

Eric Schorr speaks with Haruko Nakanishi about *Tokio Confidential*

Hiroko: A 19th-century American woman travels to Japan and decides to get a body tattoo. How did you come up with this central idea for *Tokio Confidential*?

Eric: Well, the short version is, I've had a long-term interest in Japan—it's history, art and culture. I've also very fond of the work of Henry James, and I wondered what might happen if one of his heroines—in this case Isabel Archer from *The Portrait of a Lady*—traveled east from America, instead of west. That was the beginning of the idea.

Hiroko: But tattoos don't figure into *The Portrait of a Lady*, do they?

Eric: No, they certainly don't.

Hiroko: So that part is your invention.

Eric: Yes, totally. The whole story, really, is my invention.

Hiroko: But I take it the musical is very accurate historically?

Eric: Yes, everything that takes place could have happened. And certain characters are modeled on actual people from the time.

Hiroko: Including the leading lady, I presume?

Eric: The character of Isabella is loosely based on two historical figures as well as a fictional one. The two historical ones are an intrepid explorer named Isabella Bird and a Boston art collector, Isabella Stewart Gardner, who founded that city's famous Gardner Museum. The fictional figure, as I mentioned earlier, is Isabel Archer.

Another character in the piece, that of the art dealer, is inspired by a famous art-historian named Ernest Fenollosa, who was a friend of Isabella Stewart Gardner. The character of the tattoo artist is based on the renowned Horicho.

Hiroko: What can you tell us about the historical period in which the piece is set?

Eric: *Tokio Confidential* takes place during the Meiji Period, which takes its name from the Emperor Meiji, who ruled Japan from 1868 until he died in 1912. Meiji was the first leader of modern Japan. Prior to 1868, Japan was a “closed country” run by the shoguns, and virtually no foreigners were allowed access. One of Meiji’s goals was to “civilize and enlighten” the nation, which largely meant “opening” it to western ideas, culture and technology. He invited to Tokio many distinguished foreigners who he thought had a lot to teach the country.

Hiroko: What was it about this period that interested you?

Eric: Specifically, *Tokio* is set in 1879-1880. Meiji had already been on the throne for over a decade and the country was in the throes of westernization. The powerful culture clash between east and west, as well as the tension between tradition and change, provides the background in which the characters interact and the basis of their conflict.

By the way, just one example of Meiji’s attempt to make over Japan in a more western vein, was his decision to outlaw tattooing—at least for his own subjects. He believed western visitors to Japan would see the tattoos and consider the Japanese unsophisticated barbarians. Foreigners who traveled to Japan, though, were exempt from this rule. And many of them wanted to be tattooed. It was a kind of permanent souvenir of their trip. Even some members of the English royal family brought home tattoos.

Hiroko: You’ve said the piece owes a great deal to Japanese *noh* theater. Could you explain?

Eric: Noh is one of the oldest forms of what today we would call musical theater. It integrates seamlessly theater, music and dance. To me, there is something very haunting and mysterious about the music of noh. While *Tokio* is not a noh play, it

borrowed from a certain type of noh play, called “battle noh,” the protagonists of which are the warriors from Japan’s 11th-century civil wars. These particular noh plays are infused with Buddhist themes and ideas.

Fast-forwarding hundreds of years and without revealing some of the plot details, there is also a noir aspect to *Tokio*. I like to refer to the piece as noh meets noir, or “noh-oir.”



Noh Mask

Hiroko: Another Japanese art form that figures prominently on the piece is *ukiyo-e*.

Eric: Yes, *ukiyo-e* are the colorful, multi-layered woodblock prints. The name literally means “pictures of the floating world.” The term “floating world” refers, very generally speaking, to the world of the pleasure quarters in the big cities, like Tokio.

Many of the classic designs for Japanese body tattoos, by the way, are based on these woodblock prints. In fact, some of the

first tattoo artists were the carvers of the woodblocks. They just decided to “carve” into skin instead of wood. One of the Japanese words for tattoo is *horimono*, which literally means “something carved.”



One of Katsushika Hokusai’s prints of Mount Fuji

Hiroko: To me, noh and ukiyo-e represent two quite distinctive styles, and I’m curious to know how these elements are juxtaposed.

Eric: You are absolutely correct that noh and ukiyo-e represent two very different worlds (in addition to being very different art forms). Noh was the theater of the elites—the Emperor and the court, the shogun and the samurai class. The prints of the *ukiyo*, on the other hand, were the popular art of the townspeople, who made up the vast majority of the Tokio population. This was the art with which those nineteenth-century westerners with an interest in Japan would have been familiar. By the way, even members of the respectable samurai class were known to visit the floating world occasionally—if they wanted to have a little fun!

Hiroko: *Tokio* takes place in a world very different from our own. I am curious how you see this story connecting with a contemporary audience.

Eric: Though the story is set in another place and time, its themes are very contemporary (and timeless). I don't want to give too much away, but at the heart of the piece are two interracial (Asian/Caucasian) relationships, one of them homosexual (although that term would not have been used at the time in history during which the play takes place). And the play has an anti-war message that is as relevant today as ever before. I think audiences will be able to see parts of themselves reflected in the characters and their relationships.

Hiroko: Last question. Why is "Tokio" spelled with an "i" and not a "y."

Eric: If you look at English-language newspapers, maps and guidebooks from the period during which the piece is set, most of them spell it that way. So, I thought it was a nicely authentic atmospheric touch.

Suggestions for Further Reading

To read more about noh visit:

<http://www.the-noh.com/>

To read more about ukiyo-e visit:

<http://www.japan-zone.com/culture/ukiyoe.shtml>

To read more about the Meiji Era of Japanese History visit:

http://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027/throwing_off_asia_01/emperor_02.html