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Japan Playwrights Association, ed. *Half a Century of Japanese Theater I: The 1990s Part 1.* Tokyo: Kinokuniya, 1999. 496 pp. $50.00 (paper), ISBN 978-4-314-10135-6.

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Performable English Translations of Six Major Japanese Plays of the 1990s

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This collection of translations of six plays, which had their first performances in Japan between 1989 and 1997, is of great interest to readers of English who wish to know more about contemporary Japanese theater. The Japan Playwrights Association, whose editorial committee is made up of Betsuyaku Minoru, Mari Boyd, Kawabata Ryoko, Ota Shogo, Saito Ren, and Senda Akihiko, has done a wonderful job of introducing these plays in translation while they are still fresh and contemporary. This book is the first in a series of translations of contemporary Japanese plays. (The next decade translated is the 1980's. Part 1 was published in 2001.) Mari Boyd, who edited the volume, brought together top-notch translators, writers who have had a long association with Japanese theater. Thus, the plays read very well, and are eminently performable. (One of the plays, *Epitaph for the Whales*, was produced professionally in London in 1998.) The anthology begins with an excellent general introduction to Japanese theater of the 1990s, written by Hasebe Hiroshi. Each play begins with an introduction placing the play and its playwright in its larger cultural context. This book is, as reviewer Carol Fisher Sorgenfrei has written, "Essential reading for anyone interested in Japanese theater beyond Noh and Kabuki."[1]

The introductory essay by Hasebe Hiroshi outlines the social, political and economic events in the 1990s that inspired the production of these six particular plays. Hasebe shows how certain contemporary events: the Japanese economic bubble bursting in the late 1980s, the Chernobyl nuclear accident, the end of the Cold War, the death of the Emperor (without accepting responsibility for wartime atrocities), and Japan's financial participation in the Gulf War, along with the two disasters of 1995, the great Kobe earthquake and the Sarin gas attacks by the new religious sect Aum Shinrikyo, called into question the way theater was practiced. The new playwrights rejected both the grotesque experimentation of the underground theater, and futuristic plays depicting war and destruction. Thus, the playwrights in this collection are preoccupied with larger social and political concerns. They call into question current events, attitudes, and values.

The plays in this collection reflect the disillusionment at the end of the era: the end of postwar high-growth economics, the end of the useful life of "Japan Inc," as well as the death of the Emperor. The plays challenge "official memory," and reflect on Japan's wartime past. They also challenge the audiences to look beyond the "evidence" and majority opinion, and consider what is unseen and unsaid.

Tokyo Atomic Klub, written by Makino Nozomi,[2] takes as its subject the youth of Nobel Prize Winner in Physics, Tomonaga Shinichiro (fictionalized as Tomoda Shinichiro), between 1932 and 1946. The play is set in a common boarding house, named "Peace Hall." Tomoda's life intersects with the lives of the other young boarders: a dance-hall piano player, a female entertainer (who, among other self-recreations, impersonates a Catholic nun, marries a millionaire, and eventually tours as a male impersonator), a young playwright, a university baseball player, and a military officer. The characters are very likeable, and many of the scenes are comic. The scenes portray the excitement and dejection of the rise and fall of Japan's wartime fortunes.

This play challenges the prevailing notion that the Japanese people were victims of World War II. Its treatment of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki is particularly bold. By the 1990s, many younger Japanese were questioning the official wartime memory that Japanese intellectuals and ordinary Japanese people were forced against their will to co-operate with Japan's military. This play comes to terms with the fact that the Japanese overwhelmingly supported Japanese colonial expansion and military aggression. In fact, many intel-

lectuals used the military expansion to advance their careers. Makino's play is about acknowledging the intellectual thrill of developing technologies of mass destruction. He turns around the notion that a play about the atomic bomb has to be written from the viewpoint of the victim, and has to deal with the damage and destruction caused by the bomb. In *Tokyo Atomic Klub,* Makino describes the secret excitement of physicists like Tomoda to the news of the bomb, instead of describing the devastation. Rather than concentrating on the victims, he has written from the viewpoint of potential perpetrators. These were Tomoda and his fellow physicists in the Japanese military labs who were working on creating an atomic bomb themselves. They were unable to complete their dream because they could not get the financial support that was available to the U.S. creators of the bomb. Although they were aware of the horrors of the bomb, they also wished that they had been the ones to create it. They were, like the Americans who succeeded in dropping the first atomic bombs, fellow members of the "Atomic Club." After the war, Komori, one of Tomoda's co-workers at the laboratory, expresses his secret thrill that mankind had created the bomb. He says, "I couldn't help being thrilled by the fact that human beings had already released atomic energy...looking back, I think that was a sinful reaction. However, now, even though I've said that, I wouldn't think about giving up physics." (p. 406) The play, with many amusing scenes and eccentric characters, draws the audience into thinking about difficult and even forbidden subjects. Even fifty years after the dropping of the bomb, it is taboo to write a work that might offend atomic survivors. In challenging the collective memory of the bombs, Makino has risked cultural ostracism in order to get audiences to re-examine, not only the wartime responsibility of the previous generation, but also their own responsibilities in the unfolding of current events.

In the 1990's Japanese playwrights also re-examined Japan's colonial past. Amazingly, two of the six plays in the collection are set in Korea in 1909-1910, in the early days of Japanese subjugation. The first is Hirata Oriza's *Citizens of Seoul.*[3] Hirata, who spent a year as an exchange student in Korea, examines present-day Japanese questions of national identity through his play, which is set in the past.

The play takes place in the house of the Shinozaki family, wealthy Japanese expatriates living in Seoul, in the summer of 1909, prior to the formal Japanese annexation of Korea in 1910. The family regard themselves as "liberals," because they let their Korean maids wear Korean clothing and drink tea with them. However, their unconscious sense of privilege and discrimination shows in their words and attitudes. For example, the mother hates Korean food, even though she has never tried it. The daughter, who can barely speak a word of Korean, declares that Korean language is unsuited to literature. The discriminatory statements, which occur in conversation with the Korean maids who do not contradict their employers, resonates with some contemporary Japanese explorations of cultural identity, which posit Japanese culture as unique and asserts that Japanese aesthetic tastes are paramount and Japanese language alone possesses literariness. It is only the lower-class Japanese maids serving this family of liberals who openly voice their sense of superiority over the Koreans. In revealing petty details of the life of the insular Japanese colonial family, Hirata causes the audience to examine its own present-day attitudes towards Koreans. The play was performed in 1993 in Seoul, in Hirata's Korean translation. Hirata later wrote, "the discriminatory dialogue repeatedly received an icy response from the audience." (p. 30) No doubt Hirata's depiction of colonial Japanese attitudes towards Koreans still touches a raw nerve in present-day Korea.

In contrast to the quiet ordinariness of *Citizens of Seoul*, the action in the final play in this collection, *Ice Blossoms,* by Kaneshita Tatsuo [4] also set in Korea, contains scenes of unsettling violence. The protagonist, An Chung-gun, is a Korean who assassinated the Japanese Resident-General of Korea, Ito Hirobumi. An is being held in Port Arthur Prison awaiting execution. The conflicts between the veteran prison warden, the prison doctor, and the official from the Ministry of Foreign affairs play out the conflicts of modernization, internationalization and colonial rule. In these grim and brutal surroundings, the surprising humanity of the hired interpreter, his demented mother, and the silent Christ-like An, is extremely moving. The shockingly violent events of the play foreground the "unspoken" violence of the Japanese subjugation of Korea, the subsequent war and its aftermath. The play has incredible emotional intensity, even on the written page.

Another play in the collection, *Time's Storeroom* [5], also questions historical memory, this time by re-visiting the year 1960. This was the year of the questionable revision of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty (Ampo), preparations for the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, and the beginning of the high growth economic period. The play is about the Shinjo family and how they get drawn into consumer culture. In the beginning, they look down on their money-hungry relatives, each clinging to their own version of integrity, but they begin to accept consumer items

(by agreeing to "store" their daughter's "extra" vacuum cleaner and television set) and gradually come to feel emptiness in the ideals they had previously cherished. In the end, they become engrossed in watching television.

Fireflies, by Suzue Toshiro [6], shows three interconnected couples who are trapped in emotional alienation. Actual fireflies, though sought after by the couple who have lost their child, no longer exist. Instead, the characters' emotions burst into light and extinguish, seemingly at random. They intermittently share their deepest spiritual cravings, yet always fail to achieve real connection with others. Symbolic of their spiritual dryness, they drink a lot of water and watery liquids, but they are constantly thirsty. A middle-aged businessman is forced, because modern life values his family's health over his comfort, to smoke on the balcony of his apartment, and thus cannot relax at home. He signals to other smokers on distant balconies with his lighted cigarette. He half-heartedly romances one of the office ladies at his workplace. The mask he wears hides his true feelings, even from himself. The overall effect is one of desperate alienation. The characters cry out in the dark for acceptance and affection, but always fail to connect.

Epitaph for Whales [7] is inspired by the "dream plays" of Noh (mugen Noh), in which the protagonist is a spirit with an obsessive desire to recreate scenes of the past. The youngest brother of a former whaling family, who is about to be married, receives a mysterious visit from his drowned brothers, who are all named after different species of whale. Another relative, a sort of shamaness, narrates the story of their deaths, retribution for attacking a whale and her cub. Narrated scenes of the power of the whales and the sea gods are larded with mundane observations on the importance of good oral hygiene and how to avoid getting your bicycle towed. The atmosphere is at once everyday and dreamlike. In the second half of the play, the drowned brother explains the intimate connection between the whalers and the whales:

MAKOTO: We believe a whaler is a descendant of a whale, so he is given a change to hunt a whale. That's why in many places souls of whales and whalers are always enshrined next to each other. SHUZO: In that case all of you are the transformed bodies of whales. (152)

The whaler brothers are not only named after whales, they were once whales. Thus the "epitaph" in the title of this play refers not only to actual whales, but the vanished livelihood, legends and sacrifices of the whaling community. The play portrays the dying Japanese whaling community as possessing values and memories at odds with dominant global sanctions against not only their livelihoods, but also against their very spiritual foundation. The play ends as dawn breaks, and the mysterious whale-men bless the upcoming marriage and vanish. The brothers' visit is a powerful stimulus for the audience to question our own nostalgias and obsessions with the past, and also accepted notions of what is real and unreal.

I heartily recommend this collection as an introduction to contemporary Japanese plays. The only thing that I feel is lacking from this collection is an explanation of why these particular six plays and playwrights were chosen. The selection criterion and the genesis of the book's concept are entirely missing. In spite of this shortcoming, the collection presents plays of great variety, depth, and originality. If you are interested in knowing about contemporary Japanese theater, this book is for you.

Notes:

[1]. Carol Fisher Sorgenfrei, *Asian Theater Journal,* Volume 17:2, Fall 2000, pg. 303.

[2]. *Tokyo Genshikaku Kurabu*, first produced in 1997, translated by John D. Swain.

[3]. *Soru Shimin,* first performed in 1989, translated by John D. Swain.

[4]. Kanka,_ first performed in 1997, translated by Mitachi Riho.

[5]. *Toki no Monooki,*, first performed in 1994, translated by David H. Shapiro.

[6]. *Kami o kakiageru,* first performed in 1995, translated by David G. Goodman.

[7]. *Kujira no Bohyo,* first performed in 1993, translated by Yuasa Masako.

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