In February 2011 the Lasenkan Theater Berlin will perform the new play by **TAWADA Yōko* "Kafka Kaikoku."

Tawada Yōko was born in Tōkyō and studied literature in Japan majoring in Russian Literature. She first visited Germany in 1979 arriving via the Trans Siberian Railway, and lived in Hamburg from 1982 to 2006 where she studied Modern German Literature with Sigrid Weigel and completed her PhD. Her first literary works were published in 1986 in the “Japan-Lesebuch” (Konkursbuchverlag, Tübingen) and her first book was published in Germany in 1987 and in Japan in 1992. (For more information please refer to www.yokotawada.de) She writes in German and Japanese.

Below is an interview with the author who currently resides in Berlin.

“Kafka Kaikoku” is your latest play. What is it about?

It’s about the German word “Ungeziefer” (insect/vermin), which I’ve always found very interesting. As we all know Gregor Samsa is transformed into an Ungeziefer. One day I looked up the word “Ungeziefer” in an etymological reference work and found out that it originally meant “an unclean animal”, possibly referring to an “animal unsuitable for sacrifice.” As an “Ungeziefer” Samsa was unable to continue working as a salesman. Or, he no longer needed to work. It is thought he had to meet the debts of his parents, yet later when he no longer works, this doesn’t seem to be a problem for the parents. How do we interpret this? The story ends with anticipation of his sister’s wedding. How do we interpret this concept of the future? My play deals with these questions, which is an adaption of Kafka’s novella Metamorphosis.

At the same time it deals with the opening of Japan (kaikoku). The Japanese author Izumi Kyōka also has an important influence. I think he was the author who after Japan’s modernization didn’t simply forget the spirits of the Edo Period; rather he rescued them in modern language. “Kafka Kaikoku” refers to his play “Yashagaikē.”

What sort of influence does Franz Kafka have on your own writing?

For me, Kafka’s literature is one of the few examples of German literature that reveals how the magic of language and the surreal affect each other. I liked reading Kafka while I was at school without really understanding why. Thanks to Walter Benjamin I later rediscovered Kafka. I also think that Kafka can be a key to modern world literature. During my many trips I started to see passionate young readers of Kafka from many different cultures. I not only met Japanese or American, but also Chinese and Arabic authors, and students who were avid readers of Kafka and integrated this influence in their own works.

You write both in German and Japanese. In which language did you write your latest play, and why did you choose this language?

I wrote “Kafka Kaikoku” in German because this project is about a cultural exchange in which we don’t export a finished product, rather we learn from the creative process about the location in which we live, practice and play (the Lasenkan Theater performs plays and I play with words). The “location” is in this case “the German language.” However there are a few Japanese parts in the play that can be understood onomatopoeically.

The Lasenkan Theater Berlin has performed your works since 1997, including “Sancho Pansa,” “Butai Dobuzu” and “Das nackte Auge (The naked eye).” It claims to “develop a modern form of theater situated on the boundaries of language and culture.” You’re also regarded as a boundary rider between German and Japanese languages and cultures. Is this a meeting place for kindred souls?

I don’t have just one soul but many, and I hope I may find as many kindred souls without formally having to establish a family.

The Lasenkan Theater has continuously worked with my plays since 1992 and developed their own aesthetic that isn’t to be found elsewhere. Today, there are many intellectuals and artists living in places where their native language is not understood. Playing with foreign words is part of a lifestyle that determines our modern age.

People speak with gaps, bridges, divides, defects, deformities and displacement, and it’s here where we recognize something worthwhile knowing.

You write lyrics, essays, prose, plays, and radio pieces, and you’ve been a guest performer at the JDBZ with pianist TAKASE Aki. Is there a genre that you prefer or that has most influenced you as a writer?

I have always loved reading dramatic works: starting with Shakespeare, Chekhov and the classical Greek tragedies, and then later reading works by Kleist, Büchner and Heiner Müller. Still, I couldn’t say that I prefer reading or writing poems or prose over drama. Every text must find a form best suited. For this reason I write in various genres.

“Kafka Kaikoku” will be performed within the framework of the event series “150 Years of German-Japanese Friendship” at the JDBZ. Does the piece contain statements about German-Japanese relations?

At the close of the 19th century Japan opened its humble doors, which had previously been closed for 250 years, to the world. Prussia was chosen as a model for Japan’s modernization because Prussia had undergone rapid development. However, what does rapidity mean to culture and people? Ghosts, spirits, fantastical creatures and other figures from the Edo Period did not have enough time to disappear. Thus they appear today in the midst of modern technology, in manga and anime. However, the enforced rapidity also exhausted the people. Japan raced through modernization, militarization, the colonization of other Asian countries, war, democratization, industrialization etc, just to keep up. Now the time has come to rest and look back and critically review our own history.

TAWADA Yōko (3rd from left) and the theater group Lasenkan at the JDBZ.