
Contemporary Theatre

50 Years after Reversion—Reflecting on Okinawa, Japan, and the World

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In February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine. Images of women and children fleeing and destroyed city areas thrust the reality of war before our eyes. In December, the Kishida administration signaled a large-scale reinforcement of Japan's defense capabilities in response to the increasingly tense security situation in the surrounding region. The restrictive security measures that have been in place since the postwar era are approaching a major turning point.

068 **New Plays Examined Okinawa's History and Reality**

In 2022, a year of turbulence in Japan and the world, Okinawa marked the fiftieth anniversary of its reversion to Japan.

At the end of World War II, one in four residents of Okinawa Prefecture lost their lives in a fierce land war. Following Japan's defeat, Okinawa was placed under the occupation of the United States government. The majority of American military facilities in Japan remained concentrated in the prefecture after the 1972 reversion, and to this day they continue to impose burdens and dangers on Okinawans. A number of plays exploring the history and contemporary reality of Okinawa were presented in 2022. The following is a look back at these productions in chronological order of performance.

hana—1970, *The Day Koza Burned* (*Koza ga moeta hi*), written by Hatasawa Seigo and produced by HoriPro, depicts one night in the life of a bar manager (Hana is the bar's name) and her family. In a riot that occurred in 1970 in Koza (now Okinawa City), Okinawans burned the vehicles of military personnel out of anger over inequitable handed down in cases of road accidents and crimes

perpetrated by American service members. Set against the backdrop of the riot, the play brings together various thematic elements including wartime and postwar hardship, anticipation of Okinawa's reversion, the insensitivity of mainland Japanese, and the fear experienced by American soldiers soon to be sent to war in Vietnam. Kuriyama Tamiya, who has long been holding workshops in Okinawa, directed the play with a deep sense of empathy and anger over irrational realities.

The theatre company Mum & Gypsy, led by the young playwright/director Fujita Takahiro, planned and produced the play *Light house* (which Fujita wrote and directed) in collaboration with Naha Cultural Arts Theater NAHart. Fujita started making frequent trips to Okinawa when he wrote and directed *cocoon*, a play about the “Himeyuri students” (based on the book by Kyo Machiko) which premiered in 2013. In structuring *Light house*, Fujita connected themes that had made an impression on him in Okinawa—wartime memories, construction of new bases, people's ways of life—through the motif of water. In summer, *cocoon* was also performed in locations throughout Japan.

Gekidan Chocolate Cake, a theatre company whose productions portray war on a foundation of historical fact, presented six plays in a single performance titled *To Surviving Descendants—Six Works on War (Ikinokotta shisontachi e, senso rokuhen)*. One of the plays, Furukawa Takeshi's new work, *Gama* (directed by Hisawa Yusuke), shed light on individual experiences of the Battle of Okinawa through the depiction of various people—female students, a teacher, soldiers—sheltering together in a cave (*gama*) amid fierce combat.

Kanagawa Performing Arts Theatre (KAAT) commissioned a dramatic play from Okinawa-based playwright Kaneshima Takuya, and together with director Tanaka Maiko and staff spent over a year creating its production of Kaneshima's *Waiting at Rycom (Rycom de mattoku)*. In the story, a magazine writer named Asano, who lives in Kanagawa Prefecture, happens by chance to go to Okinawa to research the trial that followed the 1964 killing of an American soldier (and injury of another soldier) by young Okinawans. In the course of his research, Asano discovers that one of the defendants in the trial was his wife's grandfather. Enmeshed in a world that mysteriously combines past and present, Asano is

confronted with the modern history of Okinawa—symbolized by the fact that the location of the former American military Ryukyu Command (RyCom) and related facilities is now the site of a large shopping mall that has retained the name Rycom. Theatregoers were deeply affected by the sense of anger and questioning (“So Okinawa is ‘Japan’s backyard,’ is it?”) that resonated from the play’s deft and at times humorous storytelling.

Katabui, 1972, written and directed by Naito Yuko, is a joint production of Theatre Office Natori (Tokyo) and ACO Okinawa. Set in the living room of a sugar cane farming family on Okinawa’s main island, the play takes a close look, based on the writer’s meticulous research, at the six-month period before Okinawa’s reversion. *Katabui* is the word for an Okinawa summer weather phenomenon in which one location is clear and sunny while heavy rain falls just a short distance away. Through the portrayal of postwar Okinawa from a domestic perspective, and the conversations of family members who respect one another’s views while disagreeing about the reversion and military bases, various questions quietly expand in scope and connect with the present.

070

On the Freedom to Speak

In Russia, a new law imposes a maximum penalty of fifteen years for the dissemination of “false information,” and media outlets and SNS have been strictly regulated. In Hong Kong, which reverted to China twenty-five years ago, restrictions on discourse are becoming increasingly severe, and even include a ban on events memorializing the Tiananmen Square massacre of June 4, 1989. The “society where people can’t speak freely” is expanding.

P-Company presented the Hong Kong play *May 35th*, written by Candace Chong Mui Ngam (Japanese translation by Maggie Chan and Ishihara Nen) and directed by Matsumoto Yuko. The main characters are an elderly Beijing couple whose son died in the Tiananmen Square massacre. Wishing simply to commemorate their child in the square, they plan an action that will put their lives at risk. This illness-afflicted couple’s strength inspires awe, while the system that crushes their hopes inspires horror.

These are by no means “other people’s problems.” Theatre company

Komatsuza's production of *Tales of Poverty (Bimbo Monogatari)*, written by Inoue Hisashi and directed by Kuriyama Tamiya, is set in 1934 in the unoccupied home of economist Kawakami Hajime, who was then in detention under the Peace Preservation Law. The conversation of the women who gather there illuminates the heaviness of "discussion" and the hardships inherent in women's lives—a thread that runs through every generation. In this production, the work conveyed a stronger sense of lived reality than it did at the time of its premiere in 1998.

Nitasha presented its signature work, *The Men Who Made Us Sing (Utawasetai otokotachi)*, which premiered in 2005. Written and directed by Nagai Ai, the play was performed with a new cast. It's set at a metropolitan high school that, on the morning of its graduation ceremony, receives a directive from the city government to have everyone sing "Kimigayo" (Japan's national anthem). What ensues in this "hilarious tragedy" is a clash of positions and opinions among the school's principal, who wants the ceremony to proceed without a hitch; a social studies teacher who objects to the city's order; and the music instructor charged with piano accompaniment. It has been more than twenty years since this issue was intensely debated, but the reality depicted in the work is shockingly contemporary. The young teachers who sneer at and unhesitatingly try to thwart those expressing the minority view brought to mind the state of discourse today, with the addition of a new layer of ominousness.

In the Theatre Cocoon production *Hiroshima Django*, written and directed by Horai Ryuta, the day-to-day routine of a Hiroshima oyster processing plant is overlaid with a "Western." Within its colorful, abundantly fantastical entertainment, the play addresses the cruelty of peer pressure, the types of conditions that can easily give rise to autocracy, and the courage of people who fight against these situations.

Artistic Directors' "Second Chapter"

–The New National Theatre, Tokyo's Thoroughgoing Programs

It has been twenty-five years since the opening of the New National Theatre, Tokyo. There has been an increase in the number of public theatres as well as an

expansion of the artistic director system. What could be called this system's second chapter has begun. In April 2022, director/actor Shirai Akira became the artistic director of Setagaya Public Theatre in Tokyo. Shirai invited choreographer/dancer Kondo Ryohei (who in the same period assumed the artistic directorship of Saitama Arts Theater), Nagatsuka Keishi of Kanagawa Arts Theatre (KAAT), Ogawa Eriko of the New National Theatre, Tokyo and others to take part in multiple discussions (held in front of audiences) that revisited the role of artistic directors. A series of symposia is also taking place at Matsumoto Performing Arts Center in Matsumoto, Nagano Prefecture, in advance of the retirement in spring 2023 of Kushida Kazuyoshi, who as artistic director has been at the helm of the theatre for the past twenty years. The movement towards thinking more deeply about the relationship between society and theatrical productions/theatres is gaining momentum.

The New National Theatre, Tokyo, where Ogawa Eriko serves as artistic director, undertook thoroughgoing personnel training and other programs, actively engaging young creators. Fourteen young people took part in the two-year playwriting workshop held by the theatre in cooperation with Britain's Royal Court Theatre. A play that emerged from this workshop, Sugai Ei's *My Month* (*Watashi no ikkagetsu*), was performed in a production directed by Inaba Kae. Osawa Yu, who directed Yokoyama Takuya's play *Beaching at Dawn* (*Yoake no yorikujira*), was one of the participants in the theatre's KOTSU-KOTSU Project, which researches theatrical works without presupposing that they will be performed. Other accomplished performances include Friedrich Dürrenmatt's *The Visit/Der Besuch der alten Dame* (translated by Koyama Yuna; directed by Gonohe Marie), which blends flights of fancy, twisted comedy and the horrors of peer pressure; and Tom Stoppard's *Leopoldstadt* (translated by Hirota Atsuro and directed by Ogawa Eriko), depicting the destinies of four generations of a Jewish family from the end of the 19th century to the period after World War II.

Women Made a Strong Impression

It was a year in which female creators and women-focused themes made a strong impression.

The work of directors was especially remarkable. Not only in *My Month* (*Watashi no ikkagetsu*) at the New National Theatre, Tokyo, but also in Office Cottone's production of Friedrich Dürrenmatt's *Der Mitmacher* (translated by Masumoto Hiroko) and Parco Stage's production of Abe Kobo's *The Ghost Is Here* (*Yurei wa koko ni iru*), director Inaba Kae vividly demonstrated the significance of presenting "this specific play at this specific time." Gonohe Marie showed outstanding skill in a production of *Venus in Fur* (scenario by David Ives, and translation by Jo Kayoko), as did Ikuta Miyuki in the Fernando Arrabal play *The Architect and the Emperor of Assyria* (translated by Tanokuchi Seigo). All three directors are affiliated with the theatre company Bungakuza. Their colleague, the veteran director Matsumoto Yuko, impressively interpreted the Bungakuza production of Akimoto Matsuyo's dramatic play *Manila mizuhoki*, which considers Japan's expansion in Asia beginning in the Meiji Era and women who engaged in prostitution in foreign countries.

Tokyo Engeki Ensemble's production of Ishihara Nen's *Fragments of Women* (*Kanojotachi no danpen*), directed by Komori Akiko, approached issues of women and society through the subject of abortion medication. The theatre company Good Distance's production of Oiwa Mari's play *Sitting with the Moon* (*Tsuki to suwaru*), directed by Nishiyama Mizuki, dealt sensitively with the issue of isolation in large cities while considering a murder case in which a homeless woman was killed.

Translated foreign plays included SIS Company's productions of two vivid works by female writers—American playwright Paula Vogel's *The Mineola Twins*, directed by Fujita Shuntaro, and British writer Lucy Kirkwood's *The Welkin*, directed by Kato Takuya (both translated by Jo Kayoko).

Among the plays by young male writers, Kato Takuya demonstrated his exceptional writing and directing skills in *Already Silent* (*Mohaya shizuka*), a detailed depiction of shifts and gaps in a couple's communication about the decision to go through pregnancy and childbirth; and *The dodo Falls* (*Dodo ga rakka*

suru), a level-headed examination of friendship. Another work that drew considerable attention was Haiyuza's production of Yokoyama Takuya's *A Cat Becomes a Lion* (*Neko, shishi ni naru*). Directed by Manabe Takashi, the play shines a light on the problem of middle-aged and elderly shut-ins. Impressive productions of works by veteran writers/directors included Iwamatsu Ryo's *The Blue Sky Is a Proof of Regret* (*Aozora wa kokai no akashi*) and *Crank In!*, penetrating examinations of people's mysterious inner worlds; Keralino Sandorovich's tenderhearted masterpiece *Shibiregumo*; and Matsuo Suzuki's *The World of Tsudaman* (*Tsudaman no sekai*), in which individual desires overlap with war.

Faith in the Power of Theatre

While nearly all of the large-scale productions performed at commercial theatres were musicals, two non-musical plays became major hits.

Toho's production of *Spirited Away* (*Sen to Chihiro no kamikakushi*) was a stage adaptation by John Caird (with co-adaptor Imai Maoko) of Miyazaki Hayao's animated film masterpiece. Caird also directed. In the story, a ten-year-old girl named Chihiro becomes lost in a mysterious world and is employed in a bathhouse frequented by gods and spirits. In the flying scenes the actors held Chihiro aloft, while fantastical characters and spirits were portrayed through a combination of actors' bodies, puppets, and masks. The resulting production was elaborately inventive, skillful, and dynamic, while at the same time successfully communicating a handmade warmth.

A succession of magical worlds unfolds in the stunning HoriPro/TBS production of *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, adapted by Jack Thorne from J.K. Rowling's original story and directed by John Tiffany (translation by Odashima Koshi and Odashima Noriko). This production, too, creates breathtaking visual effects through ingenious concepts based on the combination of actors' bodies and technology. The script, which revolves around the parent-child relationship, is outstanding as well. This is the first non-musical play ever to aim for an indefinite run in Japan.

While various policies including audience limits have been relaxed, the COVID-19 situation continues to harm the theatre industry, with performance

cancellations being announced on a daily basis.

Amid these troubles, Mitani Koki—who recently received acclaim for his script of the NHK historical drama *The 13 Lords of the Shogun* (*Kamakura-dono no jusan-nin*)—returned to the theatre as writer/director of *The Show Must Go On* (a revised version of the SIS Company production that premiered in 1991). This comedy vividly portrays a theatre director and ensemble who overcome a series of calamities and succeed in putting on a play. In fact, an extraordinary situation arose in the actual production when four actors in succession were forced to take leaves of absence for reasons including injury and COVID-19, and Mitani stepped in and performed each of their roles. It's said that life imitates art, and Mitani's perseverance truly embodied the spirit of the play's title. If there's a possibility, you have to keep going. This real-life scenario was imbued with faith in the power of theatre and faith in the audience.

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(Translation: Valerie Frasier)