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Theatre

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Critical Acts

Gallows Hospitality

Visiting Hangman Takuzō's Garden Theatre

Reginald Jackson

“Hangman Takuzō” (Kubikukuri Takuzō) was a Tokyo-based performance artist. On 28 July 2017, I went to watch him hang himself, an event scheduled to begin at 7:00 p.m. Hangman

performed this act every night, regardless of whether an audience joined him or not. My interest in his art stems from dancer and choreographer Yasuko Yokoshi's film, *Hangman Takuzo* (2012). Admittedly, I was nervous about seeing him in the flesh. Yokoshi writes, “67-year-old Hangman Takuzō lives in Tokyo. Over the past 14 years, he has been presenting a ‘garden theater’ at his house. In this micro-world Takuzō suspends himself from a tree for about ten minutes each day during an hour-long ritual performance” (2015). The “garden theatre” (*niwa no gekijō*) spans about four-by-ten meters and seats roughly a dozen people.

An online map shows how to find the venue. Getting from Kunitachi train station to the proper intersection goes fine but finding an entrance to this “micro-world” is trickier, tucked as it is within an unremarkable residential area. I'm not sure what I expected, but what I find is an overgrown copse flanked by houses, an arrangement that implies a house should be where instead there are elephant-high weeds. Twice, I skirt this mini-jungle, circling it to see if I can spy some solid structure. Finally, I draw closer. Approaching a narrow slit in the foliage, I notice a little sign: *niwa no gekijō*. There are no pedestrians to ask and no discernible lights or gate to suggest this unkempt anomaly might be the



Figure 1. Inside Hangman Takuzō's “garden theatre” the anvil stands at the ready in front of the hanging pit. Tokyo, 28 July 2017. (Photo by Reginald Jackson)

place. Sure enough, though, sliding through I glimpse the unassuming rope—hanging from a tree, about a body’s length above a neat ditch in the backyard’s mud floor.

It is now 6:30 p.m. Entering the garden, on the left I see makeshift benches and a couple of folding chairs covered for padding in what looks like repurposed aluminum building insulation. To the right at the corner closest to the garden’s entrance, atop a little wooden end table, sits a box for spectators to place their admission fee. Looking up I see a desk lamp twisted toward the empty noose 10 feet away—a makeshift spotlight, switched off. The lamp is clamped to the roof edge of a small structure, less a house than a lean-to, which is raised off the dirt by about a foot; for all I know, Hangman cobbled it together himself. A stray gust might blow it down.

No more pictures, out of courtesy.

A sliding door along the side of the shack is open and lights are on inside. A couple pairs of shoes are aligned in the dirt outside the door. I try to balance myself on the doorframe to remove my shoes, then step up into the house. I don’t see Takuzō at first, just a 20-something man, already seated, alert at a low table amidst piles of yellowed paperbacks, newspaper clippings, and all kinds of hoarded, potentially flammable materials. On the low table, an electric kettle whispers beside a neat stack of plastic cups—the thimble kind you sip Robitussin from. The swelter of Tokyo at summer’s height has followed me inside.

Removing my backpack I try to sit down at the table, worried I’ll lose my balance and accidentally trample some precious archive scrap Takuzō has ferreted away.

I introduce myself to the guy at the kettle. Incense smolders and a package of tea—Chinese on its packaging—awaits steeping. Takuzō emerges from a back room and introduces himself; I do the same. A couple minutes later, roughly 15 minutes before showtime, three college students arrive; like me, this



Figure 2. Audience seats at Hangman Takuzō’s “garden theatre.” Tokyo, 28 July 2017. (Photo by Reginald Jackson)

is their first Hangman show. Teapot man, who has seen Takuzō perform many times before, has brought tea from Taiwan as a gift. “Want some liquor?” Takuzō asks. “No,” answer the students, explaining that they’re still too young to drink. At this, Takuzō pours some of the Taiwanese tea into the tiny cups and passes them around. We thank him, share a murmured “Cheers,” and nurse the scalding tea. Takuzō pipes up and pats a portly football-sized watermelon, which he boasts his farmer friend donated just the other day. He wonders aloud if it’ll be ripe and smiles, telling us we’ll enjoy this treat once the show ends. I’m unnerved by the earnest hospitality, partly because something about the kindly way he pats the melon drives home just how poor he is. Everything about the condition of his house, garden, clothing, and refreshments signals someone barely scraping by.

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Figure 3. Hangman Takuzō prepares his theatre's lighting. Tokyo, 2014. (Screenshot by Reginald Jackson; video by Yasuko Yokoshi)

The hospitality's generous insistence makes it feel staged and sincere simultaneously. Takuzō seems genuinely genial about hosting and learning about his visitors. But that patient noose right past the sliding door taints all gestures in the vicinity with an ominous air. Is this a pre-performance, or just act one of some larger arc of which the hanging is a segment? As specified on the little box at the entrance, we each pay ¥1000—about \$10—presumably covering not simply the “show” but refreshments, too. With the hosting and hanging both performed by Takuzō, the precise price of the latter event proves harder to calculate. We become his audience, but only after we've been his guests.

What does this uncanny welcome cost us, above the thousand yen? What might it cost him, selling access to his straining body each evening?

Takuzō surrounds the hanging spectacle with mundane social contact devoid of overt theatricality. Takuzō isn't there to simply shock or entertain. Rather, he plays host, generously insisting on low-key rituals that bookend his main event to cushion the potentially alienating impact of what we are really there to see. By offering guests refreshments before and after the performance, Takuzō collapses any distance we might have felt from him. At one level, this

gesture conforms to a Japanese custom of welcoming a guest with a snack and some tea. Still, the chit-chat belies the noose waiting like a sentinel—not five meters away. Kneeling around this tiny table with strangers feels a bit surreal.

Are we really just going to sip our tea pretending this guy's not about to hop outside and hang himself?

About five minutes before 7:00 he announces, “Well, it's that time” (*Yosh': mō jikan da*), rising from the table and gesturing toward the shiny crooked benches. We try not to tumble over one another or trample stuff as we reposition, don our shoes, and grab a seat outside. The sun has set, and two more people have now slipped into the garden, waiting politely on the benches as we tumble out. A woman stares

into her palm, faint cellphone light glazing her face. Another guy looks like a stereotypical “salaryman”—a salaried white-collar worker—just off work; he just stares ahead at the red noose. (Guess they didn't want tea.) A couple of other folks scamper in over the next minute or two, slipping folded bills into the fee box. Takuzō sweeps leaf bits away from the hanging site with a makeshift broom made of branches and wire, held together with black cellophane tape with “Miyagi” printed on it. Two ski poles lean against the house, near a shovel. Our host climbs back into the house to change his shirt to a yellowish turtleneck that looks like the once golden fabric's iridescence has drained out. A final straggler arrives, making 10 spectators total.

Takuzō emerges, switching on the clamp-on lamp to illuminate the simple gallows as he steps down into the cramped backyard in his new shirt and threadbare slippers. Wordless, he's now switched modes. He gazes toward the tree but appears off-axis, avoiding the noose dead-on. It's as though he is regarding it nobly from an island cliff. Maybe it's the heat, but the distance between Takuzō and the tree he'll soon hang from seems to swell and solidify. Uncomfortably, time starts to stiffen along with it. There's a good 40 minutes that pre-

cedes the climactic hanging itself. This includes a painstakingly slow approach, in which Takuzō crouches slightly and wades across the yard's dirt, pawing purposefully through the atmosphere around his torso. A tai chi matador, he stalks a bull only he can see.

This laser-focused slowness made for rough going given the thick darkness, the soupy summer heat, and a paucity of variation in head, hand, and foot movements. Takuzō's labored walk defied any automatic recognition as "dance," even as his nonvirtuosic movement could align with the antiballetic, pedestrian experiments and styles prevalent in Japan and elsewhere since the 1950s. There was no chalky-white body paint, yet I thought of early butoh, and of Donald Richie's catty criticism of Hijikata Tatsumi's works as "distinguished by their length, their apparent irrationality, [and] their intended boredom" (1979:2). Although it seems he never studied with him formally, Takuzō reports that it was in fact butoh pioneer Hijikata Tatsumi himself who originally told him to abandon the body-spasm (*keiren*) street performance he'd been doing and experiment with hanging himself instead. During the shooting of her film, *Hangman Takuzo*, Yasuko Yokoshi interviewed the performer to understand better his motivations:

TAKUZŌ: I started hanging myself in 1969. I originally wanted to disappear from here. I wondered if I could really do that. Hanging is a Japanese tradition, or rather, a global tradition, the act of disappearing. I wanted to disappear while pain still remained in my body. So I decided to carry my pain as I hang. When I say "pain" I do not mean pain like a pain in the hand. I mean the total pain of being. It was like getting away from something inside of me. It began as a form of escape. I've practiced these sorts of hardcore physical activities since a young age.

YOKOSHI: How did you start training to hang yourself?

TAKUZŌ: In the beginning there was no way of practicing hanging. When I tried, I passed out. So I went to a Jyu-do (martial arts) master and asked him to make me unconscious. This is called "drop" in martial arts, or making the opponent lose his consciousness. He

could "drop" me, but my problem was regaining consciousness by myself. Then I decided to strengthen my neck muscles. I hung heavy weights from my neck and pulled them over and over. I practiced this quite a lot [...]. Eventually, I was able to hang for up to 50 seconds. One day, I asked myself "what are you going to do now?" Till then, I had done all kinds of physical performances onstage. But I thought, if I were to hang myself every day, I could whip the boredom (*kentai*) of my daily life. With hanging, I realized, I might be able to live! (Yokoshi 2011)

Feign death to feel alive. Takuzō sought to shoulder and suspend an existential pain through his hanging practice, to escape from a normal plane of social existence by gripping something more cruelly true. We can think of this desire to disappear in the same vein as his childhood wish to become a carpenter; both paths evade the salaryman career track whose popularity soared during postwar Japan's explosive reindustrialization (Yokoshi 2012). Both his aspirations to become a laborer and his efforts to disappear by hanging were Takuzō's attempts to fashion a new style of masculinity, askew of the blueprints readily available to him. The masochistic bent of his late-1960s experiments with "body expression" through spasms parallels that of other (male) avantgarde Japanese artists like Katō Yoshihiro and Min Tanaka, for whom Hijikata looms as countercultural father figure.

That Takuzo surmised this training could help him live by heaving him out of a cycle of unremitting weariness sketches an alternative posture to postwar Japanese ideals of productive citizenship and social reproduction. His decision to practice hanging, and eventually to make his modest living doing so, signifies an embrace of failure or delinquency literalized through his body's short-lived suspension. As Miryam Sas explains about the postwar counter-ideal of "decadence" or "fall-*eness*," "*Daraku* [decadence] is possible only for the moment, if it is possible at all. [Sakaguchi] Ango writes that, 'human beings are too weak to fall completely'" (2011:9). Hangman Takuzō's fleeting fall enacts his own social death, only temporarily. For him, to hang was to refuse participation in a perpetual move



Figure 4. Hangman Takuzō steadies himself for hanging. Tokyo, 2014. (Screenshot by Reginald Jackson; video by Yasuko Yokoshi)



Figure 5. Hangman Takuzō hanging. Tokyo, 2014. (Screenshot by Reginald Jackson; video by Yasuko Yokoshi)

forward; to hang is to interrupt the drive for a certain vision of wealth, security, and happiness by fastening one's body above the fray—for a time, at least.

Compared to Hijikata, Takuzō's grueling slowness feels more self-possessed, less aggressive. Tattered costume notwithstanding, his bearing is princely in its delicate confidence, coupled with aloofness, as he edges his way

around the shallow hanging pit, his open fingers testing the tense atmosphere like antennae. He arrives at the pit's perimeter, prepared to enter: an anvil sits atop a cinder block.

The area Takuzō has taken the better part of 40 minutes to traverse amounts to a dozen feet square—if that. He pauses, then mounts the anvil smoothly. Our attention peaks. He takes hold of the noose—balancing. Each hand's fingers curl around either side of it to pull open the loop he'll now push his head through.

He pauses again, eyes hollow, elbows cocked, steadying himself upon the pedestal as he tiptoes to plank his body and hook his chin over the rope's bottom curve. Our breathing shallows. A cockroach so large it looks like it has waddled here straight from the Temple of Doom clips my peripheral vision as it grazes lightly along the shack's perimeter. (My mind scrounges for any scrap of humor amidst mounting discomfort.)

Rope gripped, Takuzō's knuckles tighten as he draws back a bit. Just then, with the barest dive forward, his neck slips through the noose. Toes quit anvil. Taut legs swing into an inverted "V" to clear the metal pedestal and his body goes cadaver-limp once his eyelids shut. The garden goes dead silent save the numb creak of the tree limb as he swings. Time stops as his sinewy mass sways, lulling its way back toward a pure plumb line.

The very nature of Takuzō's hanging erects a partition between performer and audience on the basis of an intensified cognizance of mortality: his, certainly, and likely our own. The dingy red rope and slender suspended body inscribe a vertical axis whose tension flickers between centrifugal repulsion and a centripetal solicitation of stares. The toggling push/pull makes me queasy, especially given the sweltering



Figure 6. Hangman Takuzō entertaining guests following a performance. Tokyo, 2014. (Screenshot by Reginald Jackson; video by Yasuko Yokoshi)

humidity; saliva dribbles from Hangman’s bottom lip onto his turtleneck. His slight twists and crooks—of an elbow, or a knee—alter the velocity of his rotation in a manner that winds up more haunting than stomach-turning.

Once his body realigns vertically, Takuzō activates a lazy spin, clockwise with arms rising. He cants his feet a bit—juts left heel down, tugs right toes up—steadily leveling out his gyration. As his hands pass his waist, navel, ribcage, sternum, shoulders, a hole gapes in the turtleneck’s armpit. Takuzō grips the noose’s sides, hoists himself just slightly, and lets go. He drops with a thud into the modest pit of hard-packed mud. There are gobs of saliva now, and the sudden impact sends it surging. Gleaming strands sidle past his grizzled chin down onto his chest. Takuzō’s eyes snap open.

He’s shell-shocked: glassy gaze and wobbly jaw. Our matador, struck by stupor, scans the darkness for that phantom bull again. Hands are near his thighs, not pawing at the air, but merely aiding balance now that he has returned to earth. A minute or two of sluggish navigation follows, until Hangman climbs inside the house again. Seconds pass. Then Takuzō pops his head out: “All done!” (*Ijō desu!*). This last little exclamation rattles, because by this point, just shy of an hour in, we’ve been primed and

silent for so long. We all clap. Takuzō changes shirts while we shift in our shoddy seats to coax our legs awake.

He invites us in for more tea and some of that friend’s watermelon he’d promised. Dazed, weary from the heat, legs tingling, I tread the few steps back to the house to rejoin the five audience members who decided to stay. Too tired to remove my shoes, I watch Takuzō emerge with a big knife and a broad plate. He braces the melon with his hand and slices into it. Its halves plop apart: mostly whitish insides, with scattered flecks of pink. “Please have a seat.” He gestures to a vacant spot near where I’d sat before. “Ah, no thank you. I need to be heading home now, unfortunately. But thank you for tonight’s performance.” I bow a few times, backing from the door into the yard. Takuzō just nods and starts cutting slices of the unripe watermelon as the tea man parcels out more Rorbitussin cups.

I walk out through the garden theatre’s entrance—pitch black now—trying to fend off the brazen bushes nicking my face and forearms. In the empty alley I take a deep breath, then another, staring at asphalt and recalling that mutant cockroach from 20 minutes prior. I swallow hard, readjusting my backpack as I roll my head in large circles, one way, then the

other. My neck and shoulders ache. I need to get back home.

My discomfort stems only partly from the summer mugginess and stiff physicality of witnessing, transfixed, for so long. It's more about the disorienting meld of two spaces I had assumed to be discrete: the sitting room and the hanging pit. Bright den abutting a deeply shadowed pit; communal festivity juxtaposed with a brutally stark assertion of solitary presence—life brushing death, with a nonchalance earned from nightly execution. Hangman's rendition of domesticity, the sheer amplitude of his gallows hospitality, shook me. It sent me reeling: out of his home, back to my own, where living didn't tilt so willingly toward death.

Coda

As this essay went to press, Takuzō passed away. He died in a hospital on 31 March 2018, due to complications from lung cancer. His singular presence and generosity of spirit echo. He will be missed.

"What Shall We Do?"

Kathy Change, Soomi Kim, and Asian Feminist Performance on Campus

Vivian L. Huang

New York City–based actor and movement artist Soomi Kim walked to the center of the performance area and held a beat before falling limp to the concrete floor. Watching Kim's body succumb to gravity, in the thick of the spring semester after the presidential election, I thought: she looks as tired as I feel. The place was Arts @ 29 Garden, a multiuse artists' space run by Harvard University in a basement just north of Harvard Square, formerly the home of the Harvard police department. It was 3 April 2017, a Monday evening, mere months into #45's presidency.

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Kim's exhaustion signaled the labor she would go on to perform and conjure that night. Soon Kim would rise to her sneakers and reenact three artists connected by their early deaths and their iconicity in Asian American culture: Bruce Lee, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, and Kathy Change. The virtuosic martial artist Bruce Lee of *Enter the Dragon* (1973) fame is the most widely known of the three, while multimedia artist Cha and her experimental novel *Dictée* (1982) have been pivotal for Asian American cultural scholarship (such as, for example, Lisa Lowe's groundbreaking

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