

Baltimore



The Aesthetics of an Epiphany: Naoko Maeshiba

February 26, 2014

John Barry Interviews Naoko Maeshiba about her new production, ‘Twilight Station’ at The Baltimore Theatre Project

Last August, when she received a commission to produce a visual theatre piece for the 2014 Quest Fest, director and choreographer Naoko Maeshiba says she was terrified. “Usually I have ideas,” she says. “This time I had nothing. It was scary. I had a very vague idea about stations as an enclosed space. That was it. Then I had to plant the seeds.”

So she got to work. Her collaborators included three actors: one from Towson, two actors from Quest Visual Theatre Wings Company, and Baltimore-based experimental composer Andy Hayleck. After a few weeks of exercises, they began building a production – using found objects, developing relationships and characters, and introducing music.

What evolved out of that process after six months is ‘Twilight Station,’ which follows three characters who meet in an unidentified station. The 70 minute piece, like much of Maeshiba’s work, follows the relationships between these characters – less as a plot than as a gradual evolution on different levels, as their lives and dreams and relationships get entangled with one another.

It's not always easy to figure out where Maeshiba's ideas come from, (or how to describe them, for that matter), but the Japanese-born artist – now director of the Towson MFA program in Theater Arts – looks at the process of rehearsal as one of discovery. Recent productions in Baltimore include [Plasmic Patterns](#), [Kawatokawa](#), and [Paraffin](#) and, this weekend, with composer Andy Hayleck, she will be premiering her latest production.

In a brief interview in midtown Baltimore, Maeshiba discussed her art, her creative process, and finally, some idea of what to carry into 'Twilight Station,' which will be coming to the Theatre Project this Thursday.



Photo by Adam Golfer

John Barry: The last time I interviewed you, you were coming up with the production 'Plasmic Patterns.' When I described it, my editor wondered whether your work was closer to dance than theatre. How do you respond to that?

Naoko Maeshiba: Here's my answer: Someone called it 'Dancing on the Edge of Theater.' I don't think dance people consider it dance. Theatre people don't consider it theatre. I'm exploring this non-categorized performance... It would be hard to write about it if you think theatre begins with a script. They might be looking for something

that isn't there — plot, characters, how the director executed his or her vision, but there's no real plot line, the thing about my work is that the beginning keeps unfolding and gets explored and excavated and evolves.

It may be hard to locate the climax or the story. There are stories, but there are multiple threads. Lee Breuer said that fifty percent of theatre happens on stage, and about fifty percent happens in your mind. My ongoing question is: where is theatre happening? This is what I ask my students. So I ask my students, what would you prefer – if one hundred percent happens on stage, and people have to figure all that out.

JB: What would you prefer?

NM: I want ten percent happening on stage to ninety percent happening in the mind of the audience. I would want to move my finger and have the audience construct a whole story from that. That would be my dream. (laughs)

JB: So this production is called Twilight Station. How did you come up with that name?

NM: It's always ongoing. I was starting with the name 'Station.' And I was thinking about this work of a Japanese director I worked with who was active in Japan from the 60's to 90's, [Ohta Shogo](#). He was running this transformational company for about thirty years. One of the things that made him well known was his silent plays. He had a 'station' series – Water Station, Wind Station, Earth Station. He would write the plays based on what actors came up with, but even while he wrote the dialogue, none of the dialogue was spoken on stage. The dialogue would be internalized by the actors. And he would sit at the back of the theatre during rehearsals, telling people that they'd missed their lines! So they were actually scripted plays, but the actors never delivered their lines out loud.

JB: So that was your inspiration?

NM: So I was thinking of creating my own station. Then the word 'Twilight' came in because I was thinking of these miniscule things that happen in life, that cause some kind of ripple effect – that eventually, five years later or ten years later, explode into something. I guess that's a sort of minimalist aesthetics.

JB: That's also the aesthetics of an epiphany.

NM: Exactly. I was looking at the works of (film director) [Seijun Suzuki](#), whose work has a lot of implied moments. Actors make contacts. There's an implication that something is going to happen, but nothing does. I wanted to explore that. Twilight is a very ephemeral, in-between time that I feel resonance with. So that's how Twilight Station comes out.

JB: You have three actors playing three characters.

NM: This was a work commissioned by Quest Fest. I was asked to work with Wings Company Members. ([Wings Company](#) is a visual theatre ensemble including deaf, hard-of-hearing and hearing actors.) Two members, Mervin Primeaux and Roslyn Ward, were brought into the process, and I worked with an actor, Francis Catabec, whom I'd worked

with before. So there was an interesting mixture of hearing and non-hearing performers. One of the performers, Mervin, is deaf. Roslyn is bilingual, meaning that she hears but she signs. Francis is a hearing performer who doesn't sign. I was curious as to what would come out of this.

JB: And once this is finished in Baltimore, you're taking this elsewhere.

NM: I'm not sure. Iceland is a possibility. We're talking about Japan and China. But this piece is going to travel.

JB: So this isn't a plotted play. How should the audience view it?

NM: It's kind of like book chapters. It might not be the sort of progression that most audiences usually expect — you know, where there's a plot structure, beginning with an incident. It doesn't have that kind of structure. It's like a story book, where you get to know three characters in different dimensions of time and space. Hopefully it expands from a portrait to a larger unit.

JB: And they'll be watching a musician – Andy Hayleck — on stage as well.

NM: Andy is his own artist, has been exploring music for years, he's an artist and improviser. This was a new experience for the both of us, we have worked together before, but that was in a dance piece. This is a new format for us. I'm really glad to be working with him on this – it's given me the chance to learn different things about his music.

JB: So this is about character realization. People emerge from these different times and spaces.

NM: There's a hybrid quality. So you will see many sides of these characters.

JB: Anything else to prepare people?

NM: As usually, with my work, bring an open mind. Think of it as a train ride – where you move from one landscape to the next. It might not be that super-tight timing that theatre has – you might not see that. But if the audience can breathe and live as the actors do. That would be a good way to approach this play.

Twilight Station by Naoko Maeshiba

QuestFest 2014 at the [Baltimore Theatre Project](#)

Thu February 27 – Sun March 2 World Premiere

Performances: Thursday, Feb 27 at 8 pm, Friday Feb 28 at 8 pm, Saturday March 1 at 8