The Notion Of Jo, Ha, Kyu

From The Invisible Actor by Yoshi Oida and Lorna Marshall (Metheun, 1997)

I often ask a group of actors to sit in a circle, close their eyes, and clap their hands together, while trying to keep the sound in unison. No leader, no pre-fixed rhythm. Every time, once the group has come together, the clapping will start to imperceptibly speed up until a climax is reached. Then it will slow down again (though not as slow as the original starting point), and once more start to speed up until it reaches a second climax. And so on.

Six hundred years ago, the Japanese Noh master, Zeami, said, 'Every phenomenon in the universe develops itself through a certain progression. Even the cry of a bird and the noise of an insect follow this progression. It is called Jo, Ha, Kyu.'

Motokiyo Zeami (AD 1363-1443) was responsible for the creation of the Noh theatre. He welded together two earlier styles of performance, Sarugaku and Dengaku. Sarugaku (literally `monkey music') was a form of popular entertainment, using tricks, comedy and acrobatics. Dengaku (field music) had its origin in the songs and dances that were performed as part of agricultural ritual.

As this new art emerged, Zeami refined its subject matter, style of presentation, and acting techniques. In order to pass on his insights to following generations of actors, he wrote several treatises. These were handed down in secret, within the families of the Noh theatre. Only in 1908, when a collection of these writings accidentally appeared in a second hand bookshop, did the information become available to the general public. Although Zeami's books were written hundreds of years ago, his ideas are fascinating, and completely relevant to modern (and Western) actors.

Although Japanese theatre is heavily stylised in terms of performance, many of the conventions are actually based on an accurate observation of natural patterns. Zeami noticed one of these patterns, a rhythmic structure called Jo, Ha, Kyu. (The word jo literally means 'beginning' or 'opening', ha means 'break' or 'development', and kyu has the sense of 'fast' or 'climax'.) In this structure, you start slowly, then gradually and smoothly accelerate towards a very fast peak. After the peak, there is usually a pause and then a recommencement of the acceleration cycle. A new
Jo Ha Kyu. This is an organic rhythm which can easily be observed in the body's build-up to sexual orgasm. Almost any rhythmic physical activity will tend to follow this pattern if left to itself.

This rhythm of Jo, Ha, Kyu is quite different from the Western idea of 'beginning, middle, end' since the latter tends to produce a series of 'steps' rather than a smooth acceleration. In addition, the concept of 'beginning, middle, end' usually only refers to the overall dramatic structure of the play, while Jo, Ha, Kyu is used to support every moment of a performance as well as its structure. In Japanese theatre, each play has Jo, Ha, Kyu, each act and scene has Jo, Ha, Kyu, and each individual speech will have its own internal Jo, Ha, Kyu. Even a single gesture such as the raising of an arm will commence at a certain speed and end at a slightly faster rhythm. The degree of acceleration will vary; sometimes it is quite clear to the onlooker, sometimes the shift in tempo is so slight as to be invisible, but it is always there. The sense of onward progression is never absent. Sometimes the surface of the action slows down, or stops completely, and there is no visible Jo, Ha, Kyu; nonetheless, the development of Jo, Ha, Kyu is still happening, this time on an internal level.

From the audience's point of view, there is a real sense of being constantly carried forwards. There may be a huge variety of surface rhythms within any given performance, but the audience will never sense that the action has 'slackened off.

There is another factor. Since the Jo, Ha, Kyu pattern also exists within the body of the onlooker, the audience experiences a sense of organic 'rightness' when actors use this rhythm. The bodies of the actors and the bodies of the watchers become connected, and it feels as if they are sharing the same journey.

Many Western performers use the Jo, Ha, Kyu rhythm subconsciously. They can sense when a performance is getting 'bogged down', when you need to 'pick it up' and 'keep it moving'. They know that 'keeping it going' feels right. What Japanese classical theatre has done is to recognise and codify this pattern, and to consciously apply it to all aspects of performance. It isn't anything 'exotic' or applicable only to Japanese theatre; it's a useful tool for any performer. [L.M.]
Jo, Ha, Kyu isn’t just an esoteric theatrical concept, but a rhythm that the audience senses in their flesh and bones. If the actor or director is not aware of this fact, you could end up with a production where there is a contradiction between the inner rhythms of the audience and the production. In this case the audience cannot relax and allow themselves to be carried into the performance. Of course, it is possible to deliberately aim at working against the audience’s organic rhythm. You could make the whole production very slow, or very fast all the time. It will certainly shake the audience out of their natural rhythm, and they may perceive the production as being very ‘artistic’. In this case, their enjoyment is intellectual rather than instinctive. For myself, I prefer theatre that involves me in a physical and organic way, rather than appealing to my intellect alone.

It is virtually impossible to ‘be’ natural on stage all the time. Nonetheless, it is essential to ‘seem’ natural (from the audience’s point of view) at every moment of the performance. Since Jo, Ha, Kyu is a fundamental pattern that the audience unconsciously recognises as ‘truthful’, using it helps your acting appear more organic and ‘natural’. In addition, working in a ‘real’ rhythm that fits what you are doing, somehow makes it easier for genuine feelings to emerge spontaneously. In this way the action becomes more truthful for both the audience and the actors. [Y.O.]