Monster mash
Godzilla takes the stage as a gentlemanly suitor

BY SUE BALINT
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ESTHER CHOI

GODZILLA


Godzilla. Juxtaposing a common situation with this decidedly uncommon leading man, Godzilla was a gargantuan hit in Japan from its 1987 debut. Through several remounts, nearly 100,000 people have now seen the show, but this is Godzilla’s first stop on a foreign stage.

The staged reading that followed Crow’s Theatre’s workshop in January was well received, assuaging Ohashi’s fears that his script might not resonate with a Canadian audience. “It was really surprising,” he says. “The Toronto audience’s reaction was identical to the Japanese audience’s reaction when it was first produced.”

Bridging the cultural gap has been a chief concern of translator Cody Poulton. Beyond simply transposing the text into English, Poulton and the company dedicated a lot of time to discussing the context of the script with Ohashi. “There’s a whole slew of culturally loaded concepts and ideas,” explains Poulton. Technicalities of grammar, tense and gender are easily confused. “I get a kick out of that... to make the words come alive in English.”

Poulton, a University of Victoria professor who has translated a good deal of Japanese poetry and prose, says the process is particularly challenging when a play is involved. Several different voices must be represented rather than the consistent single narrative that usually dominates prose or poetry.

“Each character has his own mannerisms, his own habits and his own slang, so you have to try to convey that as well,” Ohashi says. “It’s generally quite gentlemanly.”

This is worlds away from the monster’s traditional demeanor. Godzilla debuted in the 1954 film of that name and has appeared in 22 Japanese sequels, usually linked to radioactivity—a symbolic topic in Japan after the 1945 atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and subsequent nuclear weapons testing in the Pacific. At various points in its cinematic life, the monster has represented a threat to Japan as well as its defender, an eco-warrior and U.S. imperialism. In his play, Ohashi uses Godzilla to comment on cultural changes that followed the rising influence of the 1960s and 1980s.

With a background in electrical engineering, Ohashi’s first attraction to theatre sprang from the mechanics of what he was writing. He loves figuring out how to create the props and special effects his scripts call for. “The budget for this production was one ten-thousandth of that of The Lion King,” Ohashi says proudly. “But the effect that was created was equal.” Ohashi is especially pleased with a volcanic eruption onstage.

One effect that doesn’t require tricks is putting Godzilla himself on the stage. Ohashi doesn’t seek to emulate blockbuster-quality effects or, heaven forbid, make an actor put on a Godzilla suit. “Imagination is the tool he favours in the theatre, giving both the man and his script a refreshing magical and childlike feel.”

“The creators of television and film are probably responsible for lessening the power of the imagination,” he says. “I felt the audience was really hungry for the opportunity to maximize their own imagination. The audience creates Godzilla in the theatre.”

GETTING UNDER HIS SCALES

Actor John O’Callaghan is only six-foot-two, but he got a taste of what it’s like to be a big green outcast when he moved to Toronto from his native Dublin six years ago.

“I didn’t really feel like I fit in,” says O’Callaghan. “People took me as being a lot more sarcastic and ironic, and I wonder why people were like, throwing knives in my face. I think everyone can identify with not belonging. With Godzilla, though, it’s worse because he’s so huge.”

O’Callaghan eventually won over Toronto, not to mention eye Weekly, which named him best actor in the 1998 Toronto Fringe Festival for his work in Concorde McPherson’s Rum and Vodka, although O’Callaghan has since relocated to Los Angeles.

O’Callaghan and Godzilla director Jim Millan had to puzzle out appropriate ways of embodying their monster without the dubious benefit of a rubber suit.

“We’ve tried working on lots of physical stuff,” says O’Callaghan. “How he walks, how he dresses, how he grows. It’s not something I’ve really played before.” However, when asked to draw theatrical comparisons, O’Callaghan doesn’t hesitate: “He’s like Hamlet, really—it’s so emotional, and there’s a lot of levels to it. Am I setting myself up for laughs here?” SCOTT MACDONALD