

## Out of the Sixties, Shimizu Kunio and Betsuyaku Minoru

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Playwrights Shimizu Kunio (b. 1936) and Betsuyaku Minoru (b. 1937) gained their initial reputations in the 1960s, during the heyday of the Little Theater Movement (*Shōgekijō undō*) in Japan.<sup>1)</sup> Twenty years later, both remain active and significant figures on the Japanese theatrical scene. Likewise, the little theater phenomenon has taken root and continues to nurture creative, vibrant theater artists. The path taken by Shimizu, Betsuyaku, and others of their generation has been followed by younger playwrights.

The two interviews printed here were conducted and recorded by me in Japanese (Tokyo, August 1983), then transcribed by a native informant for my English translation. Given the considerable passage of time since the interviewing, both Shimizu and Betsuyaku were given the opportunity to make revisions. Shimizu did so, Betsuyaku did not. Shimizu's more significant changes seem to reflect a desire to free himself somewhat from too close an identification with the ethos of the youth culture of the 1960s. In the interest of brevity, some questions were edited out of each interview—for example, Betsuyaku's description of his penchant for writing his plays in a coffee shop.

The interview form is potentially a useful research tool, for it can provide considerable insight into the artist's aesthetic and socio-political attitudes and intentions, as is demonstrated by recent interviews of American and British dramatists: for example, the interview of Sam Shepard in *American Dreams: The Imagination of Sam Shepard*; the excellent collections of interviews of such figures as Lillian Hellman and Tennessee Williams in the Literary Conversations Series of the University Press of Mississippi; and, especially, the recent *Interviews with Contemporary Women Playwrights*. As for contemporary Japanese drama, there are valuable interviews of Senda Koreya and Kanze Hideo in *Concerned Theatre Japan*, and of Yamazaki Masakazu in *Mask and Sword*.<sup>2)</sup>

The major task of an interviewer is to ask intelligent, provocative questions that spring from a knowledge of the artist's work. To some extent, therefore, the content of an interview reveals the concerns of the interviewer as much as

those of the interviewee. Any inadequacies in these interviews reflect those of the interviewer rather than of the playwrights Shimizu Kunio and Betsuyaku Minoru.

## SHIMIZU KUNIO

### I. Beginnings; Theatrical Affiliations

INTERVIEWER: What led you to become a playwright, rather than a novelist or businessman or what have you?

SHIMIZU: I was born in a very provincial area, on the Japan Sea side of Japan in Niigata Prefecture, where there is the well-known minstrel tradition of *goze*, blind women who made their livings wandering from town to town reciting stories and ballads to their own shamisen accompaniment. We learned of such things from our mothers. My early familiarity with that was important.

My beginning theater in college can be traced to that and to the fact that lots of provincials don't get to the point when they talk. They piece together their stories with bits of dialogue—so and so said such and such, then someone else said this and another that, so I said this, and so on. That must've been responsible for my becoming attracted to theater. In junior high school I even formed the habit of writing simple memos in conversational style. The usual pattern when entering a university literature department is to be a literature-struck youth and participate in little magazines; in my case, I naturally gravitated to writing plays, which I could write in conversational style, rather than the novelistic style, which I found uncongenial.

Another factor was my fondness for art, which led me to join a stage art study group when I entered college, so that I could work on stage art. I first approached theater seriously through set-building, not writing. This may sound rather specious, but, to be precise, rather than paintings, I preferred art more in the nature of sculpture. I was drawn to the three-dimensionality of sculpture. Paintings have nothing on the other side, you might say. That gave me an interest in stage art, which led to an interest in theatrical art.

INTERVIEWER: Which theatrical troupes have you been associated with?

SHIMIZU: I began while a student at Waseda University. The first play I wrote [*The Signatory (Shomeinin)* (1958)] won a prize in a Waseda University playwrighting competition, and Seihai, a professional theater company, commissioned me to write a play [*Tomorrow I'll Put Flowers There (Ashita soko-ni hana-o sasō yo)*], which became the first play of mine performed. [July 1960] A few years later, Ninagawa Yukio, the director now active at the Teikoku Gekijō

and elsewhere, was with Seihai and directed and acted in several of my plays. Our names became linked together. Later, he started a troupe, the Gendaijin Gekijō [1968]; then, after that disbanded, a new troupe, the Sakurasha, [1972] with the director Ninagawa at the center. I introduced and staged my works primarily through them.

I've also been commissioned to write plays for the Haiyūza, Bungakuza, and Mingei, the established troupes, the majors trying to cope with the newer troupes in Japan. Consequently, some people have been rather puzzled as to which genre Shimizu writes. I have not made a conscious distinction when writing, but unconsciously I've probably written one kind of play for the large troupes and another for the small ones. With the latter I can be adventuresome, experimental, whereas for the larger troupes I write plays that are more orthodox, in the negative sense. I've been criticized variously; but I've maintained two genres, plays for small troupes and those for large. And in terms of space, it has been a great stimulus for me to write both for the spaces of the small troupes and for those of the large theaters.

INTERVIEWER: Could you tell me a little about your involvement with the Rekuramusha and Mokutōsha?

SHIMIZU: There was a young fellow Akaishi Takeo in the troupe I just described that Ninagawa and I were with. Akaishi started the Rekuramusha, one of many young groups that appeared after the breakup of the Sakurasha; they did plays by Betsuyaku and myself. I began the Mokutōsha several years after the Sakurasha disbanded; we do the little theater pieces, to use the genre distinctions I just made. We have been quite conscious of their being a bit experimental. On the other hand, Akaishi and the young members of the Rekuramusha have assisted the Mokutōsha in its activities, in the spirit of a sister troupe. And I've collaborated with them in their activities whenever I could for some years.

## II. Problems of the Director/Playwright

INTERVIEWER: You are, of course, a director as well as a playwright. I would like to ask you about your work as a director. First of all, the rehearsal period. What is the actual length of your rehearsal periods and what do you think is an ideal length?

SHIMIZU: I feel about two months would be ideal for my works, but to do that I am faced with the formidable problem of getting the play written quickly. I've yet to rehearse two months. For some reason I always manage to be late with the play, which creates a major bottleneck. I'm afraid that, aside from

exhibitions in connection with university theater department classes or the like, I only direct my own group, Mokutōsha. That allows me to be a little self-indulgent. Sometimes I write half the play, stop midway, and start rehearsals. Of course, when I'm commissioned to write a play for someone else, I deliver it completed. But with my own group we go into rehearsals with the play half done, which sometimes produces good results. When we rehearse the first half of it while I go on writing the rest, it changes for the better. As I listen to the actors speaking and observe their movements, I go on steadily revising the latter half of the play. Including all that, it amounts to about forty days of rehearsals.

INTERVIEWER: How do you establish trust between yourself and the actors?

SHIMIZU: That's a very difficult question. The first thing I must say about myself as a director is that I only direct my own works, and I'm not satisfied with myself as a director of them. It's not that I'm a bit insecure; I just don't like directing. For the very reason you asked about, communication with the actors. It's difficult for a person with my character.

Take the director Ninagawa Yukio, for example. He is an old friend and astute critic of my works, but when he begins rehearsals of a play of mine, he never fails to speak enthusiastically to the actors about what an excellent play they have before them. When confronted with a new play, the actors don't know whether it will be good or not. When they hear it praised by the director, they make up their minds it must be good and their imaginations begin to work very actively. One can watch that at work creating a good atmosphere.

I'm a common Japanese type in that I find it impossible to tell everyone what a good play I've written. I want very much to tell them; but if I did, it would strike Japanese as somewhat odd. When a man praises his own work, unless he has an intense personality, it is taken as self-flattery or self-complacency. I wish I could begin by telling the actors what a good work it is and enthuse them as they approach the play, but I can't do that when I direct. It has been a circuitous answer but the best I can give to questions about communication between the actors and myself. It is an area I am still agonizing over as a director.

INTERVIEWER: Still, as you say, you only direct your own group, so you must be familiar with your actors, their idiosyncrasies. Some must even be old friends. Or do you rely upon guest appearances by people from other groups?

SHIMIZU: Since I have many extremely young people among the actors at my place, we always have people from various troupes participate in our productions. We don't give the hodgepodge impression of the producer system, but we

do invariably have people from four or five troupes participating.

INTERVIEWER: You have already answered my next question somewhat, but perhaps you have something to add. Some of your plays you direct yourself and some you do not, but what advantages or disadvantages do you find in either case?

SHIMIZU: To add to what I've already said, as for disadvantages, after I finish a play, I'm convinced it's a masterpiece for four or five of the twenty-four hours in a day; but the other ten or so waking hours I'm plagued by doubts, which I carry with me to rehearsals. An excellent director decides at certain stages of rehearsals whether the actors can do it or not and advises them. Sometimes he waits patiently, and other times he sees the problem immediately and thinks of another way. But in my case, if they still can't get it after doing it several times, I wonder if it's not the play; I occasionally begin to reread and alter the text. Several times I've wound up with a misshapen, deformed work; the results have generally not been very good. That's the greatest disadvantage in directing your own work. About the only advantage is that even if you're a little late with the play, you're the boss, so you can keep them waiting. [laughs]

### III. General Characteristics of Shimizu's Plays; Tennessee Williams

INTERVIEWER: I'd like to ask you about some of the characteristics and themes of your plays. First, what artistic or personal necessity produced the darkness and disillusionment approaching despair of your early works, such as *To Die in the Morning* (*Asa-ni shisu*) (1958) and *Tomorrow I'll Put Flowers There?* In *To Die in the Morning* a young man and woman wait for morning, then they're killed. Twenty and eighteen years old. Both try to pick up their spirits, to escape, but in the end they're killed. In *Tomorrow I'll Put Flowers There*, the son kills the father.

SHIMIZU: I don't find my early works especially dark. I'd say my recent plays are darker. What makes the earlier ones seem so dark is probably the straightforward way in which the darkness is presented, whereas it doesn't come out so directly anymore.

I'm rather at a loss to explain my early works now, but when I see them I am struck by how many are resolved by killings, as in the ones you mention. In another play, *Superficiality Overflowing with Sincerity* (*Shinjō afururu keihakusa*) (1968), people are waiting in a long line to buy tickets; then a young man comes along, says something and is killed by the people in the line. Looking back on it now, I think the killing should be cut from the ending. Having him killed is dark, but I was also interested in what comes before the killing. His being killed

was like the fourth movement of a symphony, a matter of form. Therefore, although I admit it's dark, that must have been why I was convinced it wasn't excessively so.

When I see my early works now, I always feel they would be better if the killings were cut from the endings. More depth could have been achieved that way. There is the novelist Kojima Nobuo, the author of lengthy novels such as *Family Embrace* (*Hōyō kazoku*) (1965) and, recently, *Reasons for Parting* (*Wakareru riyū*) (1982). Kojima has seen many of my works; and when I told him some years ago how I felt about them, he confessed that he, too, found the endings of my plays superfluous. The simple fact is that when a play concludes with a killing, it can easily dissolve into sentimentality on the stage. And with music the whole play becomes extremely maudlin. In retrospect, there seems a great diminution of the imagination with which you approach the audience.

INTERVIEWER: A dominant characteristic of your dramas is their lyricism—the dwarves in *To Die in the Morning*, the canary in *Tomorrow I'll Put Flowers There*, the image of the butterflies in *Lovers Fated To Be Lost!: The Play* (*Arakajime ushinawareta koibitotachi yo: gekihen*) (1981). You also make frequent use of quotations of poetry—Rilke, Pushkin, Aragon. The same Aragon poem was used in both *The Sand of Youth, How Quickly* (*Seishun no suna no nanto hayaku*) (1980) and *1982, Jealousy* (1982, *Shitto*) (1982). With what artistic objective do you quote these Western poems?

SHIMIZU: In my early period I made frequent use of quotations. When I wanted to tell of youth, I would put in a poem about youth. My miscalculation was assuming that since I liked Rilke very much, everyone else must, too, and that when I quoted Rilke the audience would recognize him, just as if it were "To be, or not to be: that is the question." I eventually realized my misconception. The poetry to be quoted won't come to life as a quotation. There must be several plays in which I made vast miscalculations about poetry.

A second situation in which I use quotations is when I want to fill in a silence, to fill in that space with words. When at a writing impasse, I found that I was unable to fill in the place with something not bound to a single meaning. What I wrote myself always followed a single line of logic. I realized that to inject a new meaning I had to use someone else's words, not my own. I tried quoting a variety of newspaper articles or reference works, but that didn't work. I quoted Japanese poets, Takamura Kōtarō, but Japanese poetry struck audiences as a continuation of the same meaning. To create a divergence, I stopped using Japanese poems and used Aragon and so on. There were times when I succeeded in achieving that divergence, and times when I didn't. That

is, at times the poems did remain isolated and begin to speak to the audience.

I've run into this question from many Japanese critics, and I've given my explanations. I've been told that although in some plays the poems are used effectively, in others the intention may be sound but the result is suspect; that *Jealousy* is one play that would absolutely be better without the poem; that the artistic divergence I'm after never materializes.

INTERVIEWER: In *The Sand of Youth, How Quickly* the poem is used in-obtrusively, briefly at the beginning and the end, whereas in *Jealousy* it occupies a scene.

SHIMIZU: One scene, independent. My objective was to make it stand independently, but it also resulted in unnecessary meaning.

INTERVIEWER: To move on to the next question, what does Tennessee Williams mean to you?

SHIMIZU: This, too, is difficult to summarize; but on a personal level, when I'm in a slump, can't write, I reread Tennessee Williams's one-act plays, seldom the multi-act ones, but nearly all of the one-act ones, *American Blues, 27 Wagons Full of Cotton*. When I fall into a slump, I first turn to Tennessee Williams's one-act plays to find a foundation; I've often reread them while writing my plays. I also read Shakespeare or re-examine the characterization in Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov, Poor Folk*. But it is in Williams's one-act plays that I sense the fundamentals of dialogue.

My slumps always involve anxiety about dialogue. Betsuyaku can compose a work writing for MAN 1, MAN 2; but my method is not so clearcut as his, although, in principle, I am extremely interested in one to one dialogue. When I have a slump it usually is an inability to write one to one dialogue. With three characters, drama seems very easy to write; but for me at least, with two it seems difficult. Of course, Tennessee Williams's plays are not all dramas for only two characters, but there is often the quality of one to one dialogue. That is the principle thing for me in Tennessee Williams.

INTERVIEWER: And your university graduation thesis?

SHIMIZU: Was on Tennessee Williams's one-act plays. [laughs] It may have its negative side, in that I'm unable to go beyond that.

INTERVIEWER: Besides dialogue, has there been any aspect of Tennessee Williams's plays of importance to you? For example, their lyricism or depictions of personalities in disintegration?

SHIMIZU: At work in Tennessee Williams's plays is what I idiosyncratically term the "power of older sister." I sense that force at work in plays that relentlessly describe the doings of people entangled in the family or the land. I

think you understand what I mean. Among my works, *With an Older Sister Solitary As a Flame* (*Hi no yō-ni samishii ane-ga ite*) (1978) has received this influence most directly.

INTERVIEWER: Chekhov is referred to heavily in some of your works, most notably *The Dressing Room* (*Gakuya*) (1977), but also in the recent *Detective Story: The Play* (*Gikyoku suiri shōsetsu*) (1987), in which, by the way, Williams is alluded to as well. What special meaning does Chekhov have for you?

SHIMIZU: Surprisingly, Chekhov's works contain violently passionate characters. I like such violent passion and for some reason respond to it nostalgically. Chekhov brings one in contact with something like the essence of man.

INTERVIEWER: One feature of many of your plays is the preponderance of roles for women. Many of the most interesting actresses in Japan regularly appear in your plays, your wife Matsumoto Noriko, Kishida Kyōko, Yoshiyuki Kazuko. Could you comment upon that?

SHIMIZU: I get lots of ideas from them every day, having them nearby. In a way, I seem to be their biographer.

#### IV. Some Themes in Shimizu's Plays

INTERVIEWER: A common theme in your plays is that of doubting or forgetting who one is, the need to reconfirm one's relationship to others. This problem of identity is a principal theme in *The Sand of Youth*, *How Quickly* and appears in *With an Older Sister As Solitary As a Flame*. What is the source of your attraction to it?

SHIMIZU: When one writes a play and is trying to spin out the lines, no matter what the form or the pattern, one considers different devices that might function like a kiln for baking pots. I hit upon memory loss as a device, a kiln, for generating dialogue. That is, I hit upon it as a concept.

Another source is a personal experience that made a strong impression on me, although I could not express it to the critics' satisfaction in my play *Those Days* (*Ano hitachi*) (1966), one of the works I wrote from material I gathered on a specific incident. This play I based on an explosion at the Miike coal mines in Ōmuta in Kyushu, using as my protagonist a miner who suffered carbon monoxide poisoning. Many died, but the four or five hundred survivors exhibited an assortment of illnesses, one being retrograde amnesia. As in the American movie *Random Harvest* (1942), the memory loss was exogenous. The men in Ōmuta suffered brain damage due to carbon monoxide. They retained adult habits such as smoking cigarettes, but there was speech loss. There was an infantile regression and, of course, they forgot who they were.



Naturally, they made gradual recoveries. I followed the story for about three years, making television documentaries, writing about it in books, and, finally, writing of it in my plays. One man, for example, had forgotten his wife's face. When he was told that the woman before him had been his wife, he gradually accepted it; but it was only as a kind of knowledge. There was no revival of love. When told hundreds of times that she was his wife, he understood the fact; but that's all. While filming four or five programs documenting how perfectly they returned to being a married couple, I developed an interest in this wondering who one is.

Another experience that led me to this theme was my first trip abroad, when I spent several months in a small town in Tanzania. It was at the time of the Tokyo Olympics [1964], right after Tanzania achieved independence; there was the feel of Africa reborn. When I went to an African bar, a native bar, there was a kind of entertainer who engaged in repartee much on the same pattern as Japanese *manzai* [standup comedy in teams]. I had studied some Swahili before going to Africa. It has a vocabulary of only about 3000 words. If you learn about a thousand, you can more or less understand. I found out later that the entertainer was not a professional comic, but a mailman. The comedy involved extremely nonsensical exchanges, people who don't know what they are, asking one another who they are. Everyone was convulsed with laughter. It was quite a shock to me. And overlaying that was my awareness of it being Africa right after independence. I felt I'd encountered the essential drama, the essential questions to ask. Those are the two experiences that have probably influenced my actual work.

INTERVIEWER: What is the cause of the amnesia in *The Sand of Youth, How Quickly?*

SHIMIZU: It's psychogenic. I have a friend who is the director of a mental hospital in Hamamatsu on the way to Nagoya. I often visited him during the time I was writing the play. There were four or five people there suffering from psychogenic amnesia, and quite a few people who did not know who they were, due to some psychological disorder. I was often at the doctor's side, like an assistant, as he diagnosed the patients. What was interesting was how the patients diagnosed themselves. When the doctor would ask how they were, they'd reply that they recognized their wife the other day, so they must be getting better. I was struck by what a peculiar genre psychiatry is, with patients diagnosing themselves. My interest in amnesia and psychological disorders grew out of such things, in other words, out of basically ontological concerns. For a while I was often criticized for having too many psychologically disturbed

characters in my plays.

INTERVIEWER: What about the portrayal of the physician in *The Sand of Youth, How Quickly*—his penchant for suddenly smashing chairs?

SHIMIZU: It's rude of me to say so, but rather than doctors per se, it's the field of psychiatry that strikes me as still very much in the dark. There are so many books on it, especially of late, and I do turn to them with some interest; but they always seem vague and insubstantial. And so, I am interested in psychiatrists for a different reason. People have an image of doctors as calm men of science, but my image of them is rather that of a group of people embracing extreme contradictions. Consequently, I may have stressed that rather strongly.

INTERVIEWER: The notion of a return home appears in your plays along with a pitting of the city against the country. For example, a little town on the Sea of Japan appears in *Those in the Troop of Love (Ano ai no ichiguntachi)* (1980) and *Lovers Fated to Be Lost*. In 1982, *Jealousy* the city and country are clearly pitted against one another. What are you trying to say to your audiences through such themes?

SHIMIZU: For me the *furusato* (hometown) is the country. And to express the contrast between country and city in terms of Chikamatsu's *kyojitsu himaku* theory,<sup>3</sup> the *kyo* (the empty or false) is the city, which is an extremely difficult place to live; while the *jitsu* (the true or real) is the country, which, with all its green, is a place for humans to live. For living in a very "natural" [Shimizu employs the English] way, the country is "real" (*jitsu*) and the city "false" (*kyo*).

Still, I think that at the same time it is possible to view things the other way around, the city as *jitsu* and the country as *kyo*. For me the hometown is the false. To put it a different way, the *furusato* is a very insidious place, a place where one is easily fooled. In spite of that, we have many fantasies about the *furusato*. In fact I often visit mine, the coast of the Japan Sea, and the same faces are there as ten or fifteen years ago—the people don't move much. It's extraordinary, in a sense, and a bit frightening. One is besieged by fear, as of something brewing steadily inside people. And so, it [the hometown] is the soil for insanity.

The hometown is like a revolving stage on which human madness slowly reveals itself. That construct figures the most prominently in *With an Older Sister As Solitary As a Flame*. It is about a married couple who tire of their lives as actors in Tokyo, return to their hometown in the provinces and run into abuse and violence in a barber shop there. In my image of a small country town there is always a barber shop on the outskirts. The barber shop is the place I associate most strongly with the hometown, and the barber shop mirror leads to

a "miracle system" [employs the English]. It may be the madness within us all that reveals itself. In *With an Older Sister As Solitary As a Flame* this construct appears in the most undiluted, straightforward form. There seems to be a recurrent pattern of returning to the hometown with the initial inevitable nostalgia, then always going back to Tokyo after taking a considerable psychological pommelling.

INTERVIEWER: To ask a question about insanity specifically, it appears as a theme in such plays of yours as *Even the Madman Will Be Born in the Pure Land* (*Kyōjin naomote ōjō-o togu*) (1969), *Dear, Dear Bedraggled Beggar* (*Itoshi itoshi no būtare kojiki*) (1971), *The Sand of Youth, How Quickly*, and *Those in the Troop of Love*. You've said a good deal already, but is there anything you could add about the role insanity plays in your works?

SHIMIZU: Doing documentaries, I became familiar with high- and low-speed photography. Everyone is acquainted with high-speed photography; and with low-speed photography the blooming of a flower that actually takes three days can be made to happen in three minutes, by leaving the shutter open for an hour a frame.

When we watch part of a sports event in slow motion, it's as if we're getting a look deep into life or man. When I visited the mental hospital, and was there among the patients, talking to them, I had the feeling I was witnessing human psychology high-speed. To approach it from a different angle, although I realize it is risky to say so, I sense a resemblance between the language of absurdist plays, for example those of Beckett, and high-speed and low-speed photography. The association with insanity might seem odd, but I think that through my contact with insanity I have seen psychology slowly reveal itself. I always wanted very much to write about that—about the lives of the mental patients. Of course not to offer criticisms of the mental patients; I'm always struck with how human they are. My strongest impression of them is of their humanity.

INTERVIEWER: Do you feel your plays contain many scenes of violence?

SHIMIZU: Let's say death, murder, rather than violence, and not so much of late. Still, in regard to the older works with more of it, I of course feel that some of my earlier works such as *To Die in the Morning* would have been good plays with the endings cut. I don't feel I have written any plays with an undue interest in violence.

INTERVIEWER: To judge from *I'll Put Flowers There Tomorrow*, *Dear, Dear Bedraggled Beggar*, *Iceberg with neither Flower Piece nor Obi* (*Hanakazari-mo obi-mo nai hyōzan yo*) (1976), and *The Sand of Youth, How Quickly*, another of your major thematic areas involves the loss of youth, growing old, friction

between generations. When did you begin to be concerned with such phenomena?

SHIMIZU: As I perceive it, there is an invisible line somewhere between 20 and 40. Whether doing plays, or doing anything—even in real life—up until a certain age one sees oneself as the hero. Even when writing a play the author is one with the hero; if everyone wanted it, one would gladly play the lead. Not, I don't think, because the young are conscious of their youth. I mean, it wasn't Sartre, but didn't someone say of youth that it is being hot on the outside but inside feeling nothing?

When I arrived at that invisible line, however, I discovered that before I knew it I was no longer the hero; I had changed into his biographer, a biographical writer writing about his life. I no longer identified with him. That's when I was struck by youth, being young, growing old. I find the word youth rather embarrassing, but growing old began to appear in my works when I realized I had crossed that invisible line and found myself powerfully aware of youth.

INTERVIEWER: Was it somewhere around forty that you felt the invisible line?

SHIMIZU: No, in my case, it was a little past thirty.

## V. Political Stance

INTERVIEWER: In the chronology of your life in *The World of Shimizu Kunio* (*Shimizu Kunio no sekai*) (1982), the entry for 1960 reads "participated in the *Anpo* struggles with the Iwanami labor union." However, I have been unable to discern any definite political stance from the plays of yours I have seen. I wonder if you could comment on that for me?

SHIMIZU: I don't have a clear political position. To be specific, as a student I was a follower, swept along by the spirit of the times, a so-called *nonsekutorajikaru* (nonsectarian radical). I was not affiliated with any particular organization in the student movement. Rather, as I said before, I was studying stage art in a stage art study group and began to write plays in my junior year. The Sunagawa Base struggle<sup>4)</sup> was going on when I became a student [April 1956]; most of my class was in that, so I tagged along with them. And then came the *Anpo* struggles.

The Japan-United States Mutual Security Treaty (*Anpo*) took effect in 1960 [June 19]. I graduated from college and immediately entered Iwanami Films that same year [March]. Iwanami Films is a subsidiary of Iwanami Publishing Company, which was one of the more radical publishers; the president of Iwanami had been jailed during the war for his defense of freedom of speech. When one joined their union, the new employee became one of their foot soldiers; the com-

pany considered going to the *Anpo* demonstrations part of the job. To begin with, there were those external circumstances.

I don't profess to understand the *Anpo* struggles, but I experienced an extreme sense of powerlessness. Add to that how frightening the street demonstrations were at the time and what I might have faced, as a policeman's son, were I arrested. My parents would have been heartbroken. Everyone was involved in the student street demonstrations. The students I studied with all had a clear political logic—at least they seemed to at the time, though looking back now I have my doubts. I wasn't so clear about things, which made me feel somehow inferior.

Plays should possess some logicity, but I felt that art should also deal with what lies beyond logic. I resisted my colleagues who arranged everything with extreme tidiness according to logic; I also felt a bit inferior to them. So, while I did want to participate in the street demonstrations, I lacked the other's clarity of purpose. I decided I ought to stake out territory where there isn't such clarity. My earlier works were given political interpretation. When we did *Superficiality Overflowing with Sincerity*, the destruction of the queue was said to involve the destruction of order, although there is no clear political stance in the work. If it really were a political work I would say that's marvelous, but I never felt that it was political.

INTERVIEWER: To what extent did *To Die in the Morning* reflect the concerns of students of that day? It was written two years before the *Anpo*.

SHIMIZU: But actually the *Anpo* and Sunagawa struggles came one on the heels of the other.

INTERVIEWER: To what extent does *To Die in the Morning* reflect the desperation of that period?

SHIMIZU: It was not a conscious attempt to express anything of the sort; but I did write it in an atmosphere in which one day I'd go to class and half the students would have cut classes to go to Sunagawa, so I'd go, too, whereas another day I wouldn't go so that I could write plays. As a result, that may have expressed itself in many forms with the man and woman spending the night waiting for morning in front of the wall, although I had absolutely no intention of symbolizing the *Anpo* or Sunagawa struggles.

INTERVIEWER: That's extremely interesting, because many of the people who put on that play seem to interpret it that way.

SHIMIZU: Yes, many. Incredibly many.

INTERVIEWER: You have one with the intriguing title *Not Weep? Not Weep for 1973?* (*Nakanai no ka? nakanai no ka? 1973-nen no tame-ni?*) (1973).

Why was 1973 such a sad year for you?

SHIMIZU: I did my plays for five or six years in the same space in Shinjuku, the Art Theater, and many young people came to see them. A play is something one generally writes intuitively, but in fact the young audiences and many of the people who participated in the plays then regarded them as a vision of their own political struggles, or as an outlet for their frustration. Ninagawa and I have sometimes talked about how, in a way, we were really involved in dangerous but, at the same time, thrilling work. During those five or six years young passersby would come in off the street and ask to be put in our plays, and it seemed to add some life to the productions. Gradually, however, the passersby stopped coming in to get into our plays. A clear distinction between amateur and professional developed and the theater became cut off from the street.

Then, in 1971 and 1972 the student movement entered a complete decline, the passersby stopped coming in to get into plays, and, one more concrete factor, I reached the conclusion that it would be impossible to do any more plays at the Art Theater. *Not Weep? Not Weep for 1973?* was my farewell to all that, and thus I gave it the title from the Ginsberg poem.<sup>5)</sup>

INTERVIEWER: When was the heyday of the Shinjuku Art Theater?

SHIMIZU: From about 1967-68 to 1970. For *Superficiality Overflowing with Sincerity*, there was line upon line of young people around the place, all trying to shove their way into the theater. Everyone thought it was humorous that when they got in, the play was about waiting in lines.

INTERVIEWER: The Shinjuku area seemed to be the hub of the youth culture. In 1970 the area in front of Shinjuku Station was teeming with young people, some sniffing thinner, most merely innocently enjoying their version of flower power.

SHIMIZU: *Not Weep?* had lines such as "Looks like things are going to be awfully quiet from now on." The play reflects my feelings of powerlessness, faced with the prospect of complacent audiences calmly accepting the intolerable tranquillity of the time. I don't think I wrote much of anything for about two years after that.

INTERVIEWER: You are rather insistent that you are fundamentally apolitical, both personally and in your approach to your art. Is it safe to say that your finding this "tranquillity" "intolerable" was basically a lamentation for the passing of the youth culture, at least the youth culture in the guise that you had identified with?

SHIMIZU: Not really. Rather, I felt misgivings about no longer being able to enhance the motifs of my works by drawing upon the period for motifs. As

for the 1960s culture, what is lost is lost, what remains remains, and I'm more or less satisfied with that.

## VI. Shimizu's Historical Plays; Importance of Traditional Culture

INTERVIEWER: To turn to your historical works, what is it you want to say through your tales of the Heike, such as *By Illusion His Heart Pushed to Madness—Our Masakado* (*Maboroshi-ni kokoro-mo sozoro kuruoshi no warera Masakado*) (1975) and *My Spirit Is the Sparkling Water* (*Waga tamashii wa kagayaku mizu nari*) (1980)?

SHIMIZU: First of all, I like the *Tales of the Heike* (*Heike monogatari*) very much, and I wanted to use it as material for plays. I found it difficult to manage, however. Rather than being interested in historical plays, I simply wanted to take a hard look at the process of ruin—here I see a similarity to Tennessee Williams. In other words, my interest lay in the defeated. While researching *My Spirit Is the Sparkling Water*, I found a new excitement in the relationship between history and nature. When I visited the sites of ancient battles between the Heike and the Genji, the topography of the springs and forests was impressive. The composition, with the Genji coming out of the Kiso Mountains and the Heike in the capital, was also exciting. At the time I was writing the play I was stimulated by what I was reading, a foreign book on forests that I used for reference. I also relied on my memories of what I had seen and read of the gorilla, when I went to Africa. If the gorilla were able to come down from the mountains and adapt to the plain, they might have been able to avoid this process of extinction. We can learn something about man and about history from that.

The critics don't remark upon it, but in my plays the point is the relation between places and people. When I write historical plays I stress the encounter between people and places, how people are greatly transformed by places. Some modern plays even take place in a public toilet. I'm often asked why I used a barber shop or a tailor shop, but frankly my interest is in the fact that people are changed by places. My interest in the encounter between *Tales of the Heike* and the forest is a significant circumstance.

INTERVIEWER: In your essay "Fragments on the Japanese House and the Stage," ("*Ie' to butai-ni tsuite no danshō*"), serialized in *Engeki Tsūshin* (Theatrical bulletin), a theater quarterly, you quote Tanizaki Jun'ichirō's *In Praise of Shadows* (*In'ei raisan*) (1934). What relevance do you feel Tanizaki's aesthetics has for Japanese today?

SHIMIZU: I have spoken of a "room not used" (*tsukawarezaru heya*) in my essays, probably quoting Tanizaki; but old Japanese houses, particularly farm

houses, always have a *kyakuma* (parlor) to receive guests. It's the best room in the house, but really close guests are put by the hearth or similar place, not in the *kyakuma*. It is for people not too close but a bit important, those to be kept at a polite distance. In more extreme cases, it may even be used as a place to isolate a family member with a contagious disease. In old houses there is usually a "room not used," a space where what is discommodious is kept. There are gilt screens; it is dark and frightening. Or, there might be faint light slanting across the white shoji. Children are frightened merely passing the room. It's the best room for them to play hide and seek. It's a space that's a kind of necessary evil, fearful but at the same time stimulating the imagination.

Times have gradually changed; now Japanese houses have become bright. In the old days the staircase in Japan was always completely without electric lights. Just going upstairs was frightening. There might be ghosts upstairs. The staircase was a very thrilling place. But Japanese houses have gradually gotten bright, even the staircase. Likewise, the "room not used," the *kyakuma*, is becoming an extravagance and disappearing. I believe we incur a gradual but various loss, in emotion and imagination, as the Japanese house loses a space that, while seemingly an extravagance, possesses those dark shadows and stimulates us in so many ways. Such extravagant spaces, the shadows and their indispensability to the Japanese imagination, have led me to the idea of a major reconsideration of the Japanese house.

For us [Japanese] it is a matter of the blank space—*yohaku* in Japanese. We've gradually lost the ability to make good use of such a space, or *yohaku*. Even in Japanese drama, one wishes *yohaku* were exploited more skilfully. *Shingeki* indeed had its origin in what was gleaned from Western dramaturgy, which accounts to some extent for what it has become. Space is now being experimented with in various forms, but there is still no genre that has integrated it in the sense of *yohaku*. When I first saw the Kanze school *nō* done at Suzuki Tadashi's new steep-roofed building in Toga Village, it moved me more than it ever had in a *nō* theater; I know that was absolutely due to the way the shadows, the *yohaku*, came alive. I was impressed by what an interesting experiment Suzuki had begun things with.

INTERVIEWER: Japanese aesthetic notions are obviously of great importance to you, but what of traditional theatrical forms, such as the *nō* to which you allude? How far is your drama from the larger Japanese theatrical tradition?

SHIMIZU: I see *nō* plays rather often. But I'm not influenced by them, at least not in terms of form, because theirs is more rigid than ours. Rather, it's the appearance of the dead that I'm drawn to and think of at various times for



my own works. This is not a matter of their form; it's the content of the narrations of the dead that I often think about.

## VII. Contemporary Japanese Theater

INTERVIEWER: What are your feelings about the term *shingeki*?

SHIMIZU: I find it a cryptic word. I don't pay much attention to what is *shingeki* and what isn't. Simply, when asked about it, I'm struck once again by what a peculiar term it is.

INTERVIEWER: Finally, I'd like to ask you about the development of Japanese playwrights. Where do you think the playwrights will come from?

SHIMIZU: To me Noda Hideki is a writer very emblematic of the change that has occurred. The playwrights of my generation may all be somewhat different types, but we bear a resemblance to one another when we write. And, whatever one says, Tsuka Kōhei's generation is not that different from ours, either. Even Watanabe Eriko strikes me as an outgrowth of a generation similar to ours.

Noda Hideki's works seem fundamentally different. I am on the selection committee for the Kishida Prize and I often have to read many works. Noda won in 1983. I must confess I could not penetrate his drama, which made him all the more intriguing. Other writers may lead one into a maze, but there are clues one can latch onto. I can't get hold of Noda's. Still, I foresee that he will be influential and that the young playwrights who come after him will produce many fine works that expand upon such a dramatic world.

I think this may be one new emerging dramatic pattern. Only, I think drama suffers when bound to one pattern; we need many patterns of drama. Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is a play I regard as "dynamic," and there are plays that are dynamic in the more usual sense of the word. I hope we can go on having both kinds of plays. It's rather sad to imagine having only plays like Noda's that are fundamentally different from ours. I hope we can have plays dynamic in many ways.

## NOTES

- 1) For an introduction to the career of Betsuyaku Minoru, see Robert Rolf, "Betsuyaku Minoru: Contemporary Playwright," *Journal of the Yokohama National University* 2, 33 (December 1986): 53-84, which also carries a brief description of the work of Shimizu Kunio (66-67).
- 2) Kenneth Clubb et al., *American Dreams: The Imagination of Sam Shepard*, ed. Bonnie Marranca (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1981); Kathleen Betsko and Rachael Koenig, eds., *Interviews with Contemporary Women Playwrights*

(New York: Beech Tree Books, 1987); "Senda Koreya: An Interview," *Concerned Theatre Japan*, 1(2): 47-79; "Noh Business: An Interview with Kanze Hideo," *Concerned Theatre Japan*, 1(4): 5-17; J. Thomas Rimer, *Mask and Sword* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980).

- 3) *Kyojitsu himaku*: Chikamatsu Monzaemon's notion that art lies in the membrane (*himaku*) between the *kyo* (void, untruth) and the *jitsu* (substance, truth). See *Kyojitsu himaku-ron no saikentō* (A reexamination of the *kyojitsu himaku* theory), by Nakamura Yukihiko, in "Chikamatsu," *Nihon Bungaku Shiryō Sōsho* (Tokyo: Yūseidō, 1976), pp. 64-74.
- 4) The Sunagawa Incident: Sometimes bloody confrontations in 1955-56 between police and protesters (local citizens, student and labor union supporters) against the expansion of the American military base in the Sunagawa section of Tachikawa City.
- 5) *Journals*, ed. Gordon Ball (New York: Grove Press, 1977). Shimizu read the Ginsberg lines in the Japanese translation by Suwa Yū.

## BETSUYAKU MINORU

### I. Beginnings as a Playwright; Relationship to Productions

INTERVIEWER: What led you to become a playwright, rather than a novelist or businessman or what have you?

BETSUYAKU: I'm not really certain myself. There was no clearcut reason; but when I entered Waseda University, theater was thriving. I joined both the Modern Literature Research Group and a theatrical troupe known as the Free Stage (*Jiyū butai*). As it happened, the Free Stage activities were livelier; they were undertaking bigger projects.

The troupes in those days did political theater, mostly socialist realism, not restricting themselves to literature, but quite seriously tackling the problem of how to make a statement about the general state of affairs and contemporary social problems. That attracted me. And so, at first I was involved in production work and work as a stage director, not playwriting. About the time my former classmates and fellow members of Free Stage graduated from Waseda in 1962, we formed a new troupe of the same name. It just so happened that there was no one to write plays, so I gave it a try. Also, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* was translated for the first time around then and that was a stimulus for me. I thought even I could write like that. [laughs]

The socialist realism that had been done to that point was extremely political in its dramatic situations, which made me wonder whether we couldn't produce plays with more depiction of man's inner workings. Reading Beckett, I decided I would try writing plays if I could write plays like his. Students of my day, the 1960s—the late 1950s and early 1960s—didn't feel that fiction or poetry had much to offer. Movies were the liveliest art. We all sort of dreamed of being movie directors and we talked mostly of the good movies we had seen. After the

appearance of Beckett and Ionesco, the so-called theater of the absurd, we began to get the idea that we could do on the stage what they were doing in movies. Plays prior to that were rather simplistic structurally. Artless. One can say what he earnestly wants to say in such plays, but I felt it difficult to express slightly convoluted, complicated matters, man's inner state, which is always hard to convey. After I began reading Beckett and Ionesco in the 1950s I realized there was another way, that it was possible to express more of an inner reality; and that must have been what led me into drama.

INTERVIEWER: I'd like to ask you about your relationship to the production of your plays. Do you usually take a hand in their production? For example, do you attend readings? Do you go to see rehearsals?

BETSUYAKU: Yes, I do. I never fail to attend the first day of readings. And, though it depends upon the troupe, I go to the first day of rehearsals and dress rehearsals, too. I generally participate in all of these. There are troupes whose rehearsals I seldom visit until dress rehearsals start, and those I visit often.

INTERVIEWER: It is not uncommon for playwrights to direct their own works, but what do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of that?

BETSUYAKU: I've directed once myself. One gains access to the interior of the actors, but in the process loses his image of the total stage. At least in my case. So my directing has been limited to just that once. When I am directing, I feel I end up failing to complete a world through composition and language. I regard the text first of all as a text, and complete it with language. I don't care how much it changes in the process, but I want it to be recreated again in the space of the stage. The writer creates one play through words; then the director creates another through images, and the actors, likewise, another through their bodies. Such entities arrived at separately constitute the best means of enriching drama. However, when functioning as both author and director, I'd find myself compelled to try to make my direction conform to the images I'd achieved in the printed portion. And just that much would likely be lost, so that I'd fail as a director. Inevitably I'd try to force conformity to the images in the words I'd written in my work. I'd stifle and fetter the actors. That's what tended to happen with me, so I'm better off not trying to be a director-playwright.

Another thing, when one doesn't form the habit of bringing the written play to completion, the author is self-complacent, and when also doubling as director, might easily try to get by without writing everything he should. By not writing specific detailed stage instructions, perhaps. He might let things

slide, leave things to the direction, and write without giving much thought to spots that he can handle as director, even in such areas as diction.

I write a play, give it to the director, stay away from the rehearsal room for a while, then go to dress rehearsals. That's when I realize for the first time what my play is like on stage. In my experience to date, success has varied with the degree of difference between the image I had when writing a play and the image I received when seeing it on stage. The greater the difference, the better the production.

All that notwithstanding, I will admit to a tremendous amount of anxiety when working with a director for the first time. I don't know how it's going to go. I generally do not break with a director after only one time; I invariably work with him at least twice. I think it is to our advantage to become thoroughly familiar with one another.

INTERVIEWER: Can you see any advantages possessed by the author-director?

BETSUYAKU: When the playwright and director are different there's a complexity arising from the intermesh of their respective images of the play. This may result in a more complex development of the space itself, and more universality, more dramatic universality. On the negative side, no doubt on those occasions when they are unable to fathom one another and both at sea, the operation would become extremely inefficient.

## II. Social Issues: Crises in the Contemporary Family and Education

INTERVIEWER: Seeing your plays and reading your collection of essays *The Criminal Syndrome (Hanzai shindorōmu)* (1981) has made me very aware of how astutely you observe contemporary society. To speak of one social issue, do you sense a crisis involving education and the contemporary Japanese family?

BETSUYAKU: I do indeed. To me, whether it is a question of the family or one of education, they are all questions involving the disintegration of the community. Locally various people form communities to live in, and the community monitors and maintains everything—all sorts of resources, educational systems, educational problems, domestic relations between the elderly and the young. It is not something that can be replaced by morals or ideology. And in Japan the religious element is extremely weak, too. So, there is something—call it a code, call it custom—within which, by following assorted more or less natural laws, infant rearing is carried out, education is carried out, and family relations too are in some way brought into being. All of that deteriorated when Japan entered the modern age; postwar urbanization brought all the more deteri-

oration. I feel the decay of the community is the cause of everything.

We are right now in a transition period; we seem to have entered a period of reorganization, a renewal of the sense of community, of people living communally. Call it, perhaps, a formation of new communities, new communality. That's no doubt why there is such confusion. The possibility still seems remote that a kind of communality can soon be achieved in rural areas, but in the cities there are non-ideological principles that might lead to some circles within which a kind of community will develop. Unless we arrive at a stage of affairs in which all of life's dilemmas find some solution, the chaos of our educational problems will not disappear.

INTERVIEWER: When I ask about education, I am thinking of your play *Cherry in Bloom* (*Ki-ni hana saku*) (1980) in particular, though I do appreciate your view that all such problems arise from the breakdown of the community. Still, what do you think of the specific question of education?

BETSUYAKU: Well, that makes it complicated, because the education problem encompasses a large variety of others, complicated and inscrutable. But, I have a feeling that the number one problem comes from the preschool education in our childcare system.

In a community children are raised according to their individual needs. In the past there would be children only good at fighting, children only good at singing, children good at study, fast runners, children with sticky fingers but with charm; when these were endorsed by the system of preschool education, there was an environment that ensured such diversity among the children. These diverse, manifold elements were nurtured and the individuality of each child furthered—of course sometimes it may have been crushed—but when there is an environment ensuring a mutual recognition of one another's individuality at the preschool stage, growing up becomes an expansion of this diversity and the educational system a superstructure that is in turn itself diversified. The child who likes to fight takes up sports; the studious child becomes a civil servant. Otherwise, parents are without an image of what to do with their children. They all approach their children in a uniform, simplistic way, wanting them to get into the same public high school so they can enter a good university. Everyone gets a simplistic, mechanical education, and that's when the problems appear. That's why it has to begin at the preschool stage.

The same is true of the boy who kills his grandmother in *Cherry in Bloom*. I don't think anything of the sort would happen, if the totality of the child were completely recognized by his environment. It runs to extremes, but the grandmother in the play holds the notion that boys must be raised that way as a

kind of traditional educational wisdom. Boys mustn't let anyone beat them; they must be strong, good in their studies, and overcome anything. The difficulty is that, as is, these extremely simple, unadorned educational elements cannot be incorporated into society. If the grandmother's educational system were genuinely tested in a single community, she might be told that her method of education was no good and it would be quashed. Then again, if it were indeed tested in the mechanism of communality, rather than being discredited as a mere principle, the testing through the communality mechanism might show it to be a superb system of education.

This intermediary—this intermediate educational system for testing the various educational systems—would produce the most practical society, but it has disappeared. Suddenly individual ideologies and those of the society at large are in direct opposition. So, extreme educational systems—the Totsuka Yacht School<sup>13</sup> is of that variety—are suddenly forced into direct opposition to the entire social situation and are crushed.

The Totsuka Yacht School is obviously one method, though. It seems to have something that attempts to compensate for what is lacking today. It does have something, but that something is variously criticized and supported by the fathers who send their sons to the yacht school and the people who live around it. It is forced into a rapid accommodation. If there were a system that allowed the yacht school to accommodate itself to the community, its extremes could be avoided and it might well mature as an educational system.

New ideologies appear already in radical form, and with the disappearance of communities to make possible their accommodation and maturation, they make their appearance in an unadulterated form, whereupon the whole social situation converges on them and they are ruined. Given the existence of the individual, the community, regional government, and the nation, is it not the individual and the community that are the most in need of regeneration? And I think the theater, too, should no doubt be of use as an organ for such local regeneration on the community level.

INTERVIEWER: Where are the "villages" in the Tokyo of today?

BETSUYAKU: It might not be in the form of villages, but it is possible to have various cultural spheres locally, for example, centered on the Jean-Jean or Parco theaters in Shibuya, the Kinokuniya in Shinjuku, or the Honda Theater in Shimo-Kitazawa. Granted these are rather weak affairs that may represent merely the incorporation of a somewhat frivolous, superficial framework; but if they gradually go on to put down roots in the soil, we might have a local culture in Tokyo—a Shimo-Kitazawa culture, a Shibuya Parco culture, a Kino-

kuniya culture, a Haiyūza culture.

### III. Political Issues

INTERVIEWER: Among your works are the 1974 *Story Written in Numbers* (*Sūji de kakareta monogatari*), which deals with the We'll Die Squad (*shinō-dan*);<sup>2)</sup> the 1973 *The Legend of Noon* (*Shōgo no densetsu*) and 1978 *Water-bloated Corpse* (*Umiyukaba mizuku kabane*), both of which include parody of the emperor system; and the 1982 *The Snow Piles on Tarō's Roof* (*Tarō no yane-ni yuki furitsumu*) and your 1973 screenplay *Martial Law* (*Kaigenrei*), both of which take up Kita Ikki and the February 26 Incident.<sup>3)</sup> What are you saying through such works?

BETSUYAKU: I feel both the crisis of the community and the national experience of Japan in recent times—the recent governmental policies that have enveloped the whole nation—date from the period of the We'll Die Squad (the early 1930s) to the February 26 Incident (1936). For all practical purposes the local community had been destroyed by the time the February 26 Incident concluded. A great many movements for national reform sprang up at about the time of the February 26 Incident, the central one. They were right-wing. The nationalists were resisting in various forms. The We'll Die Squad is one example, a form of extremely urban anarchy. They appeared at this time with their own character, a sense of themselves as individuals.

In Japan the most historically important events have been acts of rebellion that attempted to maintain a kind of separate and individual humanity, even when they possessed a right-wing image. The postwar movement against the security pact with the U.S. was, like a true 1960s struggle, to a degree a demand for a restoration of humanity. And I think those early Showa reform movements had that, too, but in a little more graphic, more garish form.

I think the emperor system is a dramaturgy, not an ideology. The emperor system itself amounts to nothing. The problem is the mechanism of statesmen who support the emperor system, the bureaucracy of the emperor system, a space that absorbs and atomizes the energy of each and every counterattack. It resembles a vacuum. It was able to perpetuate itself from the Heian through the Edo periods down to Meiji. Being a vacuum, one could color it any color. Then came the foundation of the Meiji state, and by the beginning of the Showa period there was the need to reconsider, for the first time, the contradictions inherent in the modern state. There were currency crises, major depressions, social turmoil; it was a time to reorganize the design of the nation, the image of the kind of nation people like Itō Hirobumi and Yamagata Aritomo had tried to build at the time of the Meiji Restoration. Since the insurgency came at just

such a time, the question of what to do with the nation no doubt struck everyone full force with tremendous immediacy.

The protests against the renewal of the U.S.-Japan Mutual Security Treaty made us consider the nature of the state. We felt that maybe we should reexperience for ourselves the way of thinking of those who conducted the movements for national reform that culminated in the February 26 Incident. From the start we found ourselves interested in the view of the emperor those people had had. With the postwar renunciation of the emperor's divinity, he supposedly became a symbol; but the mechanism of the imperial system remained in every recess of our daily lives. We felt we had to try our reexperiencing by transposing our emperor system with that of the February 26 Incident.

I feel that the problem of community I was just speaking of will in the final analysis prove to be one of the emperor system. I've concluded that the mechanism of the everyday community corresponded to it perfectly. Whenever a group is formed, invariably some kind of authority is established. However, the authority is not wielded directly, but through someone else from behind the scenes, issuing orders; or else, a traitor is manufactured, one who is made the villain and manipulated.

Japanese have elaborate techniques for maintaining the group in human relations. These are all techniques they have learned from the hangers-on who maintained the emperor system. They have no ideology. It's all a matter of how to maintain and develop the group. They have no sense of mission, only a perfect technique for maintaining the system. Japanese groups are curious in that they are maintained by technique alone. Normally, a group could be independent of the outside world. For example, the military would be organized through a military sense of mission, to get the enemy. Japanese groups, on the other hand, seem generally without a purpose, being maintained by technique alone. Authority is created and distinctions established, not on any judgmental basis, but because of the need for authority and distinctions as a matter of technique. At least as far as I can see. And this technique seems something that has been developed by the emperor system.

INTERVIEWER: There appears to be a connection with *Meeting (Kaigi)* (1981), which was performed in February 1982.

BETSUYAKU: Yes, there is a similarity.

INTERVIEWER: I'm thinking of the aimless group in *Meeting*. A meeting simply for the sake of a meeting, gathering merely to be gathering. As a student you were deeply involved with the 1960 Security Treaty struggle, but when I saw your *Red Elegy (Sekishoku erejī)* (1980), I was struck by how much your



political attitude had apparently changed in those twenty years since 1960. Have you really changed politically?

BETSUYAKU: Well, I don't think it's changed fundamentally. Simply, the Security struggles of the 1960s were without political ideology; I mean they were not left-wing movements. The left-wing movements of the day all had the Communist Party as ideological support. There may have been some movement to the right in later years, but at the time both in Japan and in China the Soviet Union was the ideal; its image formed a triangle with, at its base, the Japan Communist Party and the extremely idealistic social movements under its aegis.

With the destruction of the Soviet image through the criticism of Stalin, socialism suffered an almost complete setback for a time. Nevertheless, afterwards, the Japan Communist Party was still the symbol of the Left. We participated in a bund at the time of the 1960 protests, but we fled the Communist Party. We separated from them. More than anything, ours was an anarchical organization. There was a great feeling of liberation from our previous left-wing ideological shackles. The Security Treaty struggle was not one to see how far into a corner we could drive Kishi vis-à-vis the Japan-US Security Treaty, but to see how far we could liberate the left wing, if you will, or at least the theretofore left-wing way of thought, from the factionalism of the Communist Party. That accounts for our extreme sense of liberation. And, the Communist Party itself was extremely dark and clammy, beyond help. There was a new image, one separated from the Communist Party. Prior to that, a left wing divorced from the Communist Party had been inconceivable, but we succeeded in breaking away.

Thanks to the feeling of liberation, the 1960s struggles had a kind of buoyancy. It was a buoyant time. There was an energy to the struggles that was sustained by our anti-government feeling of liberation. And we were in the middle of that buoyant movement. The biggest thing was our sense of having freed ourselves from politics. As a result, I think it was our philosophy that we had to leave off political ideology so as to draw upon deeper, more human impulses. In that sense, I don't feel I've changed, even now. Speaking out directly on specific issues could do harm to what I might call the humanity of these issues proper, whether it be the Nakasone government, the Liberal Democratic Party government, environmental issues, the anti-nuclear movement. I've become a bit cautious. My caution about making political statements may well have increased, but I doubt that my stance per se has changed.

#### IV. Absurdism, Beckett

INTERVIEWER: You have written fairy tales, and also rather absurdist

plays such as *The Little Match Girl* (*Matchi-uri no shōjo*) (1966), which uses the model of an Andersen tale, and *Guess Who's behind You* (*Ushiro no shōmen dāre*) (1982), which takes its title from a children's game. What do you find that the psychology of children and the nature of absurdity have in common?

BETSUYAKU: Absurdity becomes tremendously easier to understand when it is transported to the world of the fairy tale. What I like about fairy tales is, in a word, something that can be achieved through memory. Supposing you have read a fairy tale before, by juxtaposing the memory of reading that tale with the present day, one can arrive at a simplification of things. At times one can discern rather clearly something like a time zone containing the vertical axis of the present day and a perpendicular axis of the memory of when one read the fairy tale. If so, I think that when constructing an absurd space, it is useful to view the drama in terms of the relationship between the vertical axes of memory and the present day, rather than as a story which unfolds along a horizontal axis. So, it seems chiefly a matter of taking the memories that give form to the present day, the sediment from the past that forms the present, if you will, the vestiges of the past, and transposing them to the fairy tale so that they can be seen in another light. Not only are things simplified, there is also the rich texture of the fairy tale. The rich spatial texture of the *märchen* may well contribute to the spatial enrichment of the absurd drama. In the main, I use the fairy tales we remember having read when children, to explore the temporal relationship between the vertical axes.

INTERVIEWER: Every year you write a play to be performed by the Snail Society (*Katatumuri no kai*) with your wife Kusunoki Yūko playing the lead. How did that first come about?

BETSUYAKU: Murai Shimako directs the plays and of course my wife Kusunoki Yūko appears in them. The two of them date back to the Art Theater in Shinjuku in the 1960s. It was a movie house and after the movies were over, there were late-night continuous performances of absurd dramas in the movie theater. The first play was Albee's *The Zoo Story*; the place became the first mecca of the theater of the absurd, the main playhouse for it. Murai Shimako and Kusunoki Yūko did a number of absurdist dramas together there, primarily in the later days of the Art Theater. Murai had studied Czech drama in Czechoslovakia. She directed a succession of Topol's absurdist works. She did a very fine job of it, but such work of hers became interrupted for a while. Absurdist drama then pretty much went out of fashion, and it was nearly impossible to do absurdist plays. They did not do them for a while. So when the two of them—Murai and Kusunoki—were in a position to work together again,

they decided to have a try at picking up the absurdism they had done back in the Art Theater in Shinjuku, and began doing one play annually at the Jean-Jean.

INTERVIEWER: About what year was it that it became "impossible to do absurdist works"?

BETSUYAKU: I'd put it in the mid or late 1970s.

INTERVIEWER: About 1975?

BETSUYAKU: More like 1976. There was a period when watching Beckett became painful. After *Happy Days* Beckett's plays struck me as a bit forbidding, and indeed the absurdist works rapidly became desolate, ruminative, philosophical. At the time everyone felt that they were no longer theater. They got the idea that, on the contrary, theater should be gayer and so there were musicals. Refer to it by the English "show" or the Japanese "*misemono*,"<sup>4)</sup> we felt we had to work more actively to bring out that brighter side of theater. Consequently, the absurdist techniques were all retained, but the time came when we'd all had our fill of the plays themselves, of reaffirming the space per se in such a manner. That's when we all began to abandon Beckett.

INTERVIEWER: But you yourself continue to make use of absurdist elements, as in *Guess Who's behind You*, don't you?

BETSUYAKU: Such things have been retained by various people in a variety of ways. I put in a lot of material for comic effect, "show" elements, all to liven up the stage.

INTERVIEWER: To backtrack a little, in the chronology you wrote for *The World of Betsuyaku Minoru (Betsuyaku Minoru no sekai)* (1982), the entry for 1960 contains the information "read Beckett at this time." I would like to hear more about that.

BETSUYAKU: In those days I was engrossed in his works, from *Waiting for Godot* to *Endgame*, *Happy Days*, and *Play*. Then, for a time, I felt my drama would become impoverished doing Beckett's works. They were too dark, too introspective. When you do too much Beckett, you become almost morbid; fragments of Beckett's dialogue flutter through your mind even when you sleep. I gave up Beckett for a while. But very recently Japanese translations have appeared of several of Beckett's works since about 1974—*Not I, That Time*, *Footfalls*, *Ohio Impromptu*, several short pieces. I had occasion to read them in connection with some work, and they were rather unusual. They hardly resembled plays, or anything, but at the same time I was struck by how far Beckett had gone, the tremendous force with which he had penetrated an exceedingly minor world. My interest in him has been aroused again a bit, and I am writing something about that.

To sum up the facts regarding Beckett and myself, Beckett provided the impetus to begin writing plays, but after a time I developed a definite aversion to him. There was a period when it was necessary to try to forget Beckett, which has been followed by a desire to have a moderate second look at him. Beckett's latest works are rather amazing. Reading them one can understand what he is trying to do, but the earlier works such as *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* were superb. In the later plays, *Come and Go*, *Breath*, and the like, the dialogue dwindles down to nothing. I had given up on Beckett, but now I feel, conversely, that he may have begun a new development in a different direction, even though, considering his age, he could hardly be expected to do anything that new.

INTERVIEWER: Besides Beckett, are there philosophers, playwrights, or critics of importance to you?

BETSUYAKU: At first Dostoyevsky was my favorite, his *Notes from Underground* being my introduction when I read it with a study group. In college I read Kafka, again together with friends. At that time it was Dostoyevsky and Kafka, for the most part. I felt that neither of them could be transferred to the stage, that although the stories themselves could be told, their interiors could probably not be transported intact to the stage. It's merely a matter of a different medium, but reading Beckett and Ionesco gave me a clue that I could bring such a world to the stage.

So, chiefly, there have been Dostoyevsky, Kafka, and then such playwrights as Beckett, Ionesco, and Arrabal. As for influences on my dialogue, there are places here and there that amount to Ionesco, parts of my *Alice in Wonderland* (*Fushigi no kuni no Arisu*) (1970), for example, many spots where I've imitated Ionesco's language.

## V. Characters in Betsuyaku's Plays

INTERVIEWER: In your *Gate (Mon)* (1966), *Landscape with Red Bird (Akai tori no iru fūkei)* (1967), *A-Bubblin', A-Boilin' (Ābukutatta, nītatta)* (1976), and *Thirty Days Have September (Ni shi mu ku samurai)* (1977), there is a white-collar worker who has stopped going to the office. What are you trying to say through such characters?

BETSUYAKU: The controlled society dates from about 1960 and the high growth policies instituted by Ikeda Hayato. That's when people began to speak of the controlled society. Everyone is controlled. They are made merely to move gear-like. Consequently, in the theater we have referred to it as "the everyday," the routine (*nichijōsei*), everyday people, everyday things. Life itself

was already entirely controlled by the everyday routine, but life's activities, images, the images we have of ourselves as human beings, all now began to be controlled in conformity with the demands of society. In order to return to being purely a human being, one had to escape from control; and the instant one broke away from the control, there was the sudden realization of a non-routine humanity. That was the case in the plays and, also, there was the phenomenon of an incredible number of people in our generation quitting their companies just at that time. People at about age 35 became aware of the contradictions in trying to get ahead within the company: they quit and went back to their hometowns, began to work on their own, dropped out of the white collar scene, or what have you. It strikes me that it was with those who dropped out that we had the best drama of the typical white-collar worker, the office worker, the so-called middle class of Japan. Dropping out was no solution. Even if one quit and opened a grilled food stand (*yakitoriya*), he entered the same sort of control. Still, it's that determination alone. They must have a sudden awareness of themselves as individuals in the universe at the moment they make the decision. That is where the drama lies; no doubt it's that instant that I wanted to write about. That of the Japanese middle class, in particular, popularly known as the "salary man" (white collar-worker).

In the past, he was the lower ranking warrior, today he is the "salary man," the company employee. It has been just such a middle class that has sustained an unswerving Japanese morality. Mustn't wear colorful clothing; no luxury; live steadfastly; if one works hard, he will invariably be rewarded—there was a period when all of these typical Japanese generalities were maintained by the middle stratum. From late Edo, Meiji, even in the postwar period of today, one might say. With the high growth policies of Ikeda Hayato the middle class began a rapid disintegration and their middle class morality began to crumble. This is, of course, related to the destruction of the community, of which I spoke earlier; but I also feel that the drama of the middle class in deterioration has the most universality of all the many dramas in Japan. That's why I wanted to write a drama of the middle class or, if you will, the petty bourgeois, in those days.

INTERVIEWER: "In those days"?

BETSUYAKU: About the time I wrote *A-Bubblin'*, *A-Boilin'*. When I wrote *A-Bubblin'*, *A-Boilin'* and *Thirty Days Have September*, I was very conscious of them as dramas of the middle class. Their forerunners had been appearing already from the time of *Landscape with Red Bird*.

INTERVIEWER: All of the heroines you have devised for your wife are

either domineering, or inscrutably mysterious, or enigmatic women who represent a danger for the male character. In that light, I am also reminded of the young woman in *The Little Match Girl*, Alice in *I Am Alice (Ai amu Arisu)* (1970), Woman 1 in *The Legend of Noon* and Woman 1 in *Thirty Days Have September*. How did you come to create such female characters?

BETSUYAKU: I am rather fond of the cantankerous woman, the pathos of a woman who is perverse and unpopular. I feel that inevitably we will find an intrinsic femininity in the nature of the woman who cannot help being difficult, who cannot help being domineering. So, I don't give much credence to the maternal within a woman—I doubt its dramatic possibilities. It doesn't take any risks. Likewise, I don't find Mary, the Holy Mother, that sort of woman, very thrilling, either. Not as a woman. The woman who is running risks as a woman is the one who goes ahead and does what she shouldn't, who says what she shouldn't, who does something bad, aware of what she is doing all the while—those are the things that attract me.

For the man, conversely, I tend to find an extremely manly uncouthness in the man who, though he thinks he must be manly and aggressive, is somehow unreliable, without any ability at all to cope with life. He tends to be a little overweight, is big and awkward, makes a mess of whatever he does.

I don't care for the dashing leading man. I rather prefer the supporting actor, though when he is set up as a foil for the leading man, I don't care for either the heavy or the hero. The indefinable supporting actor and the comedian come more natural to me. The manliness that many Japanese traditionally speak of strikes me as somehow false. I realize my opinion deviates from the norm a bit.

## VI. Situations in Betsuyaku's Plays

INTERVIEWER: In both *Fractured Landscape (Kowareta fūkei)* (1976) and *A Place and Its Memories (Basho to omoide)* (1977), strangers eat and drink together and become comrades. How did you devise these picnic scenes, and what function do they perform?

BETSUYAKU: I find people eating on stage dramatic. I'm very fond of it. But, father, mother, and the children facing one another over toast in the morning before they go off to the office or to school in everyday life—that I don't regard as dramatic. I place the eating beneath a telephone pole, outside, one reason being so that as they eat there with reserve, the eating, the fact that people are eating things, becomes abstracted. As a result, I've written a lot of these picnic scenes.

One more thing is that in Japan there is the notion of participating in the community through eating. When a bride comes from another area to marry into a village, she becomes a member of the new village when she eats a mouthful of their food there. Likewise, outsiders from other areas establish ties with a community by eating some of their food. In short, in Japan eating brings about a kind of community. So there are tacit notions, such as if you go to that village, you must not eat any of their food, or not to let outsiders eat any of the village's food. I feel that by incorporating such things, it should be possible to create situations in which, through the eating, characters are dragged into the communality or placed in that position, whether they like it or not. All this is latent in the picnic scenes, I imagine.

INTERVIEWER: Speaking of the picnics in these two plays, in *Fractured Landscape* it is a jogger and his backpack, in *A Place and Its Memories* a salesman and his sample case, but in both there are scenes where their belongings are taken out one by one and exclaimed over; but after this violation of their privacy, they are admitted to the group. What is at work here?

BETSUYAKU: The props are not only to show an invasion of privacy, they are also things used in everyday life, familiar objects that, conversely, allow a confirmation of the everyday when they are taken out and looked at on the picnic lawn or outdoors. So, I prefer to use rather ordinary objects in such scenes. And, through the involvement with these props, a certain environment is created, in which they become embedded.

INTERVIEWER: In *A Place and Its Memories* there are various apparently mysterious things in the baby buggies, but they are not taken out of the buggies and MAN 1 has no chance to see them at all. On the other hand, the group is able to examine all of the salesman's things. He knows nothing about those people. Not even at the end. The group exits and the salesman is left alone, still in the dark. What can we make of that?

BETSUYAKU: The salesman. Well, yes, in the end, he must enter their memories. I suppose it amounts to his being unable to extricate himself from their memories. If we were to carry the drama on a little further, I suppose he would have to settle among them and marry someone from a family there. The natives have piled objects into the baby buggies, but they have much more in view of their extensive land, so that you don't know what they'll produce from the buggies; and they go on producing strange objects one after the other, infinitely. But there's a limit to the things the salesman has, so I think it's natural for him to be dragged into their boundless possession, their extensive store of props. And so, he marries someone from a family there, settles, dies, further

becomes just a memory; and again they ensnare a man who comes to hold a different memory. That seems to be what it amounts to.

INTERVIEWER: In *Landscape with Bus Stop* (*Basutei no aru fūkei*) (1976), two characters merely sit talking on a bench, virtually without moving. What artistic objective did you have in mind in *Landscape with Bus Stop*?

BETSUYAKU: I'll tell you what I had foremost in my mind. There are a man and a woman exchanging casual conversation waiting for a bus, while from a speaker comes a realistic documentary-style broadcast of patrol cars chasing radicals. I had a book containing actual radio transmissions of police hunting radicals, which I incorporated verbatim. On the one hand, the radicals are engaged in some sort of purposeful activity, but sitting there on the bench with no apparent relation to it all are the man and the woman. Likewise, they appear to have no relation to one another. Their completely irrelevant chance encounter makes up the drama. Heretofore in modern drama there were relationships, parent and child, or what have you. The drama would unfold within the context of encounters between characters with mutual interests, with some sort of social relationship. However, in the age we live in now, encounters between people with virtually no relationship with one another seem the more numerous. In a chance encounter people would not likely open their hearts to one another; they would simply part. My play was only an experiment to see just what type of drama could arise from such a chance encounter, to see just what was the nature of an encounter with no interests at stake, no inevitability involved.

INTERVIEWER: To refer again to your chronology in *The World of Betsuyaku Minoru*, your father died when you were a child and your mother and the five children had to spend another year in Manchuria waiting to be repatriated to Japan after the war ended. That wait was followed by two rather peripatetic years until the family finally settled in Nagano. To quote from the chronology, your entry for 1948 says, "August, move from Shizuoka to Nagano, where mother tries work first peddling, then running a food cart (*yatai*) drinking spot, and finally operating a *gyōza* (fried Chinese meat dumplings) stand, this last providing a modicum of financial stability; she continues this until we move from Nagano to Tokyo (in March 1957 immediately upon eldest son Minoru's graduation from high school)." Could you tell me a little about this "fried dumpling stand"? What sort of place was it?

BETSUYAKU: We went to Nagano in the first place because of a friend of my father's who lived there and was going to introduce my mother to a job. I can't recall what the product was that she peddled; but she soon quit anyway, after which she operated a food cart. She would pull it to a shrine, in front of



which she parked it in line with the other carts. She sold *oden* (boiled vegetables and fish), or what have you, and saké. It was a drinking establishment. *Yakitori, oden*, that sort of thing. But Nagano was a bit of a tourist city with incessant beautification movements. They found the food carts lining the streets unsightly, so they constructed a ferro-concrete building and concentrated all the food cart proprietors in one spot. They put all the food cart operators from the whole city in the one building, so it was a small shop. Like the Golden Street shops in Shinjuku. Really, only from here to there [indicates shop's size with hands]. Just a counter and a row of stools.

INTERVIEWER: About how many customers could it accommodate?

BETSUYAKU: About ten, I'd say. It was a small shop, a little larger than a food cart. The ferro-concrete building the city built was three stories high as I recall, with nothing but drinking places. Mother got in there, switched to fried dumplings, because she had been good at making them in Manchuria. She sold saké, too, of course, and stayed open from 4 P.M. to about 12 or 1 in the morning. It was a big building, called "Rest Town," or something. When I went back recently, it had already gone out of business.

INTERVIEWER: What I have been leading up to is the next question, namely whether there is a connection between the many moves in your childhood and the theme of attachment to place, whether a place to live or to work, that appears in *The Move (Idō)* (1972), *A House, a Tree, a Son (Ikken no ie, ippon no ki, hitori no musuko)* (1977), and *The Narrow Lane of Tenjin (Tenjinsama no hosomichi)* (1979)?

BETSUYAKU: Hm. There might be. There just might be. But, you know, I don't dislike moving that much. I don't mind it very much. Even now I don't own a home. True, I don't have the money to build one, but, even so, I don't mind renting and moving once in a while when I get tired of the place.

INTERVIEWER: But isn't your economic situation vastly different now from when you were a child? And when we consider the situation in Japan after the war, having a place was no doubt extremely important, wasn't it?

BETSUYAKU: It was then. Especially in a place like Nagano where everyone owned his own house. Not having a house and renting may have been uncommon.

INTERVIEWER: So many of your plays are set in the street. And, in *The Legend of Noon* there is even a character who carries a box with him everywhere. If someone asks him what it's for, he answers that it's his place, that he carries it so that he'll always have a place. In *The Narrow Lane of Tenjin* there is lengthy, sometimes violent squabbling among peddlers and fortunetellers over

little patches of sidewalk. The business of a food cart is conducted entirely on the sidewalk. I can't help feeling that you have experienced things in that regard that most children don't.

BETSUYAKU: Hm, the food cart. There may be something to that. Still, I don't like to do a play where on the stage there is a wall here, a window there, a door on this side, a door on that side, and so on. Somehow that strikes me as artificial. I simply don't want to do my plays in an enclosed space. That's why I purposely have the eating scenes on mats outside. Somehow there's more of a feeling of development that way. Of course I may be getting the hint for this from my mother's work pulling the food cart. Also, I am very fond of paintings of picnics or beach scenes where the family is gathered to eat on a mat beneath a beach umbrella. Viewed from the outside, there is an extremely convincing sense of them as a family.

## VII. The Current State and Future of Japanese Drama

INTERVIEWER: Could you tell me your feelings about the term *shingeki* (new drama)?

BETSUYAKU: I don't especially disapprove of it. Our generation, that is, people who began doing plays in the 1960s, was anti-*shingeki*. The word *shingeki* was depressing, old-fashioned, somber. We were very negative toward *shingeki*, and, frankly, that basic feeling has not changed. But the fact remains that our conception of drama as something intellectual and structured is the product of a theatrical system that stretches from the days of the Tsukiji Little Theater<sup>5)</sup> down to the present. That's where it differs from traditional forms of theater such as *nō*, *kabuki*, *shimpa* (New School (of drama)), and *shinkokugeki* (New National Theater). I feel that while the intellectual does have its limitations, theater will go to ruin when it abandons the attempt to be intellectual, the attempt to be structured.

At present theater is striving to be emotional rather than intellectual, for a spectacular show-like exposition rather than for structure. The prevailing mood is that plays must be rich in variety. I think in the final analysis theater is something structural.

One more thing, although perhaps impossible for a foreigner to understand, is that the tradition that has come down from the time of the Tsukiji Little Theater has always had something foreign—"the stench of butter" (*batakusasa*)—about it. "Reeking of butter" (*batakusai*)—that means it has contained Western elements and that those Western elements have been regarded as a positive component of *shingeki*. For example, Osanai Kaoru, who founded the Tsukiji Little

Theater, was frowned upon when he announced that they would not do Japanese plays, that they would do only translated works. Because of that admiration for the West *shingeki's* reputation was none too good then, and, for that matter, neither is it now.

However, it's not simply a case of Western things being better. Rather, there are many things that can be established by doing plays in a Western manner. Japanese-style plays, for example New School or New National Theater, depend upon atmosphere. When redoing in the Western manner what has been established heretofore by atmosphere, one has logic and greater clarity at his disposal. I think it must've been a matter of the Western being better for that reason.

There are writers of butter-stench fiction in Japan, Miyazawa Kenji to name one of several such authors of fairy tales. I don't regard that as a mere case of admiration for the West, but an attempt to establish something with a bit more certainty by shifting Japanese things to a European style. It's that butter-reeking sensibility—*shingeki* has it and I relish it immensely. Take Nakamura Nobuo,<sup>6)</sup> to name an actor. Of course he has a Japanese side, but there's a feel to him, his composure, a certain bearing, European, intellectual, when he wears his Western-style clothes and glasses. The effect he produces represents the better aspects of *shingeki*, which I feel must be preserved in the future as *shingeki* tradition. Nakamura Nobuo uses the term "pure *shingeki*."

INTERVIEWER: Can we use the word *shingeki* to describe your plays?

BETSUYAKU: I've no objection to it. I personally do not find it objectionable.

INTERVIEWER: But is the term appropriate for your plays?

BETSUYAKU: Wouldn't you say it's appropriate at this juncture? Among the playwrights today, it might be the most appropriate for me. And I rather doubt that Shimizu would object to the term, either.

INTERVIEWER: Do you mean that you are carrying on the tradition of Osanai Kaoru?

BETSUYAKU: Yes. Someone like Kara Jūrō might have an aversion to it, but I have a feeling even a figure like Satoh Makoto is, in the final analysis, carrying on the *shingeki* tradition. In a different sense, of course.

INTERVIEWER: You think even Satoh would not object to the label of *shingeki*?

BETSUYAKU: I doubt that he would. Not in the sense I've been describing.

INTERVIEWER: Finally, I would like to ask you about the future development of Japanese playwrights. How do you think new playwrights will be pro-

duced?

BETSUYAKU: That's rather difficult to foresee; but you have Noda Hideki, who has emerged in the forefront of those who view theater as a "show," a *misemono*. Then there is Yamazaki Tetsu, who is more structural; or, rather than structural, difficult, aiming at a more literary exposition of the somewhat menacing areas of people's feelings. The most genuine work will result from theater that establishes structure, from theater that assumes a stance midway between that of those who seek to develop it literarily and those who develop it as a show, a *misemono*. That is the type of drama I would like to see more of appear, though I doubt whether there is a base on which to establish it.

A move to establish dramatic structure might appear from a totally different quarter and involve changes in how shows are made, changes in acting systems, or whatever. I feel that with the appearance of more structured plays, a gap will appear between the mode of expression of plays done in extremely large theaters and that of those done in extremely small playhouses. I doubt that "shows" are suited to small theaters. The plays for little theaters require the creation of a system for characters to confirm the truth as they confront one another at the extremely close quarters of the small theater.

The structural plays will sprout up among those done in small places—the question being how they will sprout up. Whatever we may say, ours is the world of literature; I feel we approach drama literarily. I refer to myself, to Kara Jūrō, to Shimizu, of course, and even to Satoh Makoto. Our orientation is the word. I find it impossible to imagine how those who aren't language-oriented might begin to identify their dramatic structure. Still, I feel that a new drama along those other lines may evolve. And we word-oriented ones—we who started with literature and experienced the theater of the absurd—may be able to establish some sort of common ground with them.

INTERVIEWER: Do you feel they will definitely appear?

BETSUYAKU: I can't say when, but I feel that theater is tenacious, that its potential may grow stronger in the future. The problem, however, is the environment to accommodate it. There must be an audience that comprises a community, whether regional or, as I described a while ago, cultural spheres centered on such theaters as the Honda, Kinokuniya, or Jean-Jean. Otherwise, the audience will go on being merely a portion of the upper class, always the same people, attracted by frivolous newspaper ads. The potential will remain unfulfilled. We may well have to go through a period of attrition lasting years, a period devoted to new gimmicks, novelty, and superficial changes.

I feel that if a solid theatergoing community is gradually created, a mature

drama will evolve in relation to it. Take classical *rakugo* (comic stories), for example. Its downfall resulted from the total destruction of its environment. In the old days there was the Suehirotei in the Ningyōchō area of Tokyo, a very good storytellers' hall (*yose*) with a local audience of people from the neighborhood who understood classical *rakugo*. Perhaps culture cannot mature without an environment wherein a small number of intimate adherents are trained in an atmosphere of terribly hard work and incisive criticism, all disseminated by word of mouth. For when the culture suddenly spreads to a hundred thousand, or a million people, there is no basis for criticism, no receptive environment for the culture. Drama still has the potential for maturity, provided it maintains its pattern of concentric circles, a small number of intimate groups, surrounded in turn by looser groupings. You can do plays on television, of course; but to experience true drama you must go to the theater.

There are good theater devotees, and the environment for this wave-like expansion remains in place. But look at the novel, serious literature (*junbungaku*, or "pure literature"). They sell a hundred thousand, or three hundred thousand copies of a first edition, and all they manage to do is to destroy serious literature by approaching it in that fashion. We won't expand our drama in that way. Our audience is still small. A play of mine is seen by about two thousand people in the course of its run.

## NOTES

- 1) The yacht school boards problem adolescents sent by their parents for strict discipline and physical training centered on the teaching of boatmanship. With the revelation of serious accidents and the instructors' regular use of corporal punishment, the school became a nationwide *cause célèbre* for media crusaders in the spring of 1983.
- 2) Refers to the *Nichirenkai* (Nichiren society), a small zealous group formed in 1928 and dedicated to a revival of "true" Nichiren Buddhism. Not one of the religions officially recognized by the government, they were under strict police observation, their activities restricted and eventually prohibited. They protested in many ways, including, in 1933, a pilgrimage from Yokohama to Kamakura, shouting *shinō* (we'll die) as they walked. They endured arrests, engaged in lengthy fasts, and finally entered a stage of suicides with the last member committing suicide in June 1938.
- 3) Unsuccessful coup attempt led by idealistic young Imperial Army officers in the name of the Emperor. See *Revolt in Japan: The Young Officers and the February 26, 1936, Incident* by B. A. Shillony (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973).
- 4) "Show" or "exhibition" are standard translations; but in some contexts *misemono* has traditionally also conjured up images of tawdry displays, as of a carnival or freak show nature.
- 5) Osanai Kaoru (1881-1928) was a seminal figure in the establishment of *shingeki*. For Tsukiji Little Theater, formed by Osanai and Hijikata Yoshi (1898-1959), see "Japan's First Modern Theater: The Tsukiji Shōgekijō and Its Company, 1924-26", by Brian

Powell, *Monumenta Nipponica*, Vol. XXX, No. 1, Spring, 1975, pp. 69-85.

- 6) Nakamura Nobuo (b. 1906) is a talented character actor, whose professional relationship with Betsuyaku has deepened considerably in recent years. He has also appeared in many films, including Ozu Yasujirō's works.