Certaines n’avaient jamais vu la mer

The Buddha in the Attic

Julie Otsuka / Richard Brunel

With Simon Alopé, Mélanie Bourgeois, Youjin Choi, Yuika Hokama, Mike Nguyen, Ely Penh, Linh-Dan Pham, Chloé Réjon, Alyzée Soudet, Kyoko Takenaka, Haini Wang and Natalie Dessay

Co-produced by La Comédie de Valence, CDN Drôme-Ardèche; Avignon Theatre Festival; Théâtre des Quarts d’Ivry, CDN du Val-de-Marne.

TOUR 18-19

• 19 > 24 July 2018 – 72e Avignon Theatre Festival
• 14 > 25 Jan 2019 – Théâtre des Quarts d’Ivry, CDN du Val-de-Marne
• 30 Jan > 02 Feb 2019 – La Comédie de Valence, CDN Drôme-Ardèche
• 13 > 15 March 2019 – Théâtre Dijon Bourgogne, CDN de Dijon

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**Certaines n’avaient jamais vu la mer**

The Buddha in the Attic

Text Julie Otsuka

French translation Carine Chichereau

Adapted from the novel, *The Buddha in the Attic* – The Marsh Agency Ltd, incorporating Paterson Marsh Ltd and Campbell Thomson & McLaughlin Ltd

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Adapted and directed by Richard Brunel

With Simon Alopé, Mélanie Bourgeois, Youjin Choi, Yuika Hokama, Mike Nguyen, Ely Penh, Linh-Dan Pham, Chloé Réjon, Alyzée Soudet, Kyoko Takenaka, Haïni Wang

And Natalie Dessay

Dramaturgy Catherine Ailloud-Nicolas

Set Design Anouk Dell’Aiera

Costumes Benjamin Moreau

Sound Antoine Richard

Lighting Laurent Castaingt

Video Jérémie Scheidler

Assistant Director Pauline Ringeade

Co-produced by La Comédie de Valence Theatre, CDN Drôme-Ardèche; Avignon Theatre Festival; Théâtre des Quartiers d’Ivry, CDN du Val-de-Marne

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Certaines n'avaient jamais vu la mer © Jean-Louis Fernandez
GIVING A VOICE TO THE UNHEARD
Richard Brunel

When I came across Julie Otsuka’s novel, I was extremely moved by the context, a poorly known episode in American history, and the tragic destinies of the women she depicts. They set off by ship, at such a tender age, full of hope, leaving Japan for the US never to return, to live with men, exiled compatriots who letter after letter had told them tales of an idyllic world where couples lived happily and in harmony. Once there, they discovered how they had been lied to, and experienced rape and hard labour in the fields or in the homes of rich Americans. Disillusionment, desperation, then resignation, far from their homeland, far from their language.

They do their best to survive and integrate, giving birth to children who unlike them are American and behave accordingly, unfamiliar with their mother’s culture. Then comes Pearl Harbor. And immediately the Japanese, whether by birth or descent, first or second generation, become targets of suspicion, enemies from within. They are rounded up and set apart, camps are built to which whole families are freighted by train. In plain view of ordinary Americans, the Japanese disappear, leaving behind traces of their American lives.

In the last chapter of the novel, Julie Otsuka suspends the story of the Japanese women who have suddenly departed. The chapter in the camps that we were expecting does not appear. Like the Americans in the last chapter facing the unimaginable, we are left guessing at possible outcomes, pondering our unanswered questions, dazed and perhaps a little in denial of what has happened. We are subjected to the absence of those who have left this place where only days before it had been possible to live together. In the eyes of their neighbours, friends and employers, the ordinary Americans who have stayed put, the Japanese have taken on the quality of ghosts or shadows.

In this text, I was particularly struck by the manner in which we are pulled into this great endless saga, related in a precise, musical language, right up until the moment when their fate suddenly takes a mysterious turn, decided by the American authorities. Behind the collective we, behind what seems to be a chorus, there is in reality a chorality at work, disseminated in a multiplicity of characters, bearing a name and their own micro-story, all as different as they are fascinating. Julie Otsuka succeeds in painting, in words, precise miniatures within a gigantic fresco, little narratives within the great narrative of History. This is what I found particularly interesting, the voices she lends to the unheard, an individuality that asserts itself from inside a community. I’m going to put all these “I”s, these first person narratives, into the hands of several actresses who will not only give them a voice, like a spokesperson reminding us of a former time, but who will embody them, bringing them to life as people. On stage, I will have them interact with several forms of otherness: men, in the shape of husbands, children or employers, and one woman, an American, the symbol of another way of behaving in society, of dressing, speaking, thinking. I want to work on the musicality of the language, embedding it in the very bodies of the performers, their movement, acts and interactions. Above all, the aim is tell the story of a harrowing period when, at the blink of an eye, a foreigner or even a fellow citizen of foreign origin, friend or employee, is suddenly an object of suspicion and is duly summoned to prove their loyalty.
Japanese women lining up on a boat for immigration inspection – Angel Island © NARA
THERE ARE STORIES THAT NEED TO BE HEARD
Excerpts from an interview with Julie Otsuka by Bret Anthony Johnston for the National Book Foundation

Bret Anthony Johnston: What role does setting play in your writing?
Julie Otsuka: The setting was crucial, almost like another character in the novel. These women are coming to a landscape that’s unlike anyplace they’ve ever seen before. America, to them, is utterly exotic in so many ways. So my task was to make the landscape I grew up in and love, the landscape that I imprinted on as being the world—California—seem new and strange again, as if I were seeing it for the first time. I had to show America through their eyes. This meant, above all, the vastness of the place, the acres and acres of uncultivated land, which was just unthinkable in Japan back then. (Remember, in the early 1900s Japan was an overcrowded country of rice farmers, which is another reason people were so desperate to get off the island, they were running out of space.) And everything looked different to them, everything: the people (so enormous and pale), the horses (twice the size of the horses back home in Japan), the buildings (in Japan the buildings were no more than two stories high), the trees (no bamboo), the shoes (so pointy)...

B.A.J.: How much of the story do you know before you start?
J.O.: I knew my beginning from the very start. And the ending, too. The last chapter was actually a piece of unfinished business from my first book, which was about a Japanese American family that is sent to the camps during WWII. What, I often wondered, did their neighbors think after they had left? Were they relieved to see their Japanese neighbors gone? Did they miss them? Did they think they would never come back? Did they not even notice they’d left? So I’d been wanting to write about a town ‘the moment after’—the moment after the Japanese have disappeared—for a long time. And then I got to thinking that, if I did it right, it could be the perfect and unexpected ending to my new novel. But that’s about all I knew at the start

B.A.J.: What is the role of the writer in the world today?
J.O.: I think it’s the writer’s role to tell the world the stories that need to be heard. To broadcast the news. Because growing up—in California, no less—I didn’t hear any stories about people who looked like me. What happened to the Japanese Americans during WWII was just not mentioned, not in works of fiction or in the history books. And even now, it’s still not being taught in the schools. Sometimes I’ll find myself talking to a group of students and they’ll say, “This didn’t really happen, right? It’s fiction? You made it up?” Or, “I didn’t know.” (Many older adults tell me this as well) And I’ll have to explain that, no, I didn’t make it up, it really happened, right here, in their—our—own country, not so long ago.
What has been most gratifying—and humbling—to me as a writer is that so many Japanese Americans have come up to me over the years and thanked me for writing about their lives. These are people, very very old people, who’ve spent most of their lives not saying a word about what happened to them during the war. It’s as if the internment never happened, which is a horrible kind of negation. Because if nobody talks about it, then it didn’t happen, and you don’t exist. You are nobody. And so I guess my role as a writer is to make these people visible—to give them a shape and a voice and tell their story to the world. Because, and I believe this strongly: the world should know.
And if this makes me sound like someone you ought to read, someone whose books ‘are good for you whether you like it or not,’ I don’t mind. Because I’m not writing to be liked. I’m just telling the stories I need to tell before my time on this earth is over. I don’t think I could live with myself otherwise.
That night our new husbands took us quickly. They took us calmly. They took us gently, but firmly, and without saying a word. They assumed we were the virgins the matchmakers had promised them we were and they took us with exquisite care. Now let me know if it hurts. They took us flat on our backs on the bare floor of the Minute Motel. They took us downtown, in second-rate rooms at the Kumamoto Inn. They took us in the best hotels in San Francisco that a yellow man could set foot in at the time. The Kinokuniya Hotel. The Mikado. The Hotel Ogawa. They took us for granted and assumed we would do for them whatever it was we were told. Please turn toward the wall and drop down on your hands and knees. They took us by the elbows and said quietly, “It’s time.” They took us before we were ready and the bleeding did not stop for three days. They took us with our white silk kimonos twisted up high over our heads and we were sure we were about to die. I thought I was being smothered. They took us greedily, hungrily, as though they had been waiting to take us for a thousand and one years. They took us even though we were still nauseous from the boat and the ground had not yet stopped rocking beneath our feet. They took us violently, with their fists, whenever we tried to resist. They took us even though we bit them. They took us even though we hit them. They took us even though we insulted them — You are worth less than the little finger of your mother — and screamed out for help (nobody came). They took us even though we knelt down at their feet with our foreheads pressed to the ground and pleaded with them to wait. Can’t we do this tomorrow? They took us by surprise, for some of us had not been told by our mothers exactly what it was that this night would entail. I was thirteen years old and had never looked a man in the eye. They took us with apologies for their rough, callused hands, and we knew at once that they were farmers and not bankers. They took us leisurely, from behind, as we leaned out the window to admire the city lights down below. “Are you happy now?” they asked us. They tied us up and took us facedown on threadbare carpets that smelled of mouse droppings and mold. They took us frenziedly, on top of yellow-stained sheets. They took us easily, and with a minimum of fuss, for some of us had been taken many times before. They took us drunkenly. They took us roughly, recklessly, and with no mind for our pain. I thought my uterus was about to explode. They took us even though we pressed our legs together and said, “Please, no.” They took us cautiously, as though they were afraid we might break. You’re so small. They took us coldly but knowledgeably — In twenty seconds you will lose all control — and we knew there had been many others before us. They took us as we stared up blankly at the ceiling and waited for it to be over, not realizing that it would not be over for years. They took us with the assistance of the innkeeper and his wife, who held us down on the floor to keep us from running away. No man will want you when he’s done. They took us the way our fathers had taken our mothers every night in the one-room hut back home in the village: suddenly, and without warning, just as we were drifting off into sleep. They took us by lamplight. They took us by moonlight. They took us in darkness, and we could not see a thing. They took us in six seconds and then collapsed on our shoulders with small shuddering sighs, and we thought to ourselves, us downtown, in second-rate rooms at the Kumamoto Inn. They took us in the best hotels in San Francisco that a yellow man could set foot in at the time. The Kinokuniya Hotel. The Mikado. The Hotel Ogawa. They took us for granted and assumed we would do for them whatever it was we were told. Please turn toward the wall and drop down on your hands and knees. They took us by the elbows and said quietly, “It’s time.” They took us before we were ready and the bleeding did not stop for three days. They took us with our white silk kimonos
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Salinas, California, 1942. Deportees of Japanese descent identify their luggage before being transferred to an internment camp. *National Archives and Records Administration, États-Unis.*
THE INTERNMENT OF JAPANESE AMERICANS DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR

By Francis McCollum Feeley (extracts taken from the *Revue française d'études américaines*)

The history of Japanese Americans before the outbreak of World War II can be divided into three phases. First came what we could call "the period of adventure", from 1869 to 1907, during which the men who arrived came to make money, always with the intention of saving as much as possible before returning home with their nest egg to improve their living standards back in Japan.

The second phase, "the period of settling", lasted from 1907 to 1924. It was during this period that urban ghettos of Japanese workers began to spread in California as a result of legislation restricting property rights, and when thousands of women arrived from Japan to marry single men already settled in the US. The flow of Japanese immigration stopped abruptly in 1924, when a law was passed categorically excluding the immigration of Japanese to the United States.

This marks the beginning of the third phase, "the period of the second generation", from 1924 to 1941, characterised by the birth of children in Japanese households settled in the US. Historians of this period evoke a "lost generation". It was only in the twenties that Japanese women began to have children in the United States, born with American nationality. Thus, between the second generation born in the US known as *Nisei*, and the first generation, born in Japan, there was a missing generation. The economic-political system of Japanese immigration to the US was such that very few children were born into Japanese families before the twenties. In 1941, therefore, the composition of the Japanese-American community was to a large extent made up of elderly Japanese citizens and youngsters with American nationality.

As a result, when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor in December, 1941, almost all the US citizens of Japanese descent were too young to vote while their elderly parents had never as foreign nationals acquired voting rights. This political situation had onerous implications for a community that was already vulnerable.

During the winter of 1942, weeks after the United States had declared war on Japan, a new policy governing the Japanese-American population was implemented. There were three waves of this "evacuation" policy, firstly on a voluntary basis from February 19 to March 20, 1942, then enforced by the US army after March 30 until the first week of June. By June 5, almost 70,000 young US citizens of Japanese descent and some 42,000 Japanese, residents of the West Coast, were being detained in concentration camps. In the days following the attack on Pearl Harbor, members of the *Issei* (first generation elders holding a certain authority in the community) were arrested by the police and the FBI. Firstly, fishermen and farmers who owned land close to the ocean, then leaders of the Japanese-American community. Buddhist priests, teachers of the Japanese language and culture, anyone suspected of being a traditional local leader was taken from his home and put in prison to await questioning by the security forces. All their personal belongings were confiscated and from the very onset of the crisis, they were kept apart from their families and communities. One of the pretexts for the arrest, expulsion and imprisonment of Japanese Americans was that they were allegedly in contact with the enemy and implicated in acts of sabotage and spying related to Pearl Harbor.
Certaines n’avaient jamais vu la mer © Jean-Louis Fernandez
RICHARD BRUNEL.
Director

After following a course in dramatic art at the Comédie de Saint-Étienne Theatre School, he co-founded the theatre company Compagnie Anonyme in 1993, of which he became the director in 1995. Based in the Rhône-Alpes region, the company was in residence at the Théâtre de la Renaissance in Dullins, on the outskirts of Lyon, from 1999 to 2002. In parallel, he continued to train as a director under the guidance of Bob Wilson, Krystian Lupa, Alain Françon and Peter Stein. From 2004 to 2007, he was appointed Associate Artist at the Théâtre de la Manufacture in Nancy.

In 2010, he was appointed director of the Comédie de Valence Theatre labelled CDN Drôme-Ardèche, one of France’s prestigious state-funded National Centres for Dramatic Art.

As a director, his theatre projects range from new stagings of classics (Cyril Tournier, Bertolt Brecht, Henrik Ibsen, Ödön von Horváth, Eugène Labiche), contemporary dramatic texts (Peter Handke, Pauline Sales, Lioubomir Simovic), adaptations of literary works (Franz Kafka, Mikhail Bulgakov, Guy de Maupassant), correspondences (Pier Paolo Pasolini, Anaïs Nin, Jacques Copeau, Hunter S. Thompson) or even philosophical (Gilles Deleuze), poetic (Maurice Blanchot, Jean Genet, Antonin Artaud) and scientific texts (Oliver Sacks). In 2011, his staging of Ferdinand Bruckner’s *Criminals* was awarded the Georges Lherminier Prize for best production by the Union of French Theatre Critics.


For the theatre, he created *Le Silence du Walhalla* with the Artistic Collective associated with the Comédie de Valence Theatre and *Avant que j’oublie* by and with Vanessa Van Durme, a show for which she won the Best Actress award given by the Union of French Theatre Critics. In 2014, he worked on a new production of Marivaux’s *La Dispute*, the first episode of *Docteur Camiski ou l’esprit du sexe* co-written by Fabrice Melquiot and Pauline Sales, *Shakespeare’s Sonnets* with the singer-actress Norah Krief and a public reading of *L’Odeur des planches* by Samira Sedira starring Sandrine Bonnaire – the fully staged version of which was then created the following year. Also in 2015, he directed a staged reading of Édouard Louis’ autobiographical novel *En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule* and during the autumn presented his production of *Roberto Zucco* by Bernard-Marie Koltès. For the seventh edition of the Comédie’s annual theatre festival, Ambivalence(s), he premiered *Pas encore*, devised with Samuel Achache and Mathurin Bolze. In November 2017, he staged a specially commissioned text by French author Christine Angot, *Dîner en ville*.

In May 2018, *Certaines n’avaient jamais vu la mer* based on the novel by Julie Otsuka was premiered during the 8th edition of the Ambivalences festival.

Richard Brunel was named a “Chevalier des Arts et des lettres” by the French government in 2014.
JULIE OTSUKA
Writer

Julie Otsuka was born in California in 1962 and lives in New York. A graduate in Fine Art from the University of Yale, she finally chose to abandon painting to dedicate herself entirely to writing.

Her first novel, *When the Emperor was Divine*, focuses on the internment of Japanese-American families in the United States during the Second World War. It was translated into 11 languages and won many literary prizes. The work is based on real events that happened to her grandparents: her grandfather was arrested by the FBI under suspicion of being a Japanese spy after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Her mother, an uncle and her grandmother all spent three years in a camp.

The *New York Times* considered the novel an “indisputable triumph, beautifully crafted” while *USA Today* referred to it as “a most captivating lesson of history”. It features on first-year university reading lists in 45 universities and higher education institutes in the US.

Her follow-up novel, *The Buddha in the Attic*, tells the story of young Japanese women who, at the beginning of the twentieth century, with little more to go on than a photograph, crossed the ocean to wed men they had never met. Upon publication it was immediately hailed a triumph and was awarded the very prestigious PEN/Faulkner Award in 2011 and subsequently won the Femina Prize in France for foreign fiction. It has been translated into 22 languages and features on the *New York Times Notable Book* list, was named *Boston Global’s* Best Book of the Year and was one of *Vogue’s* top ten books of the year.

The writings of Julie Otsuka have been published by Granta, Harper and also feature in the compilations, *100 Years of the Best American Short Stories 2012*, and *The Best American Non-required Reading 2012*. They have been recorded by BBC Radio 4.

This is the first time one of her works has been adapted for the theatre.
WHAT THE PRESS SAYS

“Richard Brunel brilliantly renders the emotional depth and subtlety of Julie Otsuka’s novel… These multiple voices are embodied by seven excellent actresses … alongside whom Natalie Dessay is formidable… and the four actors playing all the masculine parts are not overshadowed. Richard Brunel’s staging has a cinematographic feel, playing as it does with chronology and place with great fluidity…. A subtly orchestrated polyphony”.
Le Monde

“Coherent and dazzling – A clear, choric work, led by a troupe of high quality actors and illuminated by the appearance of Natalie Dessay who proves here once again that she really is an excellent and subtle actress.”
Le Figaro

Mark 5/5 – “A choric, multi-layered work with an epic dimension, a powerful text, given an ambitious, sophisticated staging, visually beautiful. The set changes, magnificent costumes, movement of the actors, even the props sliding over the stage, all contribute to creating the appropriate atmosphere specific to each passing period … feeding this awful tragedy … As if the heavens were in perfect harmony with the subject, the text and the staging. A stand-out moment of the In Festival.”
CultureBox

“Richard Brunel honours Japanese-American exiles – The words resound off the walls of the Cloître des Carmes as if speech had for a long time been denied them … the actresses, Japanese, Korean, Chinese and French, all excellent, appear as their singular selves and at the same time dissolve into one body. Their speeches follow seamlessly on one after another, giving voice to a common destiny without ever glossing over the plurality of their lives… Words, here, are all powerful. Exile, domination and resistance are all rooted in language.”
La Croix

“Richard Brunel powerfully revives a forgotten tragedy of America’s recent past – a multi-layered work of great sensitivity… Both down to earth and dreamlike, Richard Brunel’s staging sparkles with invention… Anouk Dell’Aiera’s handsome set design helps bring to life the eight short sequences the novel is made up of… The pain, in Certaines n’avaient jamais vu la mer, is never milked… The chorus, doted with a strange force, evacuates the pathos and elegantly brings out the poetry of the text. To yesterday’s exile, from another country, corresponds the migrations of today.”
SceneWeb

“A visual poem with powerful resonances today, Certaines n’avaient jamais vu la mer by Richard Brunel is composed of delicate brush strokes the impact of which remain with us from sunrise to dusk.”
Inferno

“Stirring and tender, not to be missed.”
I/O Gazette
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3 disputes, 17 new productions and touring shows

THE ARTISTIC COLLECTIVE

Alongside Richard Brunel: Samuel Achache, Catherine Aïlourd-Nicolas, Mathurin Bolze, Gaëlle Bourges, Jeanne Candel, Caroline Guiela Nguyen, Julien Guyomard, Norah Krief, Éric Massé, Lucie Rébéré and Julie Rosello-Rochet


> JULIE ROSSELLO-ROCHET & LUCIE RÉBÉRÉ • ATOMIC MAN, CHANT D’AMOUR | Julie Rosello-Rochet, Lucie Rébéré | Premiered at the Ambivalence(s) Festival in May 2018 / 31 May > 2 June 2019 – Festival Théâtre en May, Dijon • SARRAZINE | Julie Rosello-Rochet, Lucie Rébéré | 07 March > 10 April 2019 – La Comédie itinérante

DISPUTES FOR A YOUNG AUDIENCE

• DIGITAL NATIVES | Yann Verburgh, Eugen Jebeleanu | From age 9 | Premiered at La Comédie in January 2018 / 14 Nov > 06 Dec 2018 – La Comédie itinérante

• THOMAS ET JUDITH | Béatrice Bienvenue, Alex Crestey | New production | From age 9 | 21 > 28 Jan 2019 – La Fabrique, Valence / 31 Jan > 21 Feb 2019 – La Comédie itinérante

• THE FUTURE IS FEMALE | Marion Aeschlimann & Nicole Mersey | New production | From age 14 / 18 March > 05 April 2019 – La Fabrique, Valence

AMBI VALENCE(S)2019 3 NEW PRODUCTIONS

• FULL CIRCLE | Kaspar Tautzirink-Fink, Une bonne masse solaire | New production | 21 > 25 May 2019

• MALADIE OU FEMMES MODERNES | Elfriede Jelinek, Mathilde Delahaye | New production | From age 9 | 21 > 25 May 2019

• ITINÉRANDES | Yann Verburgh, Eugen Jebeleanu | New production | 23 > 25 May 2019

WORLD PREMIERE

• MOURAD MERZOUKI • VERTIKAL | Mourad Merzouki | Created for the Biennial Dance Festival of Lyon / 01 > 10 September 2018 – La Comédie de Valence