Asia Center Fellowship 2015 - 2016

Performance 3.0: A Study on Media in the Performing Arts in Japan

FINAL REPORT

PREPARED BY FAIRUZ SULAIMAN

PROJECT OVERVIEW

·   The target of the research was to understand how different types of media are placed within the *working process* of creating a performance, and by extension investigate how the usage of these types of media affects the overall creation of the performance.

·   *Working process* can be understood as the mechanisms employed; from conceptualization to the staging.

·   These *working processes* are usually tried and tested methods that are a result of a series of trials and errors learnt from past performances.

·   By unearthing these processes, it will significantly benefit my own practice as an artist as well as other performing art practitioners who are also working or planning to work with media.

·   The position of Japan as a country that is technologically advanced with a rich history in the performing arts is a unique one. This has proven to be a great environment for many Japanese companies, artists, and performers to experiment with media technology.

·   A typical *working process*:

> (1) Conceptualization
>
> (2) Content Making
>
> (3) Rehearsals
>
> (4) Staging

·   Research methods that were used:

> (1) Conducting interviews
>
> (2) Audio visual recordings

(3) Attending rehearsals, workshops and performances

(4) Studying source materials

RESEARCH SUBJECT #1

THE HIROSHI KOIKE BRIDGE PROJECT

·   For the starting point of my research, I shadowed two productions by director Hiroshi Koike; *Mahabharata 2.5* and *Restaurant of Many Orders (Restaurant)*.

1. **Mahabharata 2.5**

·   *Mahabharata 2.5* is part of a long-term project based on the Hindu epic. This project spans several productions over seven years and features an Asian cast and crew. This ambitious project has staged performances in several countries including India, Thailand, Philippines, Malaysia and at the time of my research, Japan.

· The story in *Mahabharata 2.5* focused on the period leading up to the Kurukshetra War; the epic battle between the two groups of cousins, the Kauravas and the Pandavas.

Performance details:

· The first rehearsal since arriving to Tokyo following their Asia tour was held at Morishita Studio on 5th December 2015. Some of the cast members fell ill due to the strenuous nature of the tour and could not attend this rehearsal. I had my

first introduction to Hiroshi Koike, who later introduced me to the cast and crew present.

· The crew bumped in at the Kichijoji Theatre on 6th December. Rehearsals for the cast began later that day with full attendance. I was also introduced to the managers of Hiroshi Koike Bridge Project: Yuko Tanaka and Shoko Yamauchi

· The performance ran from the 8 - 16 with a total of 10 performances. Three of the shows included a post-show discussion with the director, a professor of Asian Studies at Toyo University; Dr. Hisayoshi Miyamato and contemporary artist Takashi Kuribayashi.

· The show was well received, with an almost full capacity audience for a majority of the shows. This was worth noting considering the Mahabharata epic is considerably foreign to Japanese audiences.

2. **Restaurant of Many Orders**

Restaurant is based on a popular children's story of the same name by author Kenji Miyazawa. The production I shadowed was the second restaging by Koike-san since it first made its rounds in 2013, touring cities in Japan and South East Asia, including Kuala Lumpur.

Performance details:

·   My research for this production began with attending a theatre workshop conducted by Koike-san at the Hitachi Systems Hall, Sendai from the. This workshop was structured using Koike-san's version of *Restaurant* as its source material.

·   The workshop ran from 18th - 23rd December with a total of 11 participants from various backgrounds and age groups. At the end of the workshop, the participants staged a public performance at the workshop venue.

· Rehearsals for *Restaurant* were from 24th – 27th December in Kokokita, Tokyo. These rehearsals were mainly with the director and his three performers; Koyano Tetsuro, Akira Otsuka and Ayako Araki. A special rehearsal with musicians; Shitamachi Kyodai, Kikazu Nakamura and Toshio Nakagawa was held on 28th December at the Nagareyama City Life Long Center. Rehearsals with only the performers continued again from the 4th – 7th January at Kokokita.

· The venue was located at the Kanazawa Citizen's Art Center, Kanazawa, with 3 shows running from the 10th - 11th December. Bump in began on the 8th with a full dress rehearsal on the 9th. The overall reception was also overwhelming, with their opening night attended by a capacity audience.

Understanding the Working Process

· A large part of understanding the process was through continuous discussions and interviews I had with the director, production managers, producer, performers and musicians, which included:

i.	Hiroshi Koike
ii.	Shoko Yamauchi
iii.	Yuko Takeda
iv.	Koyano Tetsuro
v.	Sunon Warakarn
vi.	Lee Swee Keong
vii.	Shitamachi Kyodai
viii.	Yoshi Yamamoto
x.	Akira Otsuka
xi.	Ayako Araki

· These interviews were conducted multiple times, documented via audio and video recording alongside written notes. The information obtained from these interviews was later supplemented with additional online research.

· Video, photography and written notes were also used to record the process of the workshops, rehearsals and performances. Documentation of the set designs, props, costumes were also made.

*Minimal set design depicting a scene in the jungle during Bhima's encounter with Hanuman*

Some of the hand-made Balinese masks that were used as props and formed part of the stage design

· From my interviews with Koike-san, I discovered that one of his approaches developed for the production was a technique called *music map.* Essentially, this *music map* functions like a storyboard for his musicians; it maps the brightness, mood, intensity and other performative elements to a timecode according to the intended production. This *music map* is accompanied by a detailed script for the performers and musicians, which also includes side notes for the performers to help them imagine or visualize being in that particular situation. For instance, if the dialogue takes place in a forest, Koike-san would add a note describing how the scene looks like, the time of day, and the surrounding ambience.

· Utilising the *music map* alongside a detailed script has tremendously helped in cutting costs for space rental due to a shorter rehearsal period. It also makes the rehearsals more efficient because everyone on the production understands exactly what needs to be achieved according to the prepared information.

Working with Media

· My definition of media includes:
    i.   Body
    ii.   Costumes and props
    iii.   Sound and music
    iiv.   Stage and visual design
    v.   Lighting and projection

· Koike-san's philosophy as a performing arts director is to create a truly harmonious performance on stage. This harmony is achieved when you carefully balance these three elements:
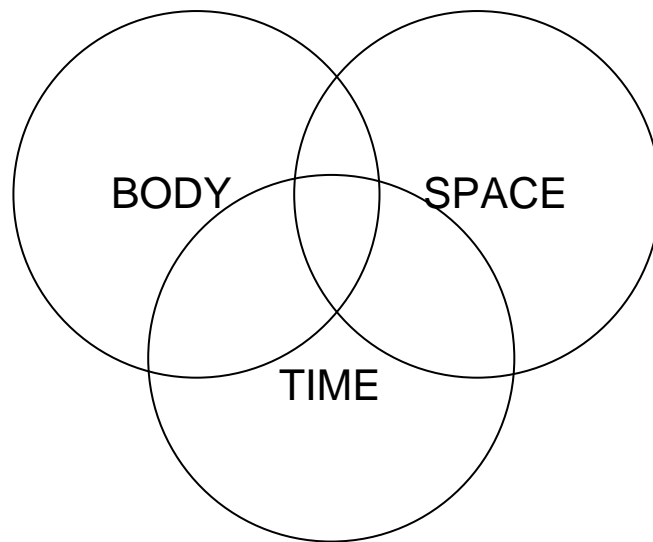
Koike-san's philosophy of performing arts

- The use of media in his works is meant to go towards creating this harmonious balance between the aforementioned elements of *Body-Space-Time.* Each media used is carefully crafted into the performance, not allowing any one media to overshadow another. The result of this is a seamless and uninterrupted experience where the audiences' attention is engaged from beginning to end.

- In contrast with many of his productions during Pappa Tarahumara in which he employed a significant amount of varying media; [architecture, fashion design, installation , video projection], *Mahabharata 2.5* and *Restaurant* each had a markedly more modest engagement with media.
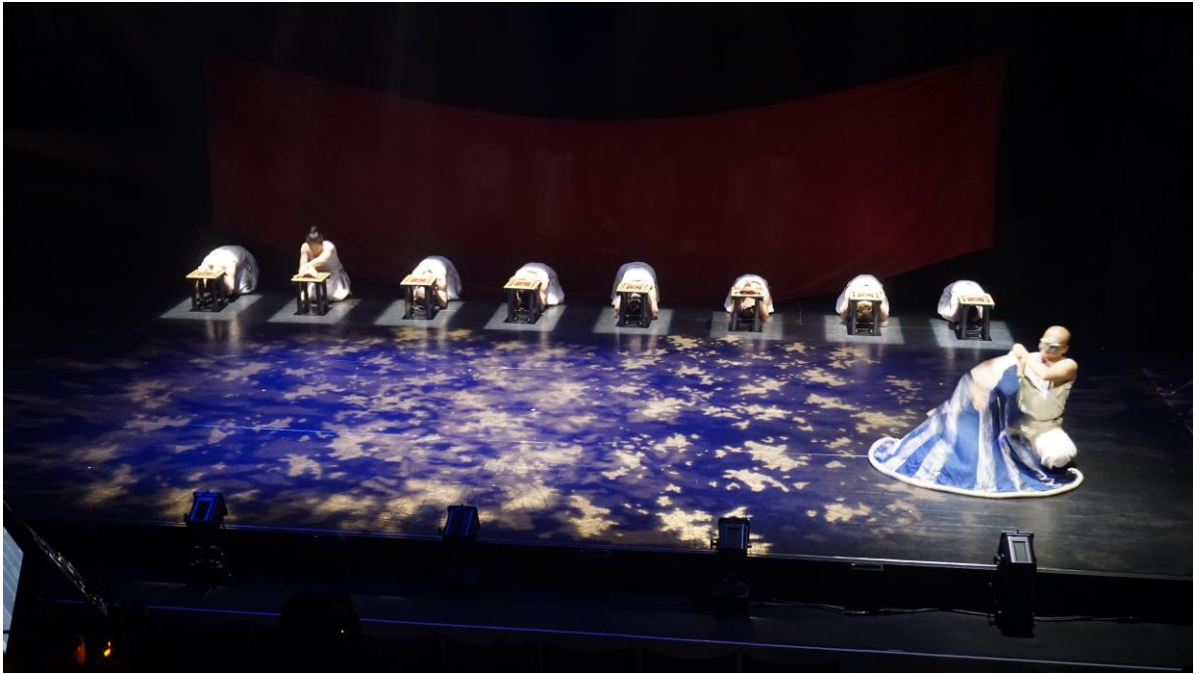
Media usage

1. **Mahabharata 2.5**
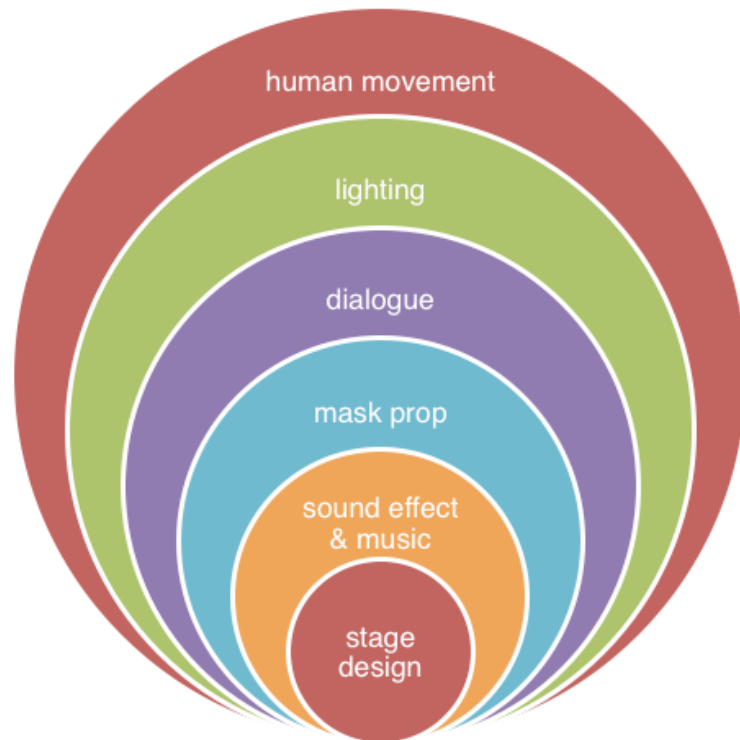
Breakdown of media according to their frequency of usage

· From the diagram above, the top three most frequently used media is lighting, which is not only the most essential element in creating an atmosphere, but also the most overlooked. The next most used media is the human body; including choreographed and acrobatic movements. It is also noted that this production is heavy in dialogue between its multiple characters. The least used media include props and masks, sound effects and music, and stage design.

Lighting design for the opening scene of Mahabharata 2.5

Lighting and stage design for the great battle between the Kaurava and Pandavas

Some of the beautiful and intricately designed costumes

A contemporary designed chariot that Arjuna sits upon, driven by Krishna

2. Restaurant of Many Orders

*Breakdown of media according to their frequency of usage*

· In comparison to the previous diagram for *Mahabharata 2.5*, a pattern begins to emerge. Again, the most frequently used media is lighting and body movement, while the least used are music and sound, dialogue, and props. Being a comparatively smaller scale production compared to *Mahabharata 2.5, Restaurant* however still retains the spirit and intensity of the former production in its delivery.

Performers Ayako-san and Koyan-san (1st and 2nd from left) exchanging comments with the musicians

Subdued lighting and smoke wafting through the stage helped create a sinister, mysterious moment
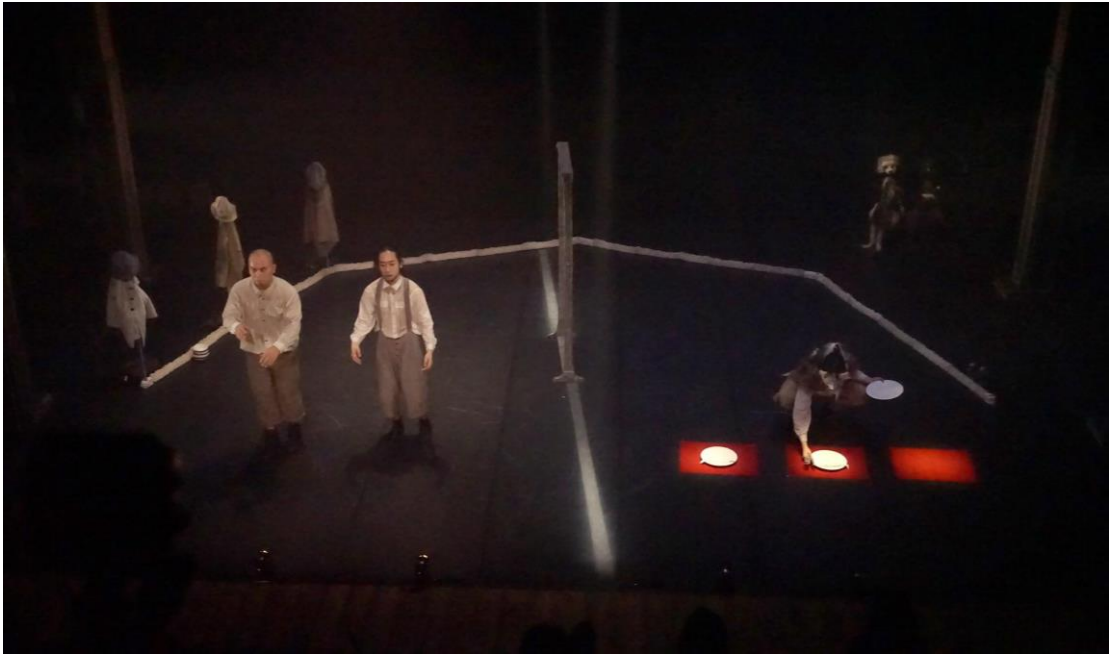
Minimal use of set design that results in striking imagery due to great use of lighting and strong contrasts

Some of the main props that were used

Conclusion

What fascinated me most about Hiroshi-san's practice was how well-prepared he was; the production was well-scripted and planned out before the performers stepped into rehearsals. He clearly knew how the media employed, from the props to the dance choreography, were going to complement each other. Being an accomplished director, Hiroshi-san exerts a self-assured and confident amount of control over his production; this allows the production to run smoothly and with great efficiency. His method of meticulously preparing everything beforehand has many advantages especially from a budgeting aspect, yet it also has its disadvantages, one of them being the little space allowed for experimentation and improvisation. For instance, this limits the probable incorporation of new creative input or suggestions by the performers or crew members.

For his working practice with media, it can be observed that Hiroshi-san uses them as cogs in a larger framework to help elevate his story at hand. No one particular media takes precedence over another; all of them work together cohesively in line with his philosophy of *BODY/SPACE/TIME.*

From what I have learned throughout this particular research, what I would like to explore in my future practice would be his music mapping technique. I believe this technique can be explored further to include mapping of other aspects, for instance emotions, movements or speed. This practice of composing in detail every aspect of the performance is particularly appealing to me since it is not something I have utilised before in my own practice.

RESEARCH SUBJECT #2

DIVIDUAL PLAYS : Yoko Ando + YCAM Interlab

In late 2010, Japanese dancer Yoko Ando, from the acclaimed German contemporary dance company, Forsythe, began exploring ideas with the Interlab team from the Yamaguchi Center for Arts and Media (YCAM) on the possibilities of using virtual reality technology to develop new movements for dance. This long-term research and development project came to be known as *RAM*, or *Reactor for Awareness in Motion*. *RAM* is made out of two components; a motion capture device called *MOTIONER* and a custom made software called *RAM DANCE TOOL KIT (RDTK)*.

Through years of collaboration in the form of workshops, presentations and summer camps, a performance came into being - *DIVIDUAL PLAYS*, which at its beginning was a cross between a performance demonstration and a presentation. Director Yoko-san was searching for the most effective way of communicating the connection between the dancers and the technology. This led to the inclusion of the *HAKONIWA* or *little garden*; an environmental system consisting of a series of physical mini environments made up of mechanical laboratories and virtual scenes. The first performance was held at YCAM in early 2015.

The second performance of *DIVIDUAL PLAYS* was held a year later from 4th - 5th February 2016 at the Kanagawa Arts Theatre *(KAAT)*, with the support of the Japan Foundation in conjunction with The Performing Arts Meeting in Yokohama (TPAM).

Creative team discussion between director Yoko Ando (center), dancers and Interlab members

Preparations and rehearsals took place at YCAM over a few weeks prior to the performance at TPAM. Preparations began in mid-January 2016 with the programmers and technical crew meticulously updating and troubleshooting the *MOTIONER*, *RDTK* and the *HAKONIWA.*

Director Yoko Ando and dancers Kenta Kojiri, Yasutake Shimaji and Kyoko Miyashita arrived a few days later and much time was spent discussing with the Interlab members the sequence of the performance. These intensive discussions were led by project curator Tsuba Nishi and was also later joined by spatial designer, architect Tsuyoshi Tane. These discussions often went late into the night beyond rehearsal hours.

Director Yoko Ando (left) exchanging ideas with dancer Kenta Kojiro

The crew began bumping in on 1st until 3rd February, working from 9am - 10pm. Being their first performance outside the comfort of the YCAM venue, there was a lot of concern about the technical setup at *KAAT*. The space was comparatively smaller, in addition to being limited in terms of the in-house tech crew. Having anticipated these issues, the crew came well prepared, led by Interlab project coordinator Clarence Ng. Several of their own technical assistants in various capacities were brought in especially for the production, ranging from lighting to stage managing.

Understanding the Working Process

Among the people interviewed include:

I. Yoko Ando

II. Clarence Ng

III. Takayuki Ito

IV. Kenta Kojiri

V. Yasuke Kitamaji

VI. Sheep

VII. Evala

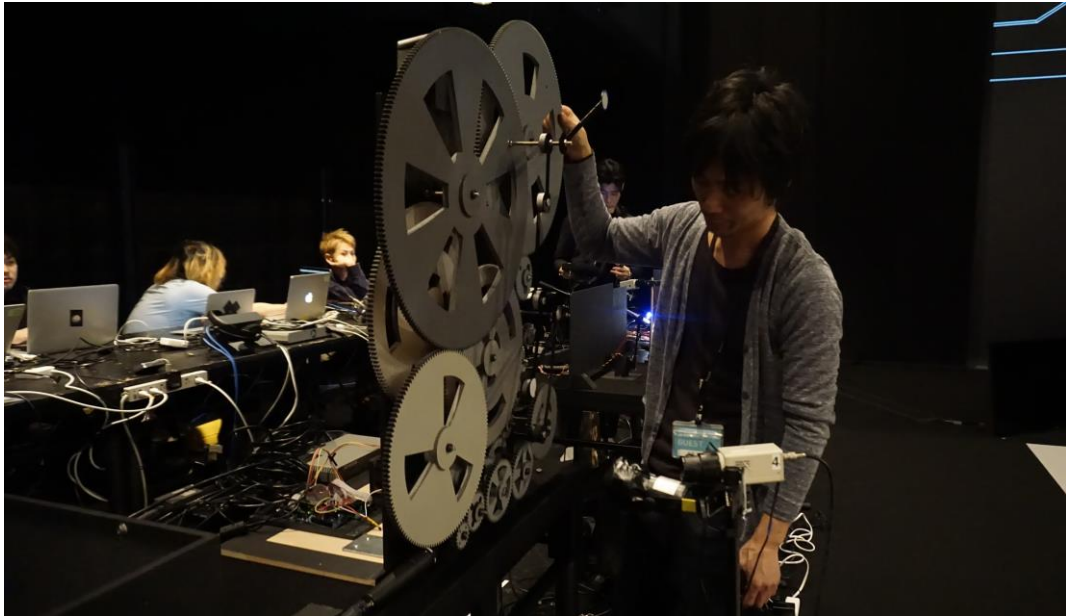VIII. Tsuyoshi Tane

IX. Tsuba Nishi

Most of these interviews took place during the rehearsal period in YCAM or after the staging in KAAT, considering many of the interviewees were occupied throughout the period at KAAT.
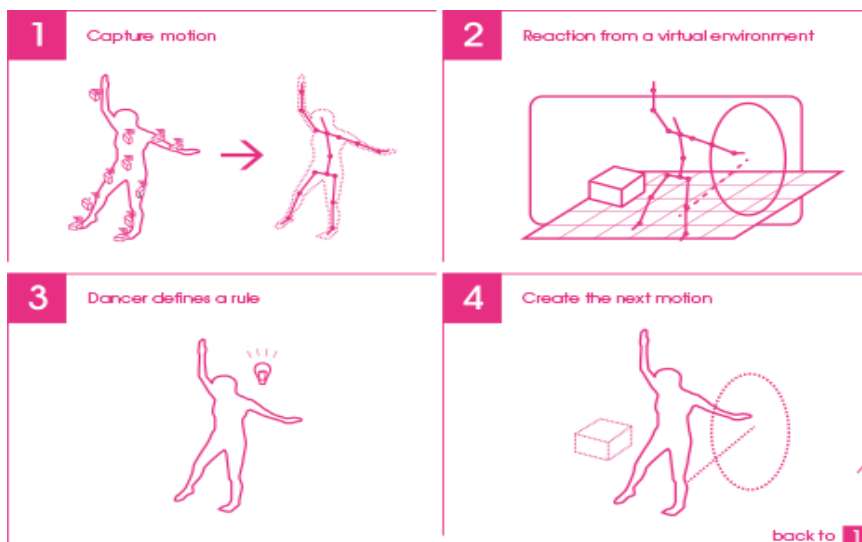
Working with Media

The relationship between the various media for this production is different compared to Hiroshi-san's approach. For *Dividual Plays,* the performers ultimately decide for themselves how they would like to respond to the information created by the *RDTK.* As the performer's responses change, so do the other media.

For this production, the breakdown of media is as follows:

I. Body movement

II. Sound / audio

III. Lighting and projection mapping

IV. Visual projection

V. Spatial design

VI. HAKONIWA

Interlab member Takuro Iwata, who designed many of the HAKONIWA, making some adjustments

1	Capture motion
2	Reaction from a virtual environment
3	Dancer defines a rule
4	Create the next motion

back to 1

A

simplified diagram explaining how the RDTK system functions

Essentially, the *HAKONIWA* - made up of motors, gears, magnets and circuits, among others - is linked to the dancer's motion capture data recorded by the *MOTIONER*. The *RDTK* then translates into moving images, sound, and lighting. The dancers in turn respond to these elements with new movements, which further goes into

creating new environments - creating a continuous loop, or cycle, of a fluid interaction between dance and technology.

For instance, in one part of the scene, the position of a performer's left arm would control the rotation of the moving head rigged about the stage, while the position of another performer onstage would determine the light's direction. This control also extends to the media of sound and music, designed and programmed by sound artist Evala. During certain parts of the scene, the movements of the performers onstage would control certain functions of the sound that is being generated, such as the amplitude of a certain sound frequency changing according to a performer's pacing onstage - the faster the movement, the higher the amplitude.

Dancer Kyoko Miyashita (first from right) controlling the moving head by rotating and waving her arms

The performer's responses are for the most part improvised, making every performance unique. The technical challenges of the various media themselves add to this; since all media technology are man-made, they are not faultless and do not necessarily function perfectly all the time.

Spatial designer Tsuyoshi Tane created a layout that helped connect what was happening center stage with the HAKONIWA on the side of the stage

Among the main directions for *Dividual Plays* was to create a balanced but clear understanding of how media technologies can work as a tool for performers to create new dance movements. It was very important for the team that the audience be able to make the connection between the relationship of the performer with the technology. To this end, a project presentation and demonstration by curator Nishi-san was added to the program alongside a post-performance Q&A session, which included members from Interlab and Professor Masahiko Inami from the School of Media Design at Keio University.

Post-performance discussion between (seated from left to right) YCAM Interlab members Richi Owaki, Tsuba Nishi, Ito Takayuki and Professor Masahiko Inami

Conclusion

Despite the complex technology involved, it can be said that the approach used for *Dividual Plays* has its similarities with other existing contemporary dance performances. Comparisons can be drawn to some improvisatory dance performances found in Kuala Lumpur where the dancer would react to music played by a live performer and vice versa causing a cause-effect cycle. *Dividual Plays* differs in that

alongside the dancer, the other live performer is a software, albeit one that is controlled by a human being.

An interesting point for me about *Dividual Plays* is its highly collaborative nature in presenting the work. This can be due to the fact that the performance is rooted in its *RAM* research program, which in essence requires many skilled professionals working together. As a side note, I am of the belief that being a dance performance, or any kind of performance for that matter, the director's intentions for the performance should be clearly visible. A performance runs the danger of being lost in the audience, especially when involving heavy usage of media. In my opinion, that direction was not clearly made visible here. However to the team's credit, I enjoyed the minimal visual presence of technology onstage; this emphasised focus on the effects of the technology, rather than the technology itself.

The use of motion tracking in performance was also very intriguing for me since I have previously experimented with similar ideas during my 2012 JENESYS internship in YCAM. Accordingly, I have had several discussions with the members of Interlab on ideas to expand the project to Malaysia; to be used as an archival method for bodily movements sourced from diverse traditional dance styles.