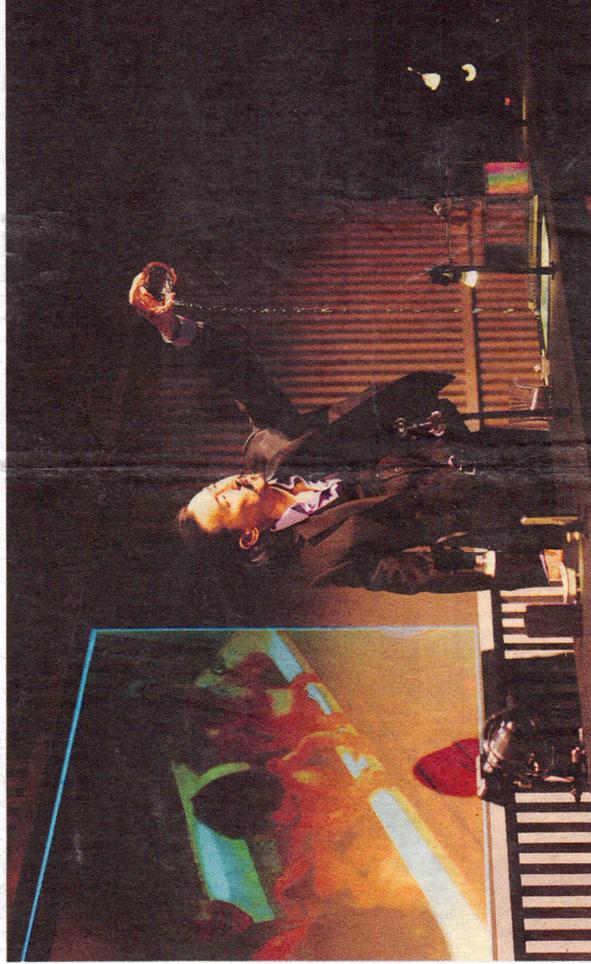
Empire of the Son

October | *Vancouver Culture Lab*

Those who were able to get tickets for this show's sold-out run will not soon forget how Tetsuro Shigematsu raised the bar to the stratosphere in his autobiographical one-man show about his relationship with his father, a former broadcaster for the CBC who was a child in Japan during the Second World War. Performing only weeks after his father's death from a lengthy, painful illness, Shigematsu lay himself utterly bare, leaving not a dry eye in the house.

The Duchess a.k.a. Wallis Simpson

April | *The Historic Theatre at The Clutch*



Tetsuro Shigematsu offered a brave and emotional performance in *Empire of the Son*, a tribute to his father.

Richard Russ. It picked up a Jessie for outstanding original script.

book and lyrics for this musical about making due through hard times was well supported by performances (including Quintana herself).

Hairspray
July/August | *Malikin Bowl*

The uncontested hit of the summer was Theatre Under the Stars production of *Hairspray*. The story of dancing misfits, based on John Waters' 1988 cult classic, featured killer breakout

Blasted

April | *Performance Works*

This may not have been the easiest play to take, but the Pi

God and the Indian

May | *Firehall Arts Centre*

out-loud funny and emotionally engaging.

Nirbhaya

November | *York Theatre*

Director and playwright Yael Farber's moving theatrical documentary began with the true story of a young woman named Jyoti Singh Pandey who was attacked and gang raped on a bus in India. Told by real life survivors, the show put human faces on the suffering and strength of those women who continue to fight against sexual violence.

Hansel and Gretel: An East Van Panto

December/January | *York Theatre*

Undoubtedly, the East Van Panto has become this city's best holiday tradition. It's unabashedly local, community-minded, clever fun for the whole family. Sharp writing by Charles Demers and music by local treasure Veda Hille guide the riotous cast through a madcap adventure in the woods of Stanley Park. It's probably the most fun you'll have in the theatre all year.

HONOURABLE MENTION

Peter and the Starcatcher

FEATURED PHOTOS
PORT MOODY FIRE
DISPLACES
DOZENS...



THE VANCOUVER SUN



FEATURED PHOTOS
PHOTOS:
FRIGHT NIGHTS
AT PLAYLAND...

NEWS OPINION BUSINESS SPORTS ENTERTAINMENT LIFE HEALTH TECHNOLOGY TRAVEL CAREERS DRIVING HOMES CLASSIFIEDS

Theatre review: Grief stripped raw in all its beauty One-man show is a powerful display of emotion

BY ERIKA THORKELSON, SPECIAL TO THE SUN OCTOBER 8, 2015



Tetsuro Shigematsu offers a brave and emotional theatrical performance in *Empire of the Son*.

Photograph by: Raymond Shum

Empire of the Son
Until Oct. 24 | Vancity Culture Lab
Tickets and info: thecultch.com

There was a time when grief was as much a performance as an emotion, but somewhere along the way we lost our respect for public mourning. Instead, we've tucked it into private rooms, plastered on brave faces and soldiered on in fear of offending those around us.

In his one-man show that opened at the Cultch this week, actor, writer and former radio personality Tetsuro Shigematsu has bravely pulled his grief out into the open, creating a riveting, emotional theatrical experience.

The show centres around Shigematsu's fraught relationship with his father, who was separated from him not just by a generation, but also by language, culture and history.

Having emigrated to the west from Japan as a young man, the elder Shigematsu was a public broadcaster for the BBC and later the CBC. He was a man whose voice echoed around the world via short wave radio, but who couldn't express his most basic emotions even to his son. Balancing the pathos with humour, Shigematsu crafts a love letter to his father, a man who quietly walked through history like Forrest Gump.

He draws the audience from his own birth in London, England, through his teenage years in suburban Montreal and finally to the two years he spent caring for his father as he became increasingly frail before his death last month, on Sept. 18. And then he goes further, into his father's childhood in Japan during the Second World War, seeking to understand the man and, by extension, himself. It's hard not to wonder how different the play would have been if, as they had initially planned, the elder Shigematsu himself would have been able to be a part of the proceedings.

In this iteration, the death — and Shigematsu's ability to mourn — becomes the fulcrum of the show. Whether he will be able to cry at his father's funeral, breaking a long cycle of emotional disconnection, becomes the central question. The sense of responsibility Shigematsu feels for this not only as a son, but as a father himself is beyond poignant.

Every part of Shigematsu's life is brought out in the open. From his childhood disobedience to his children's bathroom habits, everything is scrutinized and offered a greater meaning.

The set design by Pam Johnson and lighting design by Gerald King are surprisingly complex for a one-man show. The stage is set with a long table with a camera mounted on a long line, which allows Shigematsu to set up miniature displays that are projected onto a screen behind him.

Some of these effects are more impactful than others, and future productions might benefit from simplifying this aspect to offer more weight to the ones that do work well.



Tetsuro Shigematsu offers a brave and emotional theatrical performance in *Empire of the Son*.
Photograph by: Raymond Shum

Indeed, for all the bells and whistles, the show really is at its most powerful when Shigematsu is at his rawest and most personal, when he comes close to not performing at all. There were moments during the opening evening where Shigematsu was overcome by real emotion, sweeping the audience along with him. Sniffles echoed around the room.

It's a brave and generous performance, one that will speak to anyone who has a complicated relationship with their parents (which includes pretty much everybody, ever). And it's also a performance that reminds us that we learn how to grieve from each other, and that in learning how to grieve, we learn how to live.

THEATRE REVIEWS »

Tetsuro Shigematsu's *Empire of the Son* is exquisite

by [Colin Thomas](#) on October 9th, 2015 at 12:50 PM



By Tetsuro Shigematsu. Directed by Richard Wolfe. A Vancouver Asian Canadian Theatre production, presented by the Cultch. At the Cultch's Vancity Culture Lab on Thursday, October 8. Continues until October 24



I'm telling all of the people I love most to see this show.

Tetsuro Shigematsu's *Empire of the Son* is exquisite. It's also painstakingly honest. In his script, which Shigematsu performs solo, he explores his relationship with his father, Akira. In a talkback after the performance I attended, Shigematsu summoned the idea that artists are caught in the tension between wanting to hide and wanting to communicate. That may be the same tension that makes so many stories about fathers and sons so moving.



The Japanese-Canadian household of the writer's youth magnified the emotional restraint that many cultures put on males. Akira never stated his love for Tetsuro, but in unfolding the story of his father's childhood and its wartime traumas, Shigematsu discovers the transformative power of compassion. And in the process of exploring his dad's career humiliation—he went from being a broadcaster at the BBC and CBC to delivering mail in the CBC corridors—he redefines male success.

Shigematsu's script includes a central conceit: he has never cried as an adult, but his dad died on September 18, and he wants to weep without self-consciousness at the funeral—so these performances are an opportunity to rehearse. Within that container, the storytelling is poetic, associative—and often funny. One charming anecdote involves the author's young son, who is decidedly less self-conscious than his forebears: "Daddy, will you wipe my buttinsky?" When Shigematsu obliges, he observes his child: "For him, it's like a day at the spa." The associations can

also be searing. Akira witnessed the bombing of Hiroshima; his granddaughter writes a story for elementary school in which she skates with her family on Grouse Mountain for one last time before the Earth is destroyed by a solar flare.

Physically, the show, which was directed by Richard Wolfe and produced by Donna Yamamoto, is stellar. Shigematsu often uses a camera turned on toys and other miniatures to tell his story. Those mini movies are projected live onto a screen behind him. In the Grouse Mountain sequence, his two fingers skate in the open space between mini snowdrifts.

With its vertical narrow strips of wood, Pam Johnson's set conjures Japanese elegance, then explodes into a freeform arrangement of straight lines at the top. And Gerald King's lighting is downright musical in its multiplicity of textures and its combination of subtlety and drama.

I can't say enough good things about *Empire of the Son*. It's bound to be one of the best shows of the year. You should see it.

Follow Colin Thomas on Twitter at [@ColinThomasSays](https://twitter.com/ColinThomasSays). Find him on the web at www.colinthomas.ca.

Theatre Review: Empire of the Son is understated perfection

BY CECILIA LU

9:32 AM PDT, FRI OCTOBER 09, 2015

ARTS

THEATRE

Comments

7 SHARES

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Tetsuro Shigematsu is a terrible actor. He states as much in the one-man show *Empire of the Son*, which is currently enjoying a sold-out world premiere and hold over at The Cultch. Shigematsu's work is poised to be one of the most important of the season, both for execution and what the play symbolizes about our Canadian identity.

Written by and starring Tetsuro Shigematsu (former host of CBC's "The Roundup"), *Empire of the Son* is the story of his personal relationship with his father who is now dying. Separated by a generation but connected by blood, Tetsuro and his father speak different languages and possess different values, but what has kept them apart is their similarities.

With all the recent talk about diversity in theatre here in Vancouver and internationally, few productions are actually hitting the mark when it comes to both cast and creative. To bill *Empire* as 'ethnic' redress, however, would be missing the mark entirely. *Empire* is about two people who couldn't understand each other in life, struggling to find meaning during the experience of dying. Through his intimately drawn family memoirs, Shigematsu gently reminds us how relatable we are, despite differences in background and race.



Image: Raymond Shum

Empire is also about the classic divide between first-generation immigrants and their Westernized children; about the expectations, both imposed and self-inflicted, which become a part of everyday life. The unchronological story peels back Shigematsu's relationships layer by layer, dwelling on moments of humour where one would expect grief.

The ways of animating conversations with minimal props and fingers are beautiful in their simplicity, and the use of a camera and projector does not distract from the storytelling. Everything about this production is understated, purposefully, giving the audience space to consider their own interpretations.

Shigematsu's depiction of his father doesn't go for the easy sympathy of a dying family member, but instead dwells on his mysteries and imperfections. In refusing to relegate his father to sainthood, Shigematsu's dad becomes a living, breathing part of the production, a spectacular homage to a modest man living in remarkable times.



We find instances of resistance and spirit, veiled in a passivity that the son still can't understand. The other family members are just as affectionally portrayed, but it's evident what drove Shigematsu to create and share *Empire*, and what drives him to a raw, unaffected performance every night.

Unlike many shows on the topic, *Empire's* pacing is about the give and take. The emotion doesn't build to hit you like a brick wall, and intentional pauses give audiences time to stop and consider their own feelings. Shigematsu's 'modern' man strives for truthfulness over sympathy, a matter-of-fact storytelling that is all the more impactful in its understatement.

Empire of the Son plays at The Cultch until October 24. Limited tickets available [here](#).

review
Vancouver

"Brilliantly written and acted by Shigematsu, *Empire of the Son* is a poignant and universal story about parents and children."

Sharon Cairney, Review Vancouver

THE GEORGIA
straight

"Tetsuro Shigematsu's *Empire of the Son* is exquisite...I'm telling all of the people I love most to see this show."

Colin Thomas, The Georgia Straight

THE VANCOUVER SUN

"One-man show is a powerful display of emotion... a riveting, emotional theatrical experience."

Erika Thorkelson, The Vancouver Sun

Jo Ledingham
On The Scene

"Empire of the Son is jewel-like in its sparkle and perfection."

Jo Ledingham, On The Scene

VANCITYBUZZ

"Empire of the Son is understated perfection...Shigematsu's work is poised to be one of the most important of the season."

Cecilia Lu, VanCity Buzz

 VANCOUVER
PRESENTS
THEATRE DANCE MUSIC + MORE

"Empire of the Son is gorgeous storytelling, wrapped inside an equally gorgeous production.... Combined with Pam Johnson's Japanese-inspired set that explodes at the top, and Gerald King's simple but effective lighting, it is all becomes a gorgeous backdrop to underscore Shigematsu's equally gorgeous storytelling."

Mark Robins, Vancouver Presents

 THE UBYSSEY

"Empire of the Son is a profound piece of theatrical, technical and literary mastery...filled with hilarity and heartbreak."

Olivia Law, The Ubysee

THE GEORGIA
straight

"Shigematsu is a theatre newbie, but he has attracted an impressive team to work with him, including director Richard Wolfe and designers Pam Johnson, Gerald King, Barbara Clayden, and Steve Charles (set, lighting, costumes, and sound). By their friends shall you know them."

Colin Thomas, Georgia Straight

 CBCradio

"One of the main themes of *Empire of the Son* is this question of free will and destiny, to what degree can we escape our genetic inheritance ... this show is about breaking this lifelong silence between father and son... about two people trying to cross this huge divide, generationally, culturally and linguistically."

Sheryl MacKay - CBC North by Northwest

カナダ日系のコミュニティー・歴史・文化の月刊誌



THE Bulletin

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a journal of Japanese Canadian community, history + culture

TETSURO
SHIGEMATSU

EMPIRE OF THE SON

Asahi Legacy Games | 食欲の秋!キノコと山芋の和風カルボナーラ
東京トレンド | INTERROGATION: Lives and Times of The Kamloops Kid
Asian Canadian & Asian Migration Studies Centennial Alumni Project
Regeneration: Tsuneko Kokubo & Toru Fujibayashi | Geppogram げっぽーグラム
働きing: 松村友輝/アパッチくん | Eggplant Szechuan Style 東京トレンド

“Empire of the Son is a look at the father-son relationship. Much like the mother-daughter relationship, it is a subject ripe with endless possibilities, for pathos and comedy and everything in between.”

FEATURED VIDEO
 DEMAND FOR HEALTH-FOCUSED WEIGHT...



THE VANCOUVER SUN



FEATURED PHOTOS
 CANUCKS WIN IN SHOOTOUT

Best of 2015: Top 10 theatre experiences

Son Shone brightest in great 2015:

Shigematsu's performance leads list of most memorable experiences of the year.



Tetsuro Shigematsu offered a brave and emotional theatrical performance in Empire of the Son.
 Photograph by: Raymond Shum, Vancouver Sun

It was a year to remember

By erika thorkelson, special to the sun December 30, 2015

When it comes to theatre, 2015 was a year of searing autobiography and frothy musicals, a year of ambition, success and a little bit of failure. But why dwell on the worst?

Top Pick: Empire of the Son | October | Vancity Culture Lab

Those who were able to get tickets for this show's sold-out run will not soon forget how Tetsuro Shigematsu raised the bar into the stratosphere this year in his autobiographical one-man show about his relationship with his father, a former broadcaster for the CBC who was a child in Japan during the Second World War. Performing only weeks after his father's death from a lengthy, painful illness, Shigematsu lay himself utterly bare, both figuratively and literally, leaving not a dry eye in the house.



My top ten theatrical pleasures of 2015

Hooray for Vancouver theatre makers!

I'm especially pleased to note that my Top Ten list of theatrical experiences from this past year includes a whole bunch of work from emerging artists as well as seasoned pros. Okay. I'm going to run through my faves in chronological order, starting with the most recent.



Tetsuro Shigematsu stylin' it in his breakthrough solo, *The Empire of the Son*

Tetsuro Shigematsu's autobiographical solo show is about beginning to understand his emotionally inaccessible father. For days after seeing it, I couldn't talk about it without choking up. The production, which features videotaped performances on tiny sets, is as formally innovative as it is beautiful. After a sold-out run, the Cultch is bringing *Empire of the Son* back next season. Don't miss it.



The best of Vancouver theatre in 2015

BY MARK ROBINS ON DECEMBER 15, 2015

After seeing nearly 90 theatre productions this year, I can attest to the thriving theatre scene in Vancouver. Here is my list of the ten best theatre productions in 2015. And just to prove how difficult it is to pick only ten, I also present a bonus five that also deserve another mention, plus ten performances/moments that stuck with me through the year.



#3 - This show was gorgeous: *Empire of the Son* (Vancouver Asian Canadian Theatre) - Tetsuro Shigematsu's one-person show had gorgeous storytelling wrapped inside an equally gorgeous production.

<http://vancouverpresents.com/theatre/the-best-of-vancouver-theatre-in-2015/#sthash.3kTRrtZM.dp>

Review: Empire of the Son a poignant, heartfelt reveal of a loving but distant relationship

LOUIS B. HOBSON Updated: January 25, 2018



Tetsuro Shigematsu in Empire of the Son at High Performance Rodeo CALGARY

Tetsuro Shigematsu's one-man show, Empire of the Son, running at Alberta Theatre Projects until Jan. 28, is a loving tribute to the father he feels he never knew.

Akira Shigematsu died three years ago and Tetsuro confesses to his audience that he still hasn't been able to cry. To lighten the mood, he points out his grandfather and great-grandfather never cried either and nor did their Japanese fathers before them.

It's a cultural thing, which Shigematsu is confident his young son will shatter and, to prove this, he shows a quick series of slides of his son weeping.

He teases the audience with the prospect that it will be at this particular retelling of his father's story that he will finally be moved to tears.

Tetsuro loves to tease.

You can see his eyes twinkling and a slight grin under his handlebar moustache, so you always know you're in the presence of a master manipulator who knows just how far and how long to play a certain heartstring.

This is what gives the show such resonance. He wants his audiences to have a good time even if he's talking about some pretty serious topics.

Shigematsu and his director Richard Wolfe understand the impact of carefully inserted audiovisual moments into the monologue. They use a camera which Shigematsu focuses on miniature props, such as during the re-creation of one of the pair's many arguments.

Shigematsu wants to go skateboarding but his father wants him to tend the garden. The two men are represented by Shigematsu's fingers. One pair of fingers stands resolute while the other flips on and off a tiny skateboard. It's highly effective and, once again, it helps soften the blow of what's really happening between an immigrant man and his rather cocky Canadian son.

I particularly loved the exchange Shigematsu and his father have when Akira wants his son to drop out of university to go to India to help Mother Teresa with a leper colony in Kolkata. Failing that, Shigematsu could at least go to Winnipeg where Mother Teresa has another mission.

It's where and how Akira approached this request that makes it all seem as surreal to us, as it must have to Shigematsu.

The portrait he paints of his father is that of a deeply introverted, yet remarkable man who, as a child of 12, survived the bombing of Hiroshima in 1945. When the old man was dying, Shigematsu tried to get him to talk about that inconceivable experience.

As always, his father was reticent to the point of an emotional shutdown, yet what Akira does offer speaks volumes, as does a memory of his return from a prisoner of war camp.

Because these moments are recalled without emotion they have their own emotionally devastating impact, as do so many of Shigematsu's observations.

He thinks of his mother sharing a life with this inscrutable husband and concludes that no one should live without being touched. It's a simple remark that resonates throughout the show, especially when Shigematsu's sisters come to visit their father in hospital and immediately crowd into his bed with him, gently soothing his skin with their fingers and cooing their love. What Shigematsu does when his sisters leave tells us as much about him as it does his father.

Shigematsu's struggle with an emotionally distant father is a tale as old as time, but in the hands of the great orator, writer and personality, it seems so fresh, insightful and charming.

I think ATP should hold a fathers-and-sons only evening for Empire of the Son, at which I assure you the tears would be as audible as all the laughs of recognition.

EMPIRE OF THE SON

Written and performed by Tetsuro Shigematsu

Directed by Richard Wolfe

At Alberta Theatre Projects until Jan. 28

FOUR STARS

This Week's Flyers

Comments

Theatre review: Empire of the Son extraordinary in its ordinariness

PATRICK LANGSTON Updated: November 25, 2016

Empire of the Son

A Vancouver Asian Canadian Theatre Production

National Arts Centre Studio

Reviewed Thursday

At one point in Empire of the Son, Tetsuro Shigematsu's understated, but richly textured one-man show about his complicated relationship with his late father, Shigematsu uses an on-stage camera to zoom in on four of his fingers and project the image on a screen behind him. Two of the fingers represent his father's legs, and two – one of them poised on a tiny skateboard – represent his own legs when he was a teenager. Father and son are squabbling, as fathers and adolescent sons do, over some minor issue, yet you're riveted by those four ordinary fingers enacting a perfectly ordinary domestic scene.

And that's pretty much what this show is: A staged exploration of the unresolved relationship between a traditional Asian man – Shigematsu's father Akira – and his partly westernized son that, at first blush, seems anything but extraordinary yet draws you in and, in the end, like a vastly superior version of a Stuart McLean story, is a celebration of the extraordinary in the ordinary.

Shigematsu keeps the proceedings deceptively simple. In his own voice, sometimes taking on the restrained character of his Japanese-born father, and using multimedia to depict their family, the 45-year-old actor/playwright recounts his own life, Akira's life, and the way the two intersected, clashed, and were, at heart, very similar.

Akira lived through Hiroshima, worked at the BBC in London, England, and moved with his family to Canada where he hosted an immensely popular CBC Radio show before budget cuts forced him to take a job in the mailroom (the script is confusing on the family's life in Canada: At one point they're living in a Montreal suburb and then they're in British Columbia with no clear explanation

of when or why they moved). Through it all, the elder Shigematsu held his own counsel, his cultural background and generation dictating that his dealings with emotion and even ordinary communication with his family were restrained. He died last year, and his death becomes a pivot point for the show.

When Akira died, Shigematsu, who'd also worked at the CBC, didn't weep. Noticing that, his children asked if he'd ever cried as an adult, and he tells them, no. His father didn't cry, his male ancestors didn't cry, so Shigematsu doesn't cry. He long ago learned to bottle up his emotions – "Maybe my inside is a well-groomed golf course with little undulations," he tells us at one point – and apparently he still hasn't wept for his father. He came close a couple of times on opening night at the NAC, but backed off, deliberately eliciting (at least in your reviewer) that same uncomfortable feeling of irresolution that impelled Shigematsu to create his show.

In other words, while Shigematsu tells his story in a carefully measured and sometimes very funny fashion, gives it the gloss of ordinariness, the emotional core – including the consistently squelched impulse to break with tradition by telling his father he loves him and asking for the same in return – bubbles away beneath the surface, a source of tension, motivation and confusion within Shigematsu.

The actor uses other strategies to show us the extraordinary behind the ordinary. For example, he employs his father's CBC briefcase as a prop, unpacking a tool of work to reveal and celebrate surprising aspects of his father's life. He also references extraordinary events – the bombing of Hiroshima, the destruction of the dinosaurs when an asteroid hit the earth – to show how ordinary people and things get swept up in grand events.

Pam Johnson's set design underscores all this. Its simple, Asian-influenced backdrop of ordinary vertical wood strips explodes at the top into helter-skelter pieces that could be a release of emotion, a cataclysmic event or an aspirational reach for the stars (they do light up like stars at one point).

At the end of this finely tuned show, Shigematsu is still working out the relationship with his father and the puzzle that is his own life. Even if you've never been the son of a restrained father, you'll connect with these extraordinary lives.

Continues until Dec. 5. NAC box office, Ticketmaster outlets, 1-888-991-2787, nac-cna.ca

Empire of the Son

Christened as one of the “best theatre shows of the year” by critics and audiences after having had an extended and completely sold out run in Vancouver in 2015, this was the Centaur’s big bet for the 20th Annual Wildside, being the first act to be locked into the lineup and the last to make its opening at this year’s fest. To our great fortune, its highly anticipated Montreal premiere did not dishearten or disappoint.

Presented by the Vancouver Asian Canadian Theatre under the direction of Richard Wolfe, *Empire of the Son* is the brainchild of writer, comedian, filmmaker, and radio personality Tetsuro Shigematsu. In a tour de force solo performance featuring none other than Shigematsu in the flesh, he humorously recounts his compelling personal story of his upbringing as the Westernized child of Japanese immigrants, laying bare his complicated relationship with his late father Akira – a former public broadcaster for the BBC and the CBC. (Shigematsu Jr. is most widely known as the host of CBC Radio One’s *The Roundup*.)

Disconcerted over his self-avowed inability to weep and mourn over his father’s recent passing, Shigematsu investigates the likely agents of his stoic behaviour: is culture, genealogy, or the generational gap to blame? How can a man of such masterful rhetoric be so inarticulate in interpersonal communications, reticent in expression, and tongue-tied in the language of love? While their similarities may have been what ultimately brought them apart in life, it is Shigematsu’s earnest exploration of his father’s traumas in work and war in the latter’s wake of his death that allows him to come closer to finding a form of grieving and moving from resentment to compassion.

Cinematography has made its presence mightily known on stage at this edition of the Wildside, but no production has been as effective in the use and integration of multimedia as *Empire of the Son* has with its live video projections. Filmed anecdotes and documentary audio recordings featuring Shigematsu’s own family members also lend to the intimacy of the piece. Among other notable technical and creative elements that underscore the production are Gerald King’s atmospheric lightning design, Steve Charles’ immersive soundscape, and Pam Johnson’s modern yet elegant Japanese-inspired set.

Poignant and distinctively fine tuned in its unique telling of an all-too-common father-son dynamic, *Empire of the Son* is a modern masterpiece and decidedly one of the highlights of the *Wildside*.

When to see it:

Thursday, January 12th at 7:30 pm

Friday, January 13th at 7:30 pm

Saturday, January 14th at 7:30 pm

Show length: 75 minutes
