

JAPANESE PERSPECTIVE



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An International Childhood

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By Bryerly Long

Frequently people ask what drew me to Japan, where acting in theatre and film I have spent the better part of my twenties. Born in Washington, DC, in the US in 1988, I grew up in Vietnam, Bosnia, France, and the UK, so am familiar with the

expatriate experience. Following my parents who worked in international development and studying in French, German and Serbo-Croatian, I learned to adapt to highly diverse cultures and different languages, manners, speech patterns, physical attitudes, fashion, etc. Yet, I remained an outsider to a greater or lesser degree – due to the simple facts of nationality, and having experienced different ways of being. This sense of rootlessness is so strong that I do not feel that I have a home country per se, and even feel an outsider in the US, my country of origin. While I often faced loneliness arriving in new countries and without any attachments, studying dance provided me with a sense of belonging to a community of dancers, and rehearsal studios and theaters became my second home. I found meaning in performance as a way of overcoming solitude, connecting with other people (other performers and the audience), and ultimately drawing on individual emotions to connect to universal human experiences.

In Washington, DC, where my parents worked for USAID and the State Department, they frequently traveled for work, to Bosnia, Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro and Kosovo during the Yugoslav Wars. I accompanied them on a couple trips. My mother tells the story of my first banana split, which I ate in a small town close to the city of Split in Croatia, and her rushing me to finish as the sound of shelling and troop movements drew nearer.

Due to my parents' dual careers, a German au pair lived with us, and took care of my baby sister and me; so my childhood education in the US was strongly influenced by German culture. I also attended the German School. My parents originally wanted to send me to the French School because, working for the American government at the time, they felt that it is very important to learn to read and write in multiple languages; and also because of my mom's love of French literature and culture. However at my interview for that kindergarten I explained to the headmistress that I would be going to the German School.

My first swearword was in German. When I was two, I fell down a staircase, stood up, and exclaimed "Scheisse" rather to my mom's relief, probably a word I'd overheard from my au pair when caught in traffic. Though many years have passed, I have fond memories of the German kindergarten years and learning to read with "Fara und Fu" the fairytales of Grimm and Andersen, German kids' songs, making things during the "Basteln" class – and I feel that it was a style of education that encouraged kids' creativity.

When we moved to Hanoi (I was 8 at the time, and my sister only 2), I was heartbroken to part from my friends at the Deutsche Schule Washington and my German au pair. I remained angry with my parents for some time. We spent the first two months in the Hanoi Army Hotel (before its restoration), which seemed not to have changed much since the Vietnam War, only that there was a new generation of better-fed rats. There was also a sad monkey in a cage in front of the reception. I used to go talk to him sometimes through the bars.

Once I got into a big argument with my mom in front of some Vietnamese government officials. She had left my sister and me at the hotel with a babysitter who spoke only Vietnamese and with no way of reaching her or my dad or knowing when they would return. She exhorted me: "Aren't you ashamed of yourself; no Vietnamese child would ever show a lack of respect to their parents in this way. Remember, you are an ambassador for your country; is this really how you want people to think Americans behave?" To this day I remember that advice, and realize that my actions overseas will always be perceived as

those of an American, regardless of my own identity, allegiances, or relationship to the US.

My first Japanese friend was made in Hanoi, when I briefly attended the United Nations International School (UNIS) in Second Grade before transferring to the French Lycee. I did not adapt well to that first school. In my class a Japanese girl, Yukiko, was having an even rougher time than I had, as she understood only very little English, had no friends, and barely spoke. Because we were both outsiders we became friends. On my last day at UNIS, Yukiko wrote me a very touching letter in English, in which she thanked me for being her friend and helping her with the schoolwork, and said that she was sad I was leaving the school.

After leaving UNIS, I spent some months studying at home by correspondence and playing with the Vietnamese kids in the neighborhood we had moved to on a peninsula of West Lake. There were many fisheries selling tropical fish for pets and fighting matches; and the other kids and I used to sell used cans for money to buy fish. I can still picture the group of us wandering around the peninsula; playing hide-and-seek between the large houses, going to look in at the local temple, imitating the monks and people praying without any regard for propriety, and drinking sweet soya milk in the summer heat. Hanoi summers were almost unbearably hot; and once when a tropical rainstorm hit, my sister, mom and I ran up to our rooftop terrace, and danced around in swimsuits in the refreshing torrential showers.

I adapted well to the French Lycee, where half the students were Vietnamese due to French government scholarships to encourage Francophonie, unlike UNIS, which was only made up of expats. My parents' decision to integrate my sister and myself growing up as much as possible with the local communities, rather than living in isolated expat environments, has certainly informed the way I engage with foreign cultures today, too.

My first appearance on TV was in Vietnam, where I took part in an English-language program for children. However, since we did not have a TV cable connection at home, I never saw this show. I used to go buy pirated CDs on the black market in Hanoi, and was a big fan of the Spice Girls. We also had a couple videos from the US we could watch on our VCR; one of them was "You've got Mail", and another was "Big Bird goes to Japan" by Sesame Street. The latter features Big Bird taking the Shinkansen bullet train, learning to count in Japanese, and befriending a lonely young Japanese girl.

As a Western kid in Vietnam, I stuck out – a cause of frequent embarrassment – and, at times, shame. I belonged to the Vietnamese National Children's Dance Troupe, where we studied ballet, tap, jazz and traditional Vietnamese dance. Because of my height and hair color, I was usually only allowed to participate in performances when cast in the main role. An exception to this was when I took part in the "70 Springs of the Communist Party" official commemoration.

We all wore skirts with white shirts and red scarves, the outfit of the young pioneers; carried banners with the faces of the various presidents of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam; and sang a song called "Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh" at the top of our lungs. When selecting the banners to carry, I by chance picked up the one with Ho Chi Minh's face and was politely directed to exchange it for a slightly less famous President.

When my family moved to Sarajevo (I was 11 at the time), I was greatly relieved to fit in to the point of often being mistaken for a Bosnian. There was a big difference between being a foreigner in Asia and a communist country versus in Bosnia-Herzegovina, which though scarred by the war, was still a multi-cultural society.

I attended the Catholic School of Sarajevo, the most ethnically diverse at the time, and continued training in dance at the Sarajevo Opera Ballet School. The six other dancers and I were the first generation to graduate from the Opera's school following the war. The studio where we took ballet lessons in the Russian style had beautiful views of the river and looked across to the mountains. During the war this location had made it a prime target for shelling. Some of my classmates had lived through the war, while others had been refugees in Canada, Austria or Germany. Our ballet master had lost most of her family during the conflict. In Sarajevo I first became acutely aware of the meaning of performance, finding a strong community and identity amongst the other dancers, and dreamt of pursuing a career in the performing arts.

The people of Sarajevo had experienced upheaval, losing the safety of their homes, and being forced to consider ethnic and national identity. Though their circumstances were more extreme, I could relate to the experiences of Bosnian friends who had been refugees and of being the new kid at school in a foreign country, with the wrong fashions, not being able to speak the language, and missing friends and homes with which we had been forced to part. Sarajevo in 2000/2001 had a unique atmosphere with a sense of promise and excitement in building a new future, and with many former refugees returning, whilst at the same time the presence of the UN peace keeping troupes, bombed out buildings and recent graves were constant reminders of the fragility of peace. Thinking back on that time, the Japanese aesthetic concept of "aware" – awareness of the impermanence of things – could be used to describe Sarajevo's unique beauty.

Sarajevo also had a strong café society, and my classmates and I (young teenagers) could wander around the city freely, stopping to buy ice creams along the main avenue, or to sit in coffee shops downtown for hours. We also held house parties with music and dancing. Once at a classmate's birthday the neighbor starting shouting at us for making too much noise, and then chased after us as when we left the building. Someone said that the neighbor was a former war criminal, who had killed many people, so we began running as fast as possible down the hills to the main downtown square. The downtown was very lively, but some of the residential neighborhoods had not changed since the war, and the concrete apartment blocks in the old Soviet style from the time of Tito appeared particularly bleak on grey winter days. Behind the façade of the coffee shops and parties, many families were quite poor. There was an increasing divide between those with political connections, well-paid jobs and access to the best schools versus those left behind in the aftermath of the war.

In Sarajevo my mother's work with the International Organization for Migration to prevent human trafficking and irregular migration led to her receiving warnings from the local mafia and threats for our safety. She became increasingly worried about my and my sister's protection. At the time, my father was working in Washington, DC. After 9/11 the UN deemed that Bosnia was a potentially risky place for families, and in particular Americans. One morning, we woke up to find the doors of our house left wide open, as if someone was

warning us that they could get in at any time. My mother told my sister and me to pack up immediately and arranged to drive us to France the next day. I remember begging with her to let me attend one last ballet lesson at the Sarajevo Opera, and the grief I experienced not being able to tell my friends I was leaving. Our dog from Hanoi, Yin Yang, stayed behind with my mom; and after my mom left Sarajevo, with the father of our family friends who had had fallen in love with him. Apparently Yin Yang became a Sarajevo character, who wandered around downtown freely and stopped in the market to watch the old men playing chess as our friend's father became too weak from cancer to walk him.

Profile

Bryerly Long joined the contemporary Japanese theatre company Seinendan in 2010. She became the first actor to co-star with an android robot, in the play, "Sayonara" by Hirata Oriza, which toured over ten countries, and which she performed in Japanese, French, English and German. Sayonara premiered at the Aichi Triennale in 2010, and has continued to tour nationally and internationally since then. Long performed this role all over Japan at theatre festivals including the Kyoto Experiment, the Tokyo Performing Arts Market and Festival/Tokyo. She also toured the play in Australia, the US, Canada, Italy, Germany, France and Denmark from 2010 to 2013. Having worked with some of the most highly regarded contemporary Japanese theatre directors, Long gained recognition in Japanese film following her starring role in "Sayonara" (2015) by Fukada Koji, which premiered in Competition at the 2015 Tokyo International Film Festival.

Long is represented by Yoshimoto Kogyo in Japan, and by Das Imperium Talent Agency in Europe. In 2016 she was selected to take part in Berlinale Talents at the Berlin International Film Festival. Long appeared in episode 7 of the drama series, "Kichijoji Dakega Sumitai Machidesuka" aired by TV Tokyo on November 25th, 2016. The drama series is based on an ongoing comic with the same title in the comic magazine, *Young Magazine the Third*.



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