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Brava Miwa!

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BRAVA MIWA!

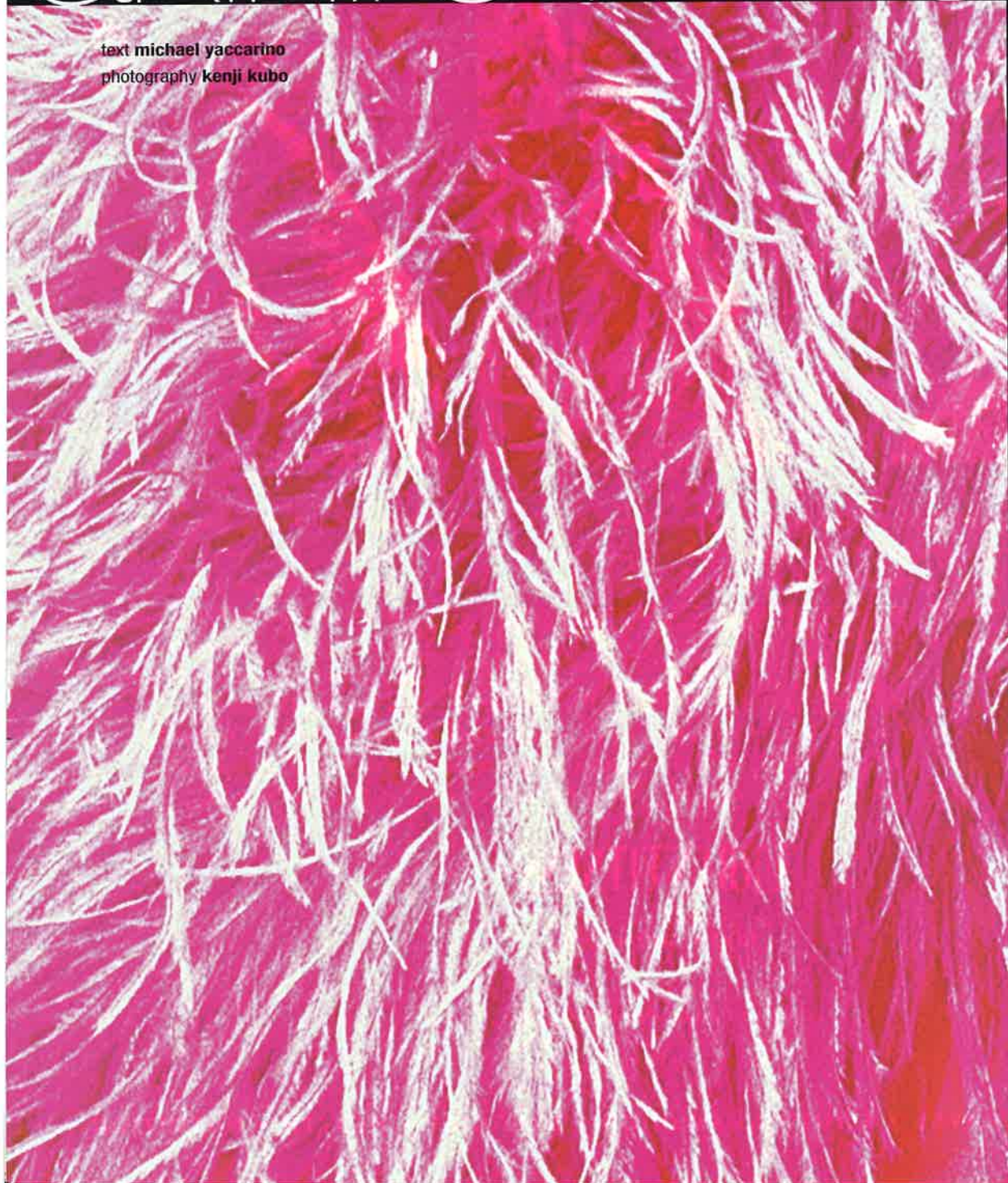


VOLUME 2 006

Japan's legendary female impersonator speaks from his heart.

akihiro miwa

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Imagine Tokyo in the 1950s: Western culture is streaming into the city, including a burgeoning gay bar scene. The Brunswick bar is the kind of place that Paul Cadmus might paint: American G.I.s, hustlers, foreigners, businessmen, and a cadre of beautiful young waiters who put on a nightly cabaret act. It was in this smoky atmosphere that novelist Yukio Mishima made the acquaintance of Akihiro Miwa, a handsome waiter whom Mishima would later help become one of Japan's biggest stars. Twenty-five years after Mishima cast Miwa in his 1968 film *Black Lizard*, Miwa remains one of Japan's most unlikely celebrities: an openly gay man who appears in serious dramatic roles in theater and film—as a woman. Sometimes known as the Edith Piaf of Japan, Miwa also has a flourishing vocal career built upon his interpretations of popular French songs. His recordings are wildly popular in France, Spain, and Germany. In his native Japan, he hosts two television talk shows and his autobiography, *Murasaki no Rirekisho* (*Purple Resume*), was a bestseller.

In 1968, Mishima adapted his play *Black Lizard* for film and chose Miwa for the title role over two “real” women. Released in the United States for the first time in 1991, and now widely available on video from Cine Vista, *Black Lizard* received unanimous critical acclaim. A slightly mystified Vincent Canby, critic for the *New York Times*, wrote, “The film will leave you speechless. Well, almost.”

For Western audiences, what is most mystifying about Miwa's performance in *Black Lizard* and his attitude towards his work over the years is his complete lack of self-consciousness. He has been criticized for not being as flamboyant as most female impersonators are, but this is probably Miwa's strongest statement. There is never any sense that Miwa is a male entertainer who is simply dressing up as a woman for his “act.” On the contrary, this artist has created a genuine identity for himself. Despite the usual props of drag—flashy gowns and ever-changing wigs—Miwa plays the title role in *Black Lizard* seriously, without self-parody. A hybrid of Eastern and Western attitudes about cross-dressing, Miwa's performance is startlingly original.

Born in Nagasaki in 1935, Miwa was given away by his parents to a son-less branch of the family, a typical Japanese practice of the day for families who already had boys. As an adolescent, Miwa became fascinated by foreign films shown in postwar Japan. Their Western influence would help shape his sensual, screen-siren aesthetic. He was a young student, working as a waiter for extra money at the Brunswick, when he met Yukio Mishima. Mishima was ten years his senior and already a writer of some repute. Miwa once described the Mishima of this period as “pale as death with a true eye for beauty.” Thus began a platonic but intense artistic relationship that would flourish until Mishima's notorious death by *seppuku* in 1970. Mishima once said of Miwa, “I enjoyed chatting with guys like him because they are more erotic than women.”

It was in the late '50s that Miwa began a career as a chanteuse at Gin Paris, the most popular “sister boy” bar or chanson tea room in Japan. He still performs there. Not only did he gain fame by writing Japanese lyrics to many French songs and penning his own hits, but also for wearing make-up and androgynous clothing.

As his fame grew in the '60s, Miwa began directing night club shows and appearing in female roles. Male actors who perform female roles of the *onnagata* (literally “woman form”) have been part of the revered Kabuki tradition for hundreds of years. Miwa never fit within the institution of Kabuki, however, because its actors (all male) must be born into one of the venerated families. Each actor's family rigidly controls his lifelong training and repertoire. The wide acceptance of the *onnagata* has been a mixed blessing for Miwa. He has taken advantage of the Kabuki tradition of cross-dressing, but faced resistance in the arena of popular entertainment, where gender-bending has remained controversial. To this day, he dresses only in female or unisex clothing.

Miwa's well-received theatrical roles have included Marguerite Gautier in *La Dame aux Camellias*, Judith Bliss in Noël Coward's *Hay Fever*, and Queen Margaret in *Richard III*. He scored an enormous success with *Ai No Sanka, Edith Piaf Monogatari* (*Song of Love, The Edith Piaf Story*), which he wrote, directed, and starred in as the doomed chanteuse.

Black Lizard, the memorable master criminal with a 14-carat heart, is Miwa's greatest role. Mishima adapted Rampo Edogawa's novel for the stage, and the play's great success led to the making of the 1968 film version.

Operatic in style, *Black Lizard* is the story of a notorious thief (Miwa) who will stop at nothing to obtain the precious jewels she desires. In an attempt to retrieve a priceless gem, a handsome detective (Isao Kimura) is hired to foil the most stylish empress of Japan's underworld. When they meet, *Black Lizard* falls in love for the first time in her life. But this mutual

Despite the usual props of

drag—flashy gowns and ever-changing wigs—attraction, played out in a treacherous game of cat and mouse, leads to her downfall. In the denouement, her plans utterly foiled by the detective, *Black Lizard* drinks a fatal dose of poison so that she may not only die in the arms of the only man she has ever cared for, but also keep their love perfect forever. Ever-obsessed with his own death, Mishima makes a brief, chilling appearance in the film as a half-nude, embalmed “doll” in *Black Lizard*'s private museum.

Last spring, the theatrical version of *Black Lizard* enjoyed a spectacularly successful revival in Tokyo and several other Japanese cities—its first performance in 25 years. Miwa was involved in the direction, sets, music, and costumes for the production, which plays again in February 1994. Miwa is one of Japan's most revered stars, a treasure as genuine as any that *Black Lizard* would risk her exquisite neck to obtain.

Akihiro Miwa in various scenes from the stage production of *Black Lizard*, 1993.



SHIN YAMADA

10 PERCENT spoke recently with Miwa about Mishima, *Black Lizard*, and other highlights of what is, by any measure, an extraordinary show business career.

10 PERCENT: It was a daring and brave decision for you to take on the role of Black Lizard in 1968, even in Japan where the art of female impersonation has been practiced for centuries.

Akihiro Miwa: Yes it was, thank you. I assume it would seem awkward and unnatural in the eyes of the Westerner for

Takaaki Enoki and Akihiro Miwa in the 1993 stage version of *Black Lizard*.



a male "actress" to play the role of a real woman, not a man simply dressed as a woman, but this was a mutual attitude in the Japanese film industry at the time. In the Occidental world during the age of Greece and Rome, there were female impersonators, and similarly in England up until the Shakespearean period. However, this no longer applies, with the exception of the Orient, where it still persists in China and Japan. In Japan, the history of *onnagata*, of female impersonation, is well over 500 years old, the most famous being Kabuki and Noh.

10%: Even so, with little exception, there have been very few serious film and stage performances of this kind that don't end up simply as spoof or send-up.

AM: That is the basic reason why I decided to create such a role. Even in Japan, there has never been an *onnagata* who has played modern or Western female dramatic roles. I am happy to say that my efforts have proven successful.

10%: When Yukio Mishima wrote the stage version, were you first in his mind to portray the character of Black Lizard?

AM: No, I was not. In fact, he used two different actresses for the first productions, the latter of whom was brought in to shoot the film. But, as it turned out, he was not happy with either of them. Then he came to see my play *Kewaga No Mary* and loved my work in it. In fact, he wasn't even aware of my acting career until then. Even though we had known each other since 1952, he had been simply one of my friends and an admirer of my music. He immediately asked me to do *Black Lizard*. I fondly remember him saying, "You are the Black Lizard herself." Because of our warm friendship for many years, he instantly understood that I had the sensitivity and personality which this character required.

10%: So, you must have shared quite a special relationship with Mishima.

AM: I have always treasured my pure friendship with the now-gone

I honestly don't give a damn about the people who accept this film only in terms of "camp" or "homosexuality." They are only proving how insensitive and primitive their minds are.

Mishima which lasted for 18 years. A week before his suicide, Mishima came to the theater where I was performing with an armful of about 300 red, red roses. Little did I know that this was his way of expressing his final farewell. Never shall I forget his deep gaze as he intently listened to me sing "Hymn L'amour."

10%: One of the strongest aspects of the character of Black Lizard is that, even though she is involved in crime, kidnapping, and murder, in the end she dies "pure" because of her great true love for the detective, Akechi, which leads to her suicide. What are your thoughts on this?

AM: I think your opinion is absolutely correct. She loves each and every beautiful thing in the world. And she will go to any length to get what she wants, regardless of what it takes, with all her might. Later, she discovers something more beautiful than any jewel or work of art, which is love, and chooses to die in order to keep it in perfect form forever. If she continued to live, she might have gotten tired of Akechi or discovered some fault in him. Instead, at the height of her affection, she made her mind up to put her love on "pause" so that it could live in Akechi's heart forever in its immaculate shape.

10%: As you know, the film premiered in New York in 1991 to great acclaim. I was distressed to see that several of the critics may have misunderstood it.

AM: Indeed, this movie is profoundly meaningful. It raises an important question. Black Lizard used to have tremendous materialistic desires just like most of us in this world. But love opened up her eyes to the fact that a beauty of a higher degree lies among things that cannot be seen, that is, in a world of four dimensions rather than three. In our society, people make judgments on everything based on what they see.

10%: So beneath all the priceless jewels that Black Lizard prizes...

MW: It's the heart. When you sit with someone face to face, what really matters is how beautiful, pure, clear, shiny, warm, tender, and considerate his heart is...or not. It's the heart that has to be the standard in judging people. And it is important to exert ourselves every day to make it a habit to keep aware of the heart which you cannot see. If we successfully do so, many of the problems we have in this world would solve themselves. Actually, it is quite simple: Each of us needs to learn to love another soul, and that's what Black Lizard learns.

10%: When the film version played in the United States, the critics were unanimous in their praise of the film, but many regarded it as "camp," emphasizing that you are a man performing the role of a woman. It is well known that female impersonation in a serious role is largely not understood in

this country.

AM: Regarding the critics, people have different essences of their own just like we all look different. Some are idiots or lunatics, while some are geniuses and saints. There are people who have delicate and sophisticated souls, and others who may be insensitive barbarians. I honestly don't give a damn about the people who accept this film only in terms of "camp" or "homosexuality." They are only proving how insensitive and primitive their minds are. Even though they seem to be writing about the film on the surface, in reality, they are showing their own level of personality. To put it more simply, it's like pearls before swine. Or, in other words, teaching a frog how to appreciate a painting by Picasso.

10%: How was the film received by the critics and audiences in Japan in 1968?

AM: We also had mixed criticism in Japan. Critics with intelligence and capability, more or less, responded positively as I recall. On the other hand, disapproving comments mostly came from barbarous people who write just for the money. To mention how the Japanese audience received the film, the fact that it became the most successful film not only in the year of its release, but in years following as well speaks for itself.

10%: You must be pleased at the great success of the current theatrical revival.

AM: Indeed. It was a great pleasure for me to be back on the stage, which had been difficult due to some illness over the last ten years.

10%: What in your career makes you the proudest?

AM: The great success of my concerts in Paris and Madrid. Also the fact that I recently have been given recognition by the Japanese people, who have begun to realize my true value.

10%: As a homosexual who has lived through many turbulent years in your own country, how has the acceptance of gays changed in Japan since the 1950s?

AM: I have been fighting all by myself for the rights of homosexuals. My 40 years in the entertainment business has been a continuous battle over concept interpretation and acceptance between myself and our society. It is ironic that even in Japan, where female impersonators are a cultural tradition, there are still biased views and prejudice. Over the last ten years we have obtained more acceptance in this country, at last, and not so much persecution can be found anymore compared to the '50s. I feel that I have finally gained an improved understanding with the public, which has given me a peaceful and satisfactory life.

10%: And what lies ahead for Akihiro Miwa?

AM: Happiness. **10**