The Absence of Voices in the Theatre Space: 

Ku Nauka’s Production of *Medea*

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Recent theatre studies have pointed out that the audience perceives the voice of an actor not directly but as ‘absence’, as a substitute for a ‘real’ voice in the Lacanian sense. Despite wide-ranging research on the voice and its ‘absence’, there is still a question that needs to be explored: what role does this ‘absence’ play for the actor’s body-space, the theatre space, and the audience? A significant example for exploring this question can be found in the production of *Medea* by the Japanese theatre group Ku Nauka, in which the embodiment of each character is split into a male narrator, who vocalizes the text, and an actress who gesticulates it silently. Since each female character is divided into a male voice and a silent female body, the audience has to search for her ‘real’ voice. Based on the experimental performance style of early twentieth century European avant-garde theatre, Ku Nauka’s *Medea* thus lets the audience experience two different aspects of voice: a loss of the ‘real’ voice and a utopian and contradictive search for it.

Theatre-Voice and Absence

Since, as Peter Brook asserts, theatre needs only an empty space occupied by a performer and an observer to make a performance possible (9), the theatre space is therefore one of the most essential conditions for any kind of theatre. Through the structure of time and space, everything can be a theatrical expression. The theatre space, including the auditorium, enables more variable effects for voices than for other theatrical elements. When an actor gesticulates and vocalizes a text on the stage, his or her voice can appeal to the senses and perception of the audience more directly than simply by gesture. While the gesture and the text are instantaneously analysed through the recognition and understanding of the audience, the voice itself resonates in their bodies and often remains longer in the emotional dimensions of their memory without being interpreted immediately. Although the audience can block out an unbearably disgusting scene by closing their eyes, they cannot avoid the invasion of awful screaming into their ears. By resonating in the bodies of speaking actors and the audience, the voice unites the theatre space and thus removes the distinction between the stage and the auditorium.

Because of this physical and transgressive impact, there is a tendency in voice theory to consider it as closely related to the notion of presence. The present voice of a speaking person settles in the body of his or her listener (Mersch 212). According to Doris Kolesch, however, the voice of an
actor is presented under the condition that the strangeness and absence of identity are present and articulated in his or her voice. Since the voice of an actor comes out through imitation and representation of the voice and language belonging to a character, “otherness,” “luck” and “deprivation” (Kolesch 262) are inherent in the voice. Another aspect of the voice (i.e. its absence) is implicit in a theatre performance composed of imitation, representation and fiction, and thus we cannot discuss the presence of the theatre-voice without examining this complex function.

The theme of presence and absence in theatre and performance has been investigated both in previous performance and cultural studies (Auslander; Phellan 146) and in dance research (Siegmund). Philip Auslander underscores the contradictions in the arguments for the value of presence in performances and concerts by pointing out that digital coverage of a live event sometimes impacts viewers more effectively than the theatre performance itself (66-72). Gerald Siegmund takes the non-dancing-expressions in dance performances by William Forsythe and Meg Stuart into consideration and insists that elements of absence rather than presence are in the foreground (49-114). Thus, recent theatre and performance studies place more emphasis on absence than on presence, and Kolesch’s argumentation for the absence of the voice in theatre is a part of this trend. Despite wide-ranging research on the voice and its absence, there are still some questions to be explored: when an actor says something on the stage, how does the absent aspect of voice impact on the actor and the audience? What impact does this absence have in the body-spaces of the actor and the audience and in the theatre space?

A relevant example for exploring these questions is Medea, performed by the Japanese theatre group Ku Nauka. In this stage production, which premiered in 1999, each character is embodied by a male narrator who vocalizes the text, and an actress who physically acts it out silently. By compelling the actresses to act solely through movement, the actors seem to deprive them of their independence, while at the same time robbing them of their voices. Throughout the performance the audience never hears the actual voice of a single actress. The real voices of the actresses are absent in the theatre space, as well as in their own bodies and in those of the audience. As described below, this extraordinary form of separation in Medea attests to the absent aspect of the voices, which can also apply to a standard theatre performance. Although this aspect is usually hidden in a staging filled with multiple voices, it can be identified in the theatre and body-spaces of actors and the audience if we focus on the process of how the voices are produced.