

Multilingual Theatre Production: Case Study in a Japanese University

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多言語演劇制作 —日本の大学での事例紹介—

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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines the production of a multilingual theatrical revue in a mid-sized private regional university in Japan. To provide context for the experiment, an extensive literature review is included, comprising multilingual theatre, Japanese multilingual theatre, and multilingual theatre in international educational settings. With one month of planning and one month of rehearsal time, 30 students were gathered, 3 adaptations of well-known stories were written and translated, and two presentation files were created to serve as both stage setting and multilingual subtitling. This paper describes the planning, recruitment, writing, rehearsal, and performance procedures to help others organize a similar event in other contexts. Reflections and observations of the educational and linguistic challenges and learning opportunities that occurred in this production are also included.

Keywords: Drama in education, multilingual theater, active learning, EFL

1. Introduction

An all-volunteer multilingual theater project involving 30 students encouraged relationships and cultural exchanges among 100 faculty, staff, and students over the course of two months. The key features of the project included setting aside time for brainstorming and flexibility, inviting student participation through script writing and translation, and low-cost costume design and production. This article includes an in-depth literature review which explores modern theatre in Japan and its intersections with multilingual theatre before examining the educational potential of student-written foreign language theatre. Details of the condensed production schedule are provided, from conceptualization to recruitment, through rehearsal and into performance. This paper can be used as a guide for other educators who want to do a similar production in their multicultural settings. The reflections section includes student comments responding to an open-ended survey question about their experience. These comments

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are then compared to the findings from the existing literature. The students wrote about their positive learning experiences from the linguistic and cultural exchanges and to the theatrical production.

2. Literature Review

The Japanese theatre industry has had to reckon with the reality of Japan's dramatic swings of interaction with the West from the mid-19th century to the modern day. After Japan's doors were forced open in 1853, there was curiosity, exchange, consumption, and mimicry of Japanese art in the West, referred to as *Japonisme* (Chiba, 1998), mirroring the trend of *Chinoiserie* which came before it. At the same time, Japanese mimicry of Western art styles became so prevalent that in each genre of Japanese art, two branches formed: for example, the term *yōga* was used to differentiate Western-style painting techniques from *nihonga*, Japanese style. Traditional forms of theatre such as Noh and Kabuki were preserved while *shingeki* (new theatre) productions became popular by embracing the modern tenets of Western realism, which had been influenced by the *Japonisme* that was so prevalent in the West (Fischer-Lichte, 1990). After World War II, Japanese art had to adapt to maintain its traditional roots and its Westernized modernization. In the 21st century, Kabuki and Noh productions include linguistic accommodations such as individual subtitling or in-ear audio guides to play the translation of the words into languages such as English, Mandarin, or contemporary Japanese. Modern productions of Western plays are still regularly done, usually either translated into Japanese or English.

2.1 Multilingual Theatre

Also known as polyglot drama, multilingual theatre is different from multicultural theatre in that it requires more than one language to be used in performance, whereas multicultural theatre may combine aspects of different cultures or theatrical traditions while maintaining a monolingual script – usually the common language of the audience. Productions explicitly advertised as multicultural became trendy in the 1980s (Fischer-Lichte, 1990) but have always existed because translation and transcultural dramaturgical effort must be made to perform a play written by a playwright from a foreign language or culture. Multilingual theatre productions, on the other hand, have been attempted in multiple countries and contexts.

Foreign language theatre "has predominantly been the domain of migrant cultures" (Bastianes, 2023) because the experience of living in a country without the comfort of one's native language creates a linguistic subculture that craves and consumes art in their native language. For example, as a response to Brexit, immigrant theatre makers formed alliances to highlight and safeguard the diversity and multiculturalism already existing within Britain. In London, Spanish-language theatre presented bilingually or with English subtitles has been successful enough to keep multiple theatrical companies afloat (Bastianes, 2023). In most English-speaking countries, a second or third language can be integrated into an English-language play to serve as a bridge to a specific cultural and linguistic community.

Multilingual adaptations of Shakespeare's plays became particularly desirable in the 1990s for an increasingly global theatrical audience, leading to a diverse collection of adaptations and recontextualizations of the texts (Huang, 2014). Shakespeare and Greek plays are both in the canon of recognizable but challenging plays that can be put on without paying royalties, so it is no wonder that these two genres of historical Western theatre are often adapted into other contexts, combined with more modern works, manipulated into contemporary political

commentary, and otherwise produced in unusual ways. Bilingualism is only one of the many possibilities to create a new conversation around these classic plays.

A multilingual production necessitates an understanding on the audience's part that they will have to understand enough of at least one language to follow the play, and that they will need to rely on other modes of communication for the rest, whether on the part of the actors on stage or any linguistic accommodations made by the theatre. The demands of such a production on the cast, crew, and audience make it a difficult sell without the proper linguistic and cultural support, any technical elements such as subtitling or in-ear headphone dubbing, and ample rehearsal time and space to properly learn to perform theatre despite - and through - language barriers.

2.2 Japanese Multilingual Theatre

The production in this paper was inspired by a few cases of Japanese multilingual theatrical productions – one fictional production of Chekov's 1897 play *Uncle Vanya*, from the 2021 film *Drive My Car* (dir. Hamaguchi); the American-directed Japanese-Latin production of Stravinsky's 1927 opera *Oedipus Rex* in 1992; and the 2022 revival of Elfriede Jelinek's multilingual play inspired by the Fukushima nuclear disaster, *No Light*, which premiered in 2012 in Tokyo.

In *Drive My Car*, the original short story of the same name by Haruki Murakami (2014) does mention *Uncle Vanya* a few times. The main character, Kafuku, is performing the titular role in a Japanese language adaptation of the play and rehearses his lines by listening to a cassette tape recording in the car. The short story is set in the present, but Kafuku owns and is driven around in a vintage European car, and his production of *Uncle Vanya* is set in the Westernization era of late 19th century Japan, referencing the type of character that is fully Japanese but aligns himself with certain aspects of western media and lifestyle. But in the movie version, the multilingual nature of the production is a major plot device – the actors all speak different Asian languages, often relying on English or Japanese as their commonly understood language and must perform a Western family drama play despite not understanding each other. In one review, Nakamura (2022) writes that the multilingual adaptation of *Uncle Vanya* within the movie becomes "the site of communication between people that exists beyond dialogue," creating a translanguaging space for humans to connect across language barriers.

The actors express restlessness when the director (Kafuku) demands that they spend multiple weeks of rehearsal sitting around the table reading through the multilingual script to familiarize themselves with cues from eight different languages. But over the course of the production, and as the plot of the movie unfolds, the actors do connect to each other, and emotional, cultural, and linguistic barriers are surpassed. Nakamura (2022) writes that by the performance at the end of the film, "we [the viewers] watch transfixed, at times forgetting that actors speak different languages, our attention drawn to their nonverbal cues." This fictional multilingual theatre production, with multiple rows of subtitles in various languages projected above the stage, is an instrument to explore the vulnerabilities and challenges of human connection. But it is not necessarily a fantasy, as multilingual productions have been undertaken in Japan before.

The next example of Japanese multilingual theatre in this study is a 1992 production of the opera *Oedipus Rex*. As with many international theatrical projects, this production relied on many lenses of translation and centuries of history. The play itself, written for the Athenian stage by Sophocles and first performed around 429 BC, was adapted into an opera by Stravinsky, a Russian living in France, and its libretto was adapted from the Greek by a Frenchman and then passed to another Frenchman to translate into Latin, finally premiering in Paris in 1927. Further,

there was a multilingual aspect written into the libretto: the songs would be performed as written in Latin, but the narration would always be performed in the language of the audience (White, 1979), requiring translation on the part of each international production to follow, and empowering each international audience to understand the narration between songs, and then understand the lyrics by other means.

The 1992 production of the opera in Tokyo was directed by Julie Taymor, an American who is known for her theatrical mask and puppet work, which she developed during a fellowship trip to Japan and Indonesia. Taymor would later win multiple Tony Awards in 1997 for her direction and costume design of *The Lion King*. The orchestra was conducted by the maestro Seiji Ozawa. The narration was performed as instructed by the libretto in the audience's language of Japanese, by the Japanese *shingeki* (new-theatre) star Kayoko Shiraishi in a kimono. She finishes the opening monologue by slashing open the fabric that covers the stage to begin the story – her embodiment of the narrator, written to be a man in a formal suit who is detached from the story, provokes thought on multiple levels: adaptation, gender, and cross-cultural (Chan 2012). On stage, Butoh dancers form the chorus of the citizens of Thebes, dying from the plague caused by the murder of the previous king. Butoh is a form of modern Japanese dance, combining theatrical expressionism with Zen philosophy, which was developed in contrast to the general trend in Japan towards modern Western dance forms after the end of WWII (Fraleigh 1999). International opera stars (including the British tenor Phillip Langridge and the American soprano Jessye Norman) move around the stage and sing Stravinsky's melodies while wearing larger-than-life masks atop their heads. The character of Oedipus himself is split into two: Phillip Langridge with a large mask extending his head as the singing Oedipus, and the Butoh star Min Tanaka as the puppet Oedipus, covered in clay and often symbolically and literally suspended from ribbons that extend from the rafters. All of this was recorded by NHK, the Japanese public broadcaster, and presented by PBS, the American public broadcaster, in the Great Performances series.

Kein Licht (No Light) was written by Elfriede Jelinek in response to the Fukushima nuclear disaster in March 2011. The play was originally written in German, published in multiple chapters on her website, and premiered in Germany in September 2011. The script was translated into Japanese by Tatsuki Hayashi and premiered in Japan, directed by Motoi Miura in November 2012. The script is based on the concept of two "violinists" (a multilingual pun, as violinist is *Geiger* in German, the same as the radiation detecting device) who are unable to hear each other but must perform a conversational "duet" in a liminal space, presumably the moment when the disaster occurred (Bala, 2014). Throughout the second Tokyo 2012 production (directed by Akira Takayama), an individualized tour-style performance conducted throughout Tokyo with a radio device, other voices are heard: the recorded voices of the victims reading the lines of the script, sometimes referring to normal life continuing despite the tragedy (Poulton, 2016). The title of the epilogue implies that it is the voice of the character Antigone from the Sophocles play, the daughter of Oedipus who dares to speak against the state to give her brother a proper burial despite direct orders from the new king that it would be treason to do so. The invocation of Antigone provides an intertextual rebellion against the global powers and society that allowed the tragedy to happen and against the pressure to remain silent about controversial issues (Bala, 2014; Poulton, 2016).

This was already a multicultural production, from the writing to the translation to the audience, but the recent 2022 revival was entirely multilingual. The director Motoi Miura of the original Japanese premiere returned to work on the revival when he was inspired by the irony that the 2020 Tokyo Olympics – which hoped to welcome the world back to Japan after all effects of the Fukushima disaster had been solved – was then postponed for an entire year because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The lines of the script were divided into seven languages, German,

English, French, Spanish, Russian, Korean, and Japanese, with subtitles provided in Japanese, to further expand the audience's sensation of the script as an orchestra, where words are sounds with meanings that are at times understood and indistinguishable. This is consistent with Miura's other linguistic deconstructing work with Western play scripts (Nakamura, 2022). The subtitling here adds another element to the original concept of the duetting violinists who cannot hear each other – the Japanese audience member must choose whether to read and make meaning or to sit back and surrender to not understanding it all (Niino, 2022).

Criticism of commercially produced multilingual and multicultural theatre, especially in the Asian diaspora, is explored in-depth and within the context of Shakespeare adaptations by Huang (2014). The conflicting pressures to make something novel and to stay loyal to the original text can create problems for both the production team and the audience. In some cases, a seductive "new lens" through which to interpret an old work can cause the entire production to detach from the work, especially when designers have the freedom to explore their own interpretations of the play's central themes. Huang discusses the details of a 1985 production of *Shogun Macbeth*, wondering if Shakespeare in the style of Kabuki, with some characters and place names turned to Japanese, is a celebration of Japanese culture and heritage or an exoticized Japanese mask placed on top of a classic Western play (Huang, 2014). A commercially produced play must be able to make money, but any cultural reinterpretations of the play should be careful not to profit from stereotyping.

The technical choices involved with theatrical subtitling are sometimes assumed to be helpful for all audience members, but some complain that they distract from the action on stage and that moving the eyes back and forth is too difficult in a theatre. Subtitling can help with understanding performers who speak with accents, but it may also hinder the audience's ability to grow accustomed to understanding an accent. Culturally conscious casting is also an issue – what racial identity will be chosen to play each character in an adaptation of a play (either Greek or Shakespeare) that was originally written with the assumption that most of the characters were white? And once those racial identities are placed into the plot, is it treated as a colorblind production emphasizing diversity without comment, or will it be critically treated somehow to call various social issues into the spotlight? Harder still is when racial or national identity is embodied directly in the characters themselves. Can Othello be played by a White actor? Can Mulan be played by a non-Chinese actor? Each director must reckon with these criticisms when they set out to create multicultural or multilingual theatre.

2.3 Educational Multilingual Theatre

Multilingual theatre has also been used in educational settings, usually in foreign language programs, where the purpose of the production is to showcase the language abilities of the students in an entertaining medium, often to an audience of varied language abilities. Using drama as a tool for foreign language learning provides students with an active-learning project that demands their attention, teamwork, and individual practice. Kovács (2014) summarizes the benefits of drama in the language classroom as "an effective alternative tool in developing communicative competence in the target language and the learners' ability to perform certain roles in the possible 'scenes' of everyday life or their future professions." Foreign language textbooks often attempt to write realistic dialogues for students to practice new vocabulary or grammar, which may indicate that teaching a language can be more effective when placed in the communicative context it would appear in. By using drama techniques, these language learning exercises may be further elevated.

In practice, these exercises have been used in a variety of contexts. Bin (2022) discusses the production of a Chinese play in a Greek university to test the value of Drama in Education techniques on an international exchange. The language of production was in the actors' native Greek, but rehearsals included Chinese culture and language exercises led by Bin. Students' responses to a pre-survey and a post-survey showed that their appreciation and knowledge of Chinese culture and language were significantly improved through their involvement in the project.

Sanchez & Athanases (2022) reflected on the multilingual rehearsal process of a series of English-language poems for a performance by a diverse group of students in an international school English class in the United States. The class was taught in English, and rehearsals were led in English, but small-group conversations were often conducted in the students' native languages, including Spanish and Cantonese. One student realized that when he read the text alone, he could find meaning, but through repetition in rehearsals with his peers, he felt "it's not just text, it's like the subtexts" (Sanchez & Athanases, 2022, p. 222). A traditional foreign language classroom could benefit from these individual discoveries that only become possible when a student spends time with a foreign language text and familiarizes themselves with it for the purpose of performing it. The researchers reflected that a play with elevated English language, such as poetry, would need "extended opportunities for learners to 'sound and feel' language, and for a safe space for multiple renderings of a text" (Sanchez & Athanases, 2022, p. 223) because the goal of their project was for the students to perform the poetry as originally written by the authors. A student-written play, or an abridged version of a story, could be more freely edited to suit the needs and linguistic abilities of each individual student actor.

In Ku (2019), an annual play written by the graduating class of English majors at a university in Taiwan was allowed for the first time to include some Mandarin language in the script, unlocking the potential to create a more approachable English-language story for the multilingual audience. Their lived linguistic experience in Taiwan includes more than just one language at a time, so this adjustment to their play enriched their rehearsals, acting, and the audience experience. They used this opportunity to incorporate a translator character who personified their efforts to translate their story, and the characters attempting to understand each other, often with comedic effect. The final play became a realistic "translingual practice," where the group of students used more than one commonly understood language to communicate, a phenomenon often recorded in multilingual communities such as theirs. Ku concluded that "plays offer a space for students to experiment with language(s) and explore beyond the boundaries of traditional language practices typically expected in language education settings." If students can be encouraged to use the language structures they have learned in the textbook for script writing and rehearsal for a performance, they may become more comfortable with using language as a tool for communication rather than a test subject.

In a similar context, Shakespeare was taught to high school students learning English at an advanced level in Taiwan to examine the efficacy of drama pedagogy on language learning (Cheng & Winston, 2011). Multiple testimonials from the students showed that the physical embodiment of the elevated Shakespearean text allowed the students to unlock more meaning and communicate with each other about their interpretations of the text. This indicates that students can access a deeper understanding of dramatic literature by rehearsing it together, even if they do not perform it for an audience.

2.4 Stance of the Researcher; Ethical Considerations

The researcher is a mixed-race white American of Japanese descent, who grew up in the Japanese-American diaspora of media, including listening to folktales, reading manga, and watching animation from both sides of the

Pacific. The researcher is trained in theatre education and has studied the Japanese language and culture in multiple institutions where Shakespeare in educational contexts was also attempted. The actors and crew members involved in this project were all university students volunteering to join an intensive extracurricular activity. Some of the exercises were repeated, either for a learning activity or for class credit in General English courses, but the theatre project itself was not done for a grade. No personal information about the participants will be published in this paper.

3. Production Details

3.1 Planning and Equipment

The initial goal of the project was for students to write lines from three plays in any language towards a final script of adaptations of three stories, and that translation efforts would be supported by the director and other language instructors in the institution. General ideas for the overall production had to be communicated to get approval from the student affairs office to perform at the student festival, so the structure of performing three abridged versions of well-known stories from different cultures was suggested. The examples given to explain the project were "Momotaro," the Japanese folk tale about a boy born from a peach who grows up and leaves his home to defeat the nearby demons who terrorize his village; "Cinderella," due to its global familiarity and possibilities for adaptation to different cultures and languages; and Shakespeare's "Romeo & Juliet," to juxtapose the two children's stories with a tragedy, and to lend a sense of theatrical gravitas to the production. When explaining these three potential short plays, most of the Japanese university administration workers, faculty, and students smiled nostalgically at the idea of Momotaro, nodded politely at the idea of Cinderella, and seemed impressed by the idea of Romeo and Juliet. Approval was given to the production with the understanding that no institutional budget remained to support it financially, but that an empty classroom and available equipment could be allocated for rehearsals.

The main education building and its plaza were the logical center of activity. Most of the student body commutes through its plaza, and most student club activity occurs there or in the neighboring student club building. A room designated for international exchange activities is immediately accessible from this plaza, where international students often gather to study or relax between classes. This room was chosen for general rehearsal activities due to the international nature of the project and the lack of a designated theatre space. However, the room was already designated to be used during the student festival for a Chinese cultural event and a poster presentation on international exchange activities, so another classroom was chosen for the performance. With more time to prepare, a room with some performance equipment could have been available, but they were already being used by other performance groups.

The classroom chosen was a medium-sized lecture hall with a maximum seating capacity of 180 and a social-distancing capacity of 90.¹ The classroom layout included 12 rows of lecture-style wooden desks with bench seats, slightly raked, with two steps upward to accommodate vision for the middle and the back section. There were two double doors on either side of the long whiteboard hung on the wall, facing a slightly elevated stage-like area in the front of the classroom. Classroom equipment included two large projector screens that covered both ends of the whiteboard with projectors that could be linked to one input or separate inputs. A single microphone for lecture use was plugged in and held on a small stand on top of the dais.

The classroom was not designed for theatre use, but it was adaptable for a small production. It was decided that the audience would be seated on a first-come, first-served basis in the first seven rows and that additional seating

would be made available in the back five rows, in the left or right sections, for those who came later but wished to social distance. The entire back wall consisted of windows, which were covered by blinds but opened to promote air circulation.

3.2 Motivating Student Participation

Potential student actors were told in the first week of recruitment that they could decide what stories they wanted to tell and write their own scripts. However, the small group of initially recruited students expressed concern about their abilities to write a script and hesitated to participate in such a demanding production due to their inexperience in theatre. With a more advanced group in either theatrical production or international exchange events, this proposal might have been more appealing. However, the coronavirus pandemic had severely limited all club activities and club recruitment. The pandemic may have severed the university experience for many students entering in 2020 and 2021, where first-year students are brought into a club space and trained in its culture and activities, and then become the recruiters who bring in new students upon their return to school as second-year students. There was no theatre club to recruit students from because it had been disbanded during the pandemic.

An additional reality of the pandemic in this university was the inability to send students abroad or to accept new international students. Some international students were even stranded in Japan when they were supposed to be preparing to return home, which added pressure on the existing infrastructure of the international exchange office. Without the constant flow of new students coming and going, and domestic students departing and returning, the international center's events suffered. Domestic students' perceptions of their foreign language classes being a connection to future international experiences also seemed to diminish, according to drawings of students' experiences in English as a Foreign Language classes before and during the pandemic (Driussi, 2022).

To illustrate the vision of a multilingual theatre project, some initial meetings included short screenings of clips from *Drive My Car* (Hamaguchi, 2021) to show the students how one single play could be expressed by a group of actors who speak different languages. The demonstration of the movie clips, particularly the audition sequence (0:55:00), the first read-through of the script (1:06:15), a rehearsal scene outdoors (1:50:23), and one of the final performance scenes (2:45:55) were instrumental in conveying the concept. Before watching the clips, students were asking if they could participate only in "the English play" or "the Japanese play", thinking they would be separate events in the program. After viewing, students understood that they could choose their performance language and hear their scene partners speaking other languages. Each actor continued to adjust their language choices throughout the rehearsal process.

Students expressed various concerns that affected their desire to sign up for this project. The most common was a general feeling of anxiety around performance, especially outside of their native language. This was expressed by nearly all the students who participated, whether they became actors or stayed behind the scenes. This is partially due to the lack of a self-selected group of theatre students to recruit from and partially due to the general lack of theatrical experiences that this student group had been exposed to or participated in because their high school and college years had been interrupted and defined by the corona pandemic. Another concern expressed was the compressed timeline – many students participate in clubs that meet only once a week and, therefore, perform only twice a year. However, this schedule demanded multiple rehearsals per week for less than two months. A third, less common concern was the respectability of a performance comprising folktales in languages that could not be understood by most of the audience. This sentiment was mostly held by students with more theatrical experience,

likely wanting to defend themselves from possible ridicule for participating in something too far away from their image of "good theatre."

Over the course of recruitment, a group of Chinese international students decided to participate as actors and stage crew. Students pointed out that Cinderella derives from a Chinese folktale originally but has been claimed by many other cultures (Beauchamp, 2010; Waley, 1947). The students agreed that having a Chinese story was nice, but most people only think of Cinderella as a European princess story, especially due to the influence of the Disney film (Jackson et al, 1950). In response, the Legend of Mulan was suggested as an alternative, acknowledging its similar stance as a folktale whose international touchstone is the Disney animated musical adaptation (Cook & Bancroft, 1998). The Chinese international students were inspired by the idea of representing themselves in an irrefutably Chinese legend such as Mulan and to have some agency in its production. The tentative idea of Cinderella, as a recognizable and easily abridged international rags-to-riches love story, was replaced by the inspirational call-to-action of a young woman who goes to battle to save her family. As the students taught each other the story, they noticed that it echoed – and appeared to ground in history – the fantastical tale of Momotaro, which was so familiar to the Japanese audience.

3.3 Writing

The writing phase began quickly after the first few students had been recruited and then was completed before the final day of recruitment to use as an additional recruiting tool for students who needed to see the script before they agreed to participate. The script continued to be edited throughout rehearsals and was translated into a few third languages for individual students who wanted to represent another language on stage.

As the director of the play was a native English speaker, and the students were hesitant to write a play by themselves, the initiative to write the skeleton of the first play, "Momotaro," was taken on by a group of Japanese students and the director. For inspiration, the group watched a few educational videos on YouTube Kids, each one a slightly different telling of the same folktale. Students took ideas from those videos and from their own childhood recollections of the most important details and started writing a script with the director in English. Some students had higher English levels and were able to come up with approximations of full sentences in English on their own. In contrast, others made short suggestions in English or worked together to translate phrases from Japanese.

The story was split into seven scenes: The introduction, Momotaro's birth from a peach, Momotaro growing up and deciding to fight the demons, three chapters showing his journey and recruitment of three animals to fight with him (the dog, the monkey, and the pheasant), and the finale fight at Demon Island with a short happy ending epilogue. In the first writing rehearsal, the focus group was able to write the first three scenes and the finale fight.

The writing of the three animal recruitment vignettes was assigned as classwork for small groups in an English class. The students were divided into three groups; each one read the initial three scenes as a choral reading exercise where the teacher demonstrated, and the students repeated the pronunciation of each sentence. At first, the students were nervous about the idea of writing dialogue in English due to their elementary language levels, but upon reading the casual speech style of the first three scenes, they felt more at ease. Students seemed to become enthusiastic about the process as they remembered the details of the story and expressed ideas to each other. They typed phrases into translation software and tried saying the resulting English phrases to each other. This classroom exercise was not planned as part of the syllabus for the semester, yet it became one of the most active learning moments in the class and was referred to by students later as a good English learning experience. Once the three

animal recruitment scenes were finished, the groups performed them for each other, and then the entire class read the final fight scene together as a closing activity. This all-English script was then used in an advanced General English class, with students reading the words carefully for the first time. The script was used as a reading exercise so that the English sentences could be edited wherever students struggled – breaking up long sentences or substituting expressions.

The full script was translated into Japanese with the help of a Japanese faculty member, and then went to its first rehearsal. The bilingual script was read by a small group of recruited students. In both English and Japanese, students were encouraged to choose either language to read, even if they wanted to switch languages partway through a line. Some of the rehearsal group had been a part of the writing team and seemed proud of themselves, even laughing at the jokes they had put in, but the students who were not part of the writing team seemed nervous about their English abilities and asked multiple times if it was acceptable to read the Japanese lines aloud. This is an indication of a monolingual pressure Japanese students may feel in an English classroom – that it should be either all English or all Japanese. Many students reflected that it was difficult at first to switch their brains so quickly between languages but that they adjusted over the course of the rehearsals.

The *Mulan* script was the most sensitive because it is the least familiar to the director and the majority population of the audience. At first, the Chinese international students seemed eager to be responsible for writing a 10-minute version of *Mulan*, but as the other two scripts were finished, the students had yet to make progress. A casual meeting was called with the director, a few Chinese students, and two Japanese students who were familiar with the Disney musical adaptation. The group watched multiple singalong videos from the movie in different languages: Japanese, English, and Mandarin. They used those songs to make a plot summary of the Disney movie and then agreed that the battle sequences could be done through dance. A rough script was created, dividing the story into four long scenes.

A similar process happened with the script for *Romeo & Juliet*, where the students expressed uncertainty about their ability to write an adaptation. First, some videos were watched on YouTube, including some footage of a Japanese-language musical theatre adaptation of *Romeo & Juliet*. The first draft was written mostly by the director with a small group of students, using note cards and colored pens to show the relationships between the characters. The play was divided roughly into ten scenes with ten characters, hoping to keep set changes minimal for a smooth abridgment of the long story. As with many abridgments, the plot becomes much more amusing when the details are cut out, so the tragic drama became a dramatic comedy as it was written. After being translated with the help of multiple Japanese faculty members, the students were able to read the bilingual script together. Students seemed impressed by the historical and dramatic significance of *Mulan* and seemed pleased that *Romeo & Juliet* was amusing and not as hard as they thought it would be. An excerpt of the bilingual script, which would later become a multilingual script, is provided in Appendix A.

3.4 Rehearsal

Rehearsals were held in the afternoon in the international exchange room every weekday. Students were encouraged to attend rehearsal whenever they were able, but it was understood that most of them could only attend a couple of times a week. Three students were unable to attend one of the two performance days, so it became clear that some actors would be Day 1 or Day 2 actors and that alternates would need to be identified. Ideally, these actors

would be in minor roles so that the change from one day to the other would not be too difficult for the other actors in the scene.

Auditions were not held formally. Students were asked when they were recruited if they wanted a bigger role or a smaller role and what languages they were comfortable performing in. Students who wanted bigger roles were asked to choose a play to have a big role in so they could have some agency over their roles. In the first week of rehearsing with the script, auditions were held informally: the play was read multiple times all the way through, with students switching roles each time. This method was chosen because most of the students had very little theatre experience and because it would act as the first few read-throughs even if the cast had not been decided yet. Many students asked for reassurance that they could speak their lines in Japanese throughout the process. Some students announced to the group that they would try to read in English today, and the other students were encouraging. After frequent comments from the director, students began to remind each other that an all-English production was not the goal and that everyone should be allowed to challenge themselves in a foreign language or be comfortable sharing their native language with the audience.

Many rehearsals only had a few actual actors in the room, so the substitute actor group was formed by students who regularly spent time in the international exchange room. These students were international students and Japanese students, usually working on homework or relaxing, who were either invited or volunteered to read in place of the missing actors. This process of constantly switching the actors around helped to solidify the story itself in the minds of the actors and crew, although it did cause problems later when some actors had never heard their scene partner speak their dialogue before the dress rehearsal.

The script underwent multiple changes, so every time it was edited, a new batch was printed and stamped with the date for students to use. Labeling proved essential as time passed because students who were sick for a week might come back and not realize that the script had changed until their acting partners were reading the scene differently from what was on their page. Regular script changes were logistically challenging but allowed for many shifts in the lines, translations, and even character arcs.

Some students were hesitant to join the acting group at first, but when they started reading, they wanted to do more. This was especially evident in the two characters of the Nurse and the Friar in the abridged *Romeo & Juliet*. At first, they only had about six lines each, but their acting was so good, and their eagerness to tell the story correctly inspired the script expansion of their respective dialogues with Juliet and Romeo. This expansion allowed more iconic lines to be represented in the play, such as Juliet's "What's in a name? A rose by any other name would smell as sweet! ... I am no Capulet, and he is no Montague!" The first two sentences are directly from the Shakespearean text, originally in a monologue Juliet gives on her balcony, oblivious that Romeo is privy to her words, in Act 2 scene 2 of the original text. The final sentence is a contemporary summary of what she says next, but it has been reframed in the script as a conversation she has with the Nurse. As with many abridged Shakespeare plays, the balance between the original language and modern speech patterns can create comedy and add drama. In Scene 6, Romeo visits the Friar and asks for his help to get married tomorrow (Appendix A). At first, they speak casually, but then their language drops into Shakespearean text when the Friar makes the ominous remark: "These violent delights have violent ends, and in their triumph die. Like fire and powder, which, as they kiss, consume," in Act 2 scene 6 of the original text. The actors decided that Romeo should pause to try to understand this difficult language, get overwhelmed, and then hurriedly say, "I don't care how it ends! I love her!" This exchange caused giggles in rehearsal and in the performance every time.

Without an existing theatre club, there were few costume and prop resources available, so each item had to be made, bought at a discount, or borrowed. One-point costume characterization, where a costume is distilled into one piece, and the group of actors wear neutral colors so that the one-point is accentuated, was mostly used for financial reasons. It was also helpful for logistics when students needed to switch between stories and characters every 15 minutes, taking off one item (such as a tie), putting on another item (such as a hat), and switching between a sword and a cane. The growing collection of items on the rehearsal tables also attracted curious students to come help with rehearsals.

Traditional theatre production etiquette forbids people from touching props or wearing costumes that are not theirs, to protect the items from accidental damage. Such hard rules do save money on repairs or replacements and demand a level of respect from participants, but they can also serve as gatekeepers to prevent beginners from trying something new. In this case, those rules were never communicated, to maximize the potential for each student to play around a little with the items. Of course, this was concerning due to the toy weapons, as students were unable to resist the urge to play around fighting with their friends, but the weapons had been purchased at a discount store and were easily replaceable. Thus, students could play around with the toy swords and bats, unlocking a childlike joy and interacting across language barriers to teach each other little play-fighting techniques. These moments may have been stifled by purchasing more expensive items or an unnecessarily militant approach to the "rules of theater." Especially in the multilingual space, any rules and regulations should be approached with a community-building mindset, so other rules that general theatre practitioners take for granted may need similar adjustments.

3.5 Third Language Translations

Most students were satisfied with the binary options of English or Japanese for each character. A few students asked if they could perform some characters in Mandarin, Korean, and Nepali. For the Mandarin script, a Chinese student who was too busy to participate in rehearsals, but was eager to contribute somehow, volunteered to translate it from Japanese. He took one week to translate *Mulan* and then asked if the other two scripts needed to be in Mandarin, too. At that point in rehearsals, extra scripts were regularly being passed to students who were uninterested in acting on stage but wanted to help as "substitute actors" – some of whom were Chinese students who preferred to read lines in Mandarin. It took two more weeks for the entire script to be translated. Ten copies of the "Mandarin Edition" were printed, and each character's lines were numbered so that readers could keep track of their lines even when the language was not printed on their script.

The two Japanese students who wanted to perform in Korean went to their textbooks and translation software first and then consulted with the Korean faculty members. Both faculty members were able to help them with translations and pronunciation, a volunteer effort that was instrumental in the students' confidence and pride in their third-language acting abilities. One student asked to perform one of his roles in English, one in Japanese, and one in his native language of Nepali. Ideally, there would be more than one language representative for each language spoken so that no language is only one person's project, but in this case, the student seemed proud to be the expert of his own language and to be in a space that celebrated his ability to speak more languages. A few students who could speak Cantonese made a few jokes together about including Cantonese but then decided against it because they had already worked hard to memorize their lines in English.

3.6 Performance

The program for the event had seven chapters: an introduction in many languages, "Momotaro," a performance of "Reflection" from Disney's *Mulan*, "Mulan," a puppet show, "Romeo & Juliet," and a farewell in many languages. Eight languages were used in the introduction and farewell sections, where a student demonstrated a greeting in a language, and the audience repeated it with subtitle pronunciation guides. Momotaro was performed in English, Japanese, Korean, and Nepali. As a prelude to *Mulan*, a Greek student sang the song "Reflection," which was translated from the original English into Greek, while the video played with the Japanese translation of the lyrics on the projector screen. *Mulan* was performed in English, Japanese, Chinese, Nepali, and Korean. The puppet show was performed in Japanese and included a promotional section where students could advertise the other festival activities they were involved in and a Shakespeare introduction section where the puppets introduced the ten characters of *Romeo & Juliet*. "The Tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet*, *Top Speed*" was performed in English, Japanese, Mandarin, Korean, and Nepali. Students took a bow after every chapter of the production and then had a final bow altogether at the end.

Three students who had significant experience in theatre had asked to recite their lines in Japanese only. But some of the other students, without theatrical experience, began rehearsals in Japanese but switched to English over the course of rehearsals as they became more comfortable. This was viewed by the director as a positive outcome, but also caused stress in those who had asked to stay in Japanese. As time passed, peer pressure seemed to have the effect of forcing all actors to speak English lines, despite constant reminders that more English would make it less multilingual. Students who attended rehearsal regularly, regardless of language ability, were able to settle into a nice language balance, but in the actual performance, a student with significant theatre experience, but low English ability, read their English lines from the projector during the performance due to a lack of confidence. This slowed down the pace of the production and added a level of stress to the performers who wanted to stick to the plan of those characters speaking Japanese, highlighting how valuable rehearsal time and effort is for group cohesion in a linguistically challenging production.

In an amateur production such as this, linguistic challenges existed for both the performers and the audience. The Japanese audience was reserved but often laughed at the Japanese language lines during the production, suggesting that the actors speaking Japanese may have been advocates for the Japanese audience members. When one of the students said a line in Japanese and the audience responded with laughter, he misinterpreted their linguistic relief and joy as judgment and turned back to read the English subtitles. Meanwhile, another actor, who had come to rehearsals more regularly and had committed to speaking in Japanese throughout, was very comfortable acting in his native language and working with the audience to help them understand his multilingual scene partners. This is evidence that the repetition in the rehearsal process itself is essential for students to become comfortable with their role in a multilingual production. There was no pressure from the actors or from the director for these students to perform outside of their native language, but they nevertheless felt pressure to conform. This is consistent with Niino's (2023) experience watching a Japanese multilingual play, where he lamented the effort demanded by the viewer to choose between understanding by reading or to accept some linguistic ignorance.

4. Student Reflections

A month after the production, students responded to an anonymous open-ended survey with only one question written in both English and Japanese: "Please write some thoughts about the multiple language theater

project. You can write about challenges, stresses, fun memories, and learning experiences." All the student responses, translated into English and edited for clarity, are available in Appendix B. Their comments reveal common experiences, such as positive feelings of international exchange, stresses about preparing on such a tight schedule, and pride in their efforts, both as individuals and as a group, towards the final production.

Students reflected that they "felt a terrific sense of accomplishment" (student 1) and "saw strong performances by multiple people" (student 5). These examples show that students felt pride in their work. Other students used words such as "enjoyed" (student 9 and 11) and "exciting" (student 4 and 5) to positively describe their experiences. One student wrote that they were "so glad we could read the script together" (student 2), which may indicate that students viewed the rehearsal process itself as a valuable experience. This is consistent with analysis of Cheng & Winston (2011) in section 2.3. Even students who had little theatre experience wrote positive reflections: "I was excited to speak although I was a beginner" (student 5). A few reflections included positive theatrical experiences showing their interest in doing a project like this in the future: "let's make a drama club!" (student 2), and "I'll never forget the theater memory. I want to do language theater" (student 5). One student wrote about their acting experience, "I tried my best to [...] express my emotions with my voice and movements" (student 8), showing how the multilingual medium gave new meaning to basic theatrical practices that encourage nonverbal communication.

This production had an inherent element of international exchange which was advertised in the recruitment materials, hoping to attract students who wanted to have a multinational and multilingual experience. Students' reflections on the production also included various cosmopolitan comments: "I took this opportunity to meet many partners from other countries" (student 3), and "we got to interact with international students" (student 6). One student explicitly wrote, "Acting in so many languages made me want to be able to speak to people from many countries in the future" (student 8), indicating a shift in personal goals connecting foreign languages to future social experiences. Another student said, "I realized again that it doesn't matter what country you are from when dealing with people" (student 11) and wrote at length about the fears Japanese people have about interacting with foreigners, and how this experience proved those fears to be misguided. According to these comments, the international aspect of this play was a positive experience that promoted multinational conversations, cultural exchanges, and shifts in thinking about one's future beyond their own country. This echoes Nakamura's (2022) analysis of the *Drive My Car* film in Section 2.2 above.

Students also reflected on the linguistic experiences they had in the play. Many of the comments reflected the novelty of the multilingual script, describing it as "a valuable experience for me to mix various languages to create one performance, which I had never done before" (student 9), and "fun to perform the play in more than one language, not just English" (student 1). These comments show that students had not done this sort of performance before, and that they benefited from the challenge. One student said it was "good to be exposed to a language I would not normally hear" (student 7), possibly referring to the set of actors who performed in one of the alternate languages of Mandarin, Korean, Nepali, and one who sang in Greek. Another student revealed the struggle they had with the English lines: "[t]he English script was new, but it was a little difficult for me" (student 2), showing that for some students, the pressure to read in English was still present despite other actors reading in their native languages. The language study benefits were also commented on: "remembering the script helped me with studying the language" (student 11), indicating that this method of multilingual script writing could be useful as a tool to help students practice conversational language skills, as suggested by Kovács (2014).

The main challenge noted by students in their reflections was the short time schedule they faced in this project. Four of the eleven comments included this sentiment: "stresses were to gather in time" (student 4), "not enough time for all of us to practice together" (student 6), stating that the limited schedule was the main challenge of the production. Another student, while making a similar comment, laments the lost social opportunities of having so little time: "if we had been able to practice a little earlier, we would have been able to do many more things with our friends" (student 9), while another student wished for more time to improve their performance as a group, writing that it "would have been more perfect if we could fix some time so that we can rehearse perfectly" (student 10). Another challenge, as written before, was that the English script was too difficult for one student. Another challenge noted in the reflections was that the rehearsal schedule was tough on the actors who wanted to work with their scene partners, but instead worked with substitute actors often: "I found problems adjusting to new people and students, though we managed ourselves" (student 10). Although the practice of welcoming substitute actors was done partially by necessity and to promote the international exchange activity of rehearsals without the pressures of a performance, it would have been good for the performing actors to have a more regular cast of scene partners to work consistently with.

Many of the ideas in these comments are universal to theatrical productions: a lack of time often characterizes both amateur and professional productions, a sense of pride in the performance is felt by those who act and who contributed efforts behind the scenes, and a human connection is made among the group and with the audience members in rehearsal and performance. The inclusion of these comments in the students' reflections shows that despite the multilingualism, this was a standard theatrical experience which was enjoyed by students with and without drama backgrounds. But some of these comments are more unique to this context – the international exchange seemed to be appreciated and celebrated by the students, as was the opportunity to act in multiple languages and gain exposure to other countries, customs, and cultures. The language of a script may be challenging to actors even in their native language, especially in scripts written in specialized language such as Shakespeare or a regional dialect, so students' feelings of struggle with the multilingual script may have been resolved with more rehearsal time or adjustment of the script. It is possible that some students may have felt that the English script was too challenging but that the script in their native language would seem too easy. Other students seemed intimidated by the responsibility of involvement in the script writing and felt more comfortable rehearsing with the script as a finished product. This is a challenge that must be faced by every drama educator or director who wants to encourage student-written scripts. The next time this experiment is undertaken, the same script can be used as a jumping-off point and a safety net, encouraging students to use it again or write their own.

5. Conclusion

A multilingual theatre production is demanding on the part of the production company and of the audience. It has roots in migrant communities where language exchanges are necessary for the survival of multiple cultures in a host country. Multilingual theatre productions in the commercial world have been done to explore the boundaries between cultures and languages. In the educational context, it is an example of a valuable activity for a foreign language program to attempt. The expensive qualities of commercial multilingual theatre do not necessarily apply to one for educational purposes because the objective is not to make money but for students to gain agency in both their native languages and their foreign languages. Language teachers and theatre educators can pre-write simple scripts to encourage their students to contribute in a short time frame like the one described in this paper, or can

work in a longer capacity, such as building an entire course or club activity around a project. Students involved can experience the challenges and joys of a theatrical production, with the additional benefit of international exchange and the empowerment to choose the language in which they will express themselves.

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7. Appendix A

Romeo & Juliet, Scene 6

Romeo	Help me, Friar. I want to get married tomorrow.	助けてください、修道士。 明日結婚したいんです。	6.1
Friar	You always say that. Who is it now?	君はいつもそう言う。 今度は誰ですか？	6.2
Romeo	This one is real! I will marry Juliet.	これは本物だ！ ジュリエットと結婚する。	6.3
Friar	These violent delights have violent ends, and in their triumph die. Like fire and powder, which, as they kiss, consume.	暴力的な喜びは暴力的な結末を迎え、 勝利のうちに死ぬ。 火や粉のように、接吻を交わしながら 焼き尽くす。	6.4
Romeo	I don't care how it ends! I love her!	結末なんてどうでもいい！ 彼女を愛している！	6.5
Friar	You are the craziest boy in Verona. ... I will help you.	君はヴェローナで最もやばい少年だ。 私が助けてあげる。	6.6
Romeo	Thanks! We'll come back tomorrow to get married here.	ありがとう！明日、ここで結婚式を 挙げるためにまた来よう。	6.7

**** Full scripts, bilingual rehearsal version and multilingual production version, are available upon request.**

8. Appendix B

Student Responses for Multilingual Theatre (translated into English and edited for clarity), responding to the open-ended reflection prompt in English and Japanese: "Please write some thoughts about the multiple language theater project. You can write about challenges, stresses, fun memories, and learning experiences."

1. At first, we only had lines from the script, but after a lot of practice and rehearsals, we were happy to see it all come together as one play. I also felt a terrific sense of accomplishment in the production. It was also fun to perform the play in more than one language, not just English. And it was great that we were able to make new relationships through the play. My overall rating for the play was a perfect 100!
 2. It was very fun! The English script was new, but it was a little difficult for me. I'm so glad we could read the script together! Let's make a drama club!
 3. Very cool! I took this opportunity to meet many partners from other countries.
 4. I loved the idea. It was really exciting. The stresses were to gather in time.
 5. I saw strong performances by multiple people. I had a very good experience, and I was excited to speak although I was a beginner. The teacher's strong support was reassuring. I'll never forget the theater memory. I want to do language theater. Thank you!
 6. Not enough time for all of us to practice together. Gave us a chance to speak in English. We got to interact with international students.
 7. It was good to be exposed to a language I would not normally hear.
 8. I was happy to be able to play the role I got. When acting, I tried my best to imitate the performances of actors I admired and to express my emotions with my voice and movements. Acting in so many languages made me want to be able to speak to people from many countries in the future.
 9. It was a valuable experience for me to mix various languages to create one performance, which I had never done before, and I really enjoyed it! That said, I also feel that if we had been able to practice a little earlier, we would have been able to do many more things with our friends. It was a very enjoyable experience!
 10. Well, I really loved the projects. In some of the parts, I found problems adjusting to new people and students, though we managed ourselves. Also, there was a time scheduling problem. It would have been more perfect if we could fix some time so that we can rehearse perfectly. Thank you!
 11. The theater project was so interesting, and I enjoyed it! Here are a few reasons why I feel the project was good. First, remembering the script helped me with studying the language. For example, I learned the word *bullies*. The first time I heard *bullies*, it was a difficult word for me. I didn't know the meaning, pronunciation, or how to use it. But now, I can understand it and I use it in my daily life, because I learned through practice. Second, I realized again that it doesn't matter what country you are from when dealing with people. The theater project members consisted of multiple nationalities. Of course, there are language barriers and cultural differences. But I didn't feel that the countries mattered. On the contrary, our theater was successful. Some Japanese people avoid talking with foreign people. But I think we don't need to be scared, because language barriers and cultural differences are not scary. I experienced it firsthand. These are reasons I feel theater project was good. Thank you for helping us!
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ⁱ In the first year of the pandemic, the university had enforced the transition of most classes to online formats, then allowed classes to resume in-person at 30% capacity during some periods when coronavirus was deemed lower-transmission. In the second year of the pandemic, the 30% capacity was changed to 50% capacity, and online classes were only mandated for 4 weeks of the year. By the time of this theatrical production in the third year of the pandemic, the desks were still marked for 50% capacity, but the institution had lifted most other restrictions such as the mask mandate, following the lifting of guidelines by the Japanese government.