

ANOTHER COUNTRY

Yukichi Matsumoto's theatre piece captures a sense of dislocation within Japanese society, writes **Victoria Laurie**

IN a playground near the sea, schoolchildren in baseball caps, cotton shirts and shorts call out to their friends in long, singsong tones. They count out “*Ichi, ni, san, shi*” as they march up and down or toss balls or squat on their haunches to peer at an insect.

The opening moments of Yukichi Matsumoto's theatre production are intended to conjure the precise emotion of its title, *Nostalgia*. Every action and sound is the distilled essence of a Japanese childhood.

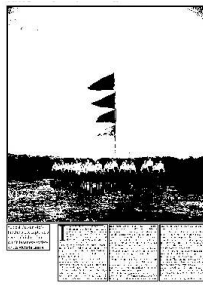
Here, nostalgia is more than a sentimental longing for a past era or pop song. If you were immersed in this childhood place and then left it

behind it would linger as a bitter-sweet memory.

One suspects there's a fair amount of nostalgia in Matsumoto. A gently spoken man in his early 60s, he grew up in the forested beauty of Kumamoto prefecture in Kyushu. He moved to the industrial city of Osaka to take an arts degree, performed as an actor and in the early 1970s set up his own theatre company in an old working-class district near Osaka's Tennoji temple.

On the eve of his arrival at the Perth International Arts Festival with his celebrated company *Ishinha*, I ring him for a long-distance chat at his Osaka headquarters.

“The thing that concerns me is how today's young people have lost a sense of home, so they



lack a sense of nostalgia,” he says when asked about the title of his play.

“Most young Japanese are born in city apartments and they simply don’t know what it is to come from somewhere else.” Not so long ago, he says, at least one of their parents might have been raised in rural Japan.

“I tell the young people in our company to create a home town in their hearts, even if they have to go out and find one deliberately. A person without a nostalgic home town is not really a full person,” he says.

Nostalgia is a 13-act saga about Japanese migrants, individuals for whom nostalgia was a potent emotion. It explores a history little known

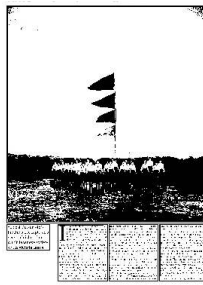
in Western countries: the exodus of poor, largely rural Japanese families to the shores of Brazil (and, later, other South American countries) at the dawn of the 20th century.

On an imposingly big stage that makes humans seem small and looks like a picture book, Matsumoto presents a tale of progress and painful dislocation. The migrants are seen assembling, oversize suitcases in hand, on the wharf beside a ship bound for Sao Paulo. They are herded on deck, inspected and triple-stamped; almost palpable is the tension of waiting, the effort of learning a new language, the anxieties of arriving in a new land.

Later, under headings such as Seven-Beat



Home is where the heart is: Main picture, opposite page, and above, members of the Ishinha troupe in *Nostalgia*, a play about Japanese migration



Samba, Refugees, and Jungle Jim, we see our migrants swept along by Brazilian dances, revolutionary movements and gushing rivers.

How does Matsumoto convey all this, given his stated aim for “dialogue that isn’t spoken, dance that you don’t dance, song that is not sung”?

Take, for example, the movement of Ishinha’s troupe. Their meticulously executed sequences have been devised by the group, not a choreographer, and resemble a cross between a gym workout and Twyla Tharp’s trademark choreography built around personal mannerisms: a shrugged shoulder or caressing hand, repeated endlessly.

The result can be a line of women cutting a swath through sugarcane crops, or a precise drill of physical jerks that resembles the actions of men labouring away in a mine.

They are actors with rhythm rather than a corps de ballet; at times their legs move to a seven-beat pulse and their arms to three beats, and you wonder how on earth they do it.

Matsumoto says dance can be a fluid and beautiful art form, but that’s not what interests him. The Ishinha performers (all in their 20s, individually unremarkable but collectively a powerful sight) are asked to repress and unlearn the body’s inclination to dance naturally.

“For a baby to eat, it is easiest just to pick up the food with its hands, but we teach the child to use chopsticks to pick up the food,” Matsumoto says. “It takes a lot of willpower to give up that inclination to dance, and it even takes a deliberate development of technique.”

I’m struck by his analogy, which jogs memories of seeing Japanese kindergarten children being supervised even at lunchtimes. Chopsticks poised, they eat with the enforced self-consciousness of small adults; Australian children tear at their sandwiches with teeth and hands.

Ishinha means reformation, or revolutionary movement, but when Matsumoto formed the company in 1970, its inspiration was both new and old traditions.

His troupe — actors, theatre technicians, administrators — often help construct their own performance space, preferably outside. Derelict buildings and even a copper refinery have been transformed into temporary theatre spaces (but not in Perth, where *Nostalgia* will occupy a pavilion in the Perth Convention Centre).

The notion of the self-constructed space is Ishinha borrowing from older performance traditions: for example, the way people gathered around street buskers, carnival entertainers, or *chindonya*, an almost defunct form of human billboard advertising.

“Outdoor is not simply a matter of building a theatre outdoors, it is a matter of ‘continuing to stand outside,’” Matsumoto has said. “It’s because you don’t want to be drawn into the establishment, you want to continue to be on the periphery, on the borders or margins. You want to continue to be drifting free.”

The theatre convention of dialogue also takes

on a new meaning with Ishinha. The company borrows a little from traditional Kabuki theatre, in which lines are divided between performers (*warizerifu*), and staccato words delivered in a sing-song fashion. But Matsumoto pares back even further; single nouns are repeated and tossed, like balls, between performers. He’s dubbed his own style of theatre “Jan Jan Opera”, *jan jan* being an onomatopoeic term akin to crash bang.

“We don’t much go in for standard play-style of dialogue between the main players,” he says. “It’s more a musical interplay, like *kashi* [song lyrics]. We focus on the musicality of the words.”

In trying to grasp Ishinha’s philosophy, it helps to learn the order of attack. There’s no script at the start, only a well-researched thematic idea. A model of the proposed stage set is made, then the actors move around it and decide what sort of movement would work best. Lighting is planned early, although Matsumoto says, “eventually, like the music, it becomes one of the last things to be finalised”.

He works closely with composer Kazuhisa Uchihashi, who is probably more famous than Matsumoto outside Japan. Uchihashi formed his rock band Altered States in 1990 and is celebrated in Europe and the US for his film and drama compositions.

Another Ishinha collaborator is film director Yuji Hayashida. Matsumoto says filmmakers understand his desire for big sets, while an art director with a pure theatre background might feel compelled to pare down his vision.

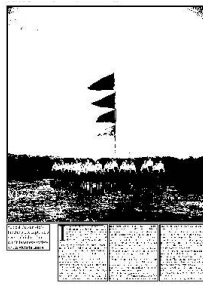
His most recent show, *Kokyu Kikai* (Breathing Machine) was a mega epic. Actors performed on a platform anchored on the waters of Lake Biwa near Kyoto; at its climax, the actors slowly merged into the lake as the water rose over the stage. Depicting the tale of war-orphaned Jewish brothers in World War II Europe, the ambitious show this month won Matsumoto his second Asahi Theatre Arts Prize.

As anyone who saw Ishinha’s production of *Mizumachi* will attest, Matsumoto doesn’t do things by halves. *Mizumachi*, or Water Town, received rave reviews when the company made its Australian debut at the 2000 Adelaide Festival (its first tour outside Japan).

“An extraordinary production, undoubtedly a festival high water mark,” wrote *The Australian’s* Adelaide theatre critic, Murray Bramwell, alluding to the huge body of water on top of which a spectacular 19th-century Osaka shanty town had been constructed in Adelaide’s Torrens Parade Ground. It required a cast and crew of 60; *Nostalgia* is only moderately smaller in scale.

Mizumachi was a kind of preamble to *Nostalgia’s* migration story. Set in 1905, it depicted the lives of destitute rural workers who had drifted in to live along the industrial canals of Osaka, working in spinning mills and building shanty towns.

It was precisely that new urban poverty that led the Japanese and Brazilian governments to sign a



treaty in 1907, opening the way for Japanese migration to Brazil.

The first migrants arrived the following year, mainly farmers and their families. In all, about 200,000 Japanese had migrated by the early 1940s; many found themselves contracted to coffee plantation owners around Sao Paulo.

Life proved to be as harsh and feudal as the one they had left behind, destroying the migrants' hopes that they could make a quick fortune and hurry back home. Instead, the Japanese formed hermetically sealed communities within which children were born, taught Japanese in their own schools and married off to other Nipo-Brasilerios.

World War II saw the Japanese schools closed and the dispersal of a third generation into more assimilated lives in Brazil's cities. Post-war, the promise of El Dorado fortunes in new Brazilian gold and coal mines brought a new wave of Japanese seeking their fortune.

(In *Nostalgia*, look out for the way Matsumoto has incorporated images of humans-as-ants at the Serra Pelada gold mine, taken by acclaimed Brazilian photographer Sebastiao Salgado and published in *Workers: An Archaeology of the Industrial Age*.)

Brazil is now home to the largest population of expatriate Japanese, outstripping the US, with about 1.5 million Japanese-speaking citizens.

It was during a 2005 visit by Ishinha to Brazil that the idea of *Nostalgia* was born. In one port town, Matsumoto felt tears welling up inside him when he observed how the Japanese quarter had become a slum for illegal squatters. At the time, he said: "The immigrants to Brazil have tried to

save some of their Japanese culture by teaching their children Japanese, but by the third generation there is no way they can have any longing for the homeland left in them."

And while they speak Japanese, "it is hard to say what kind of Japanese it is. It is not their language either. I believe that language is culture, so their 'unidentifiable Japanese' has a big reality gap to it."

Matsumoto may be anti-establishment, even avant garde, when measured against the rigid conventions of Japanese theatre tradition, yet he seems incurably nostalgic about his cultural past.

One suspects that his despairing view of Nipo-Brasilerio descendants — that they belong to neither culture — may not be shared by them all. What about the lusty cross-fertilising of European, African and indigenous cultures in Brazil, from which has emerged Brazil's riotous Rio Carnival?

The short time left for our conversation curtails further debate. "I gather Australia is also a strong migrant country like Brazil and I wonder if (*Nostalgia*) will convey the same feelings," Matsumoto simply notes.

So is there anything else he would like to tell his Australian audience? "Tell them it's the kind of play where you can get over the wall of words and enjoy it." He chuckles gently on the other end of the line. "Or at least I hope so."

Nostalgia is at the Perth Convention Exhibition Centre, February 13-21.