

Looking beyond the Pandemic

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New Endeavors Amid a Return to Origins

One trend among the television dramas of 2022 was a return to origins.

Take NHK's serial drama *Come Come Everybody* (*Kamu kamu evuribadi*). Some 90% of the many serial dramas NHK has broadcast since 1961 have featured a female protagonist, and early series in particular often told the life story of a woman who had experienced war. *Come Come Everybody* implicitly acknowledged these origins of the “morning drama” as a form.

However, it also demonstrated innovation in following three generations of mothers and daughters instead of a single heroine. Combined with the masterful foreshadowing and payoff of scriptwriter Fujimoto Yuki, this created a serial drama of a type that is seldom seen—a tale of intertwined fates that spanned a full century and stirred genuine emotion in viewers (48th Hoso Bunka Foundation Prize: Incentive Award—Program, Television Drama, Scriptwriting Award—Fujimoto Yuki; Tokyo Drama Awards 2022: Series Drama Award for Excellence, Best Supporting Actor—Odagiri Joe, Scriptwriting Award—Fujimoto Yuki; 60th Galaxy Awards: Award—Television, first half of year).

Skilled depictions of complex interpersonal relationships were also on display in *The 13 Lords of the Shogun* (*Kamakura-dono no jusan-nin*), this year's taiga drama. NHK's taiga dramas have brought the lives of warriors and other figures from Japanese history to the screen since 1963. For this entry in the series, Mitani Koki's screenplay stayed true to the recorded facts of history while filling in the blanks with flights of imagination, spinning a rich human drama around the struggle for supremacy that is the origin of the taiga drama form.

Making protagonist Hojo Yoshitoki (Oguri Shun) a cold and calculating

antihero rather than the often-seen idealistic dreamer also added a fresh touch. The superb pacing, with comical scenes woven seamlessly into the series of historical tragedies, heightened the sense of maturity, demonstrating a *terminus ad quem* of the “Mitani screenplay.”

What these works shared in common was an attempt to find new possibilities for drama amid a return to origins. In their approach to this, they threw the current realities of Japanese society into relief. Indeed, the intent to recapture the everyday that is the point of origin for our lives, and discover new drama there, was another commonality shared by some the finest works of 2022.

Crime Shown as Continuous with the Everyday

That intent was readily visible, for example, in dramas that depicted the relationship between crime and everyday life. When an extraordinary event like crime rears its head amid what had seemed to be a peaceful everyday existence, what drama can be found there? Works posing this question to their viewers attracted attention in 2022. This facet was visible in dramas like the much-discussed *Don't Call It Mystery (Misuteri to iu nakare)* (Fuji TV) starring Suda Masaki, but I will discuss two in particular here.

The first was *Ishiko and Haneo: You're Suing Me? (Ishiko to Haneo: Sonna koto de uttaemasu?)* (TBS) in which a lawyer and a paralegal (Nakamura Tomoya and Arimura Kasumi, respectively) buddied up to explore the unexpected human dramas behind the cases handled by their legal office. Clients arrived with minor issues that could arise anywhere, such as disagreements over in-app fees for smartphone games, but as our heroes traced the threads toward resolution, hidden snarls in relationships and surprising motives on the part of the parties involved came to the surface. This was an appealing work, further elevated by Tsukahara Ayuko's refined direction (60th Galaxy Awards: Incentive Award—Television, first half of year).

By contrast, the central crime in *Love with a Case (Hatsukoi no akuma)*, (NTV) was a string of gruesome murders. This heightened the contrast with the everyday life woven by the four highly individual actors Hayashi Kento, Nakano Taiga, Matsuoka Mayu, and Emoto Tasuku, which contained all the romance

and friendship of a coming-of-age tale. However, these two worlds were not separated but existed on a continuum. This drama's Japanese title literally means "the demon of first love," and it did indeed contain both of those elements. Sakamoto Yuji's screenplay was fresh as always, with memorable lines and exchanges that bound together these two worlds representing opposite extremes.

A Drama Urging Self-Reflection by the Television Industry

One work that sought to depict the relationship between society and crime from a slightly different angle was *Elpis: Hope or Disaster (Erupisu: Kibo, arui wa wazawai*, Kansai TV).

When television news announcer Asakawa Ena (Nagasawa Masami) learns that a prisoner sentenced to death for serial murder may have been falsely convicted, she starts working on the story with her director Kishimoto Takuro (Maeda Gordon). The two uncover new evidence and draw nearer to the truth but are frustrated by political pressure and their network's eagerness to comply with the unspoken demands of the powerful.

It is extremely rare for a prime-time commercial television drama to take the problems of the judicial system as its theme. In doing so, while also putting television news reporting and even television itself on the chopping block, *Elpis* felt fresh and razor-sharp. It demonstrated a perspective that urges critical self-reflection by the television industry and, and posed a sincere question: "How deeply can drama delve into the contradictions and problems of society?"

Critical to the realization of this vision was, I gather, the role of Sano Ayumi, who was also producer of *Teen Regime (Junanasai no teikoku*, NHK) (60th Galaxy Awards: Incentive Award—Television, first half of year), in which a seventeen-year-old boy chosen by AI struggles to become the ideal politician to reverse the decline of a regional city in a waning near-future Japan. Watanabe Aya's screenplay for *Elpis* skillfully blends in the romance between Asakawa and political reporter Saito Seiichi (Suzuki Ryohei) and entertaining elements like Kishimoto's development beyond his sheltered upbringing, creating a social suspense drama that was more than rewarding.

Elpis surely created a stir in the world of television dramas, where

stereotyped works that seek solely to entertain constitute the mainstream. It was a deeply meaningful attempt to broaden the possibilities of the form.

Coming to Terms with the Pandemic

Years after the initial outbreak, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to shake our everyday life to the core. This naturally raises the question of how television dramas are addressing the pandemic as a kind of “extraordinary turned everyday.”

Ultimately, however, dramas have tended to avoid facing that question directly. Admittedly, there have been “remote dramas” in which actors and staff avoided close contact by filming separate segments that were edited into a unified story. Some of these works were superb. But most television dramas only reflected the impact of COVID-19 on our lives at the most superficial level.

By contrast, *Your Stuff Is Here* (*Anata no butsu ga, koko ni*, NHK) was a work that fixed its gaze directly on the question of what the pandemic means for our lives.

Nimura Sawa plays the protagonist, a single mother who works at a cabaret club. When she loses that job due to the pandemic, she finds new work as a delivery driver. Having no existing connection to this industry, her unfamiliar new duties cause her difficulties and lower her spirits.

Your Stuff Is Here vividly depicted other aspects of daily life that have been changed or exacerbated by the pandemic. The *okonomiyaki* restaurant owned by the protagonist’s parents found itself in straitened circumstances as customers stopped coming. The delivery recipients around the city faced difficulties too. One had work cancelled due to COVID-19. Another treated the protagonist and other delivery drivers coldly, refusing even to meet them in the entranceway out of fear she would transmit the disease to her unwell husband.

The program showed how the pandemic creates a despairing sense of being trapped at every turn. However, as the protagonist interacted with her colleagues and clients—sometimes clashing with them, sometimes solving problems together—she found her own salvation. In short, this was a drama about people isolated by the pandemic gradually reclaiming the human connections they had

before (60th Galaxy Awards: Award—Television, first half of year).

The Essence of Communication

Another television drama that made us rethink this meaning of “connection”—or, put another way, what communication is—was *silent* (Fuji TV). *silent* is the story of a love affair between its two young protagonists, but at its root lie universal questions transcending the romantic frame: What does it mean for two people to communicate? What is it to understand each other?

Aoba Tsumugi (Kawaguchi Haruna) and Sakura So (Meguro Ren) had a relationship in high school before becoming estranged from each other. When they encounter each other again years later, So has become hearing-impaired due to illness. Tsumugi and So, however, are not the absolute center of the story; the work placed great emphasis on depicting their relationships with the friends and family around them, including a woman who has had a hearing disability from birth, played by Kaho. At times, these characters were presented in as much detail as the lead protagonists.

This approach brings the diversity of communication into view. Instead of a simple “hearing/not hearing” opposition, So lost his hearing partway through life and knows both worlds. Characters interact with each other using a range of methods, including spoken, sign, and written language. Naturally, this brings complications, making life difficult and communication challenging at times. On the other hand, the moments when those barriers are surmounted and mutual understanding is achieved give hope to carry on. What this work teaches us is the universal essence of communication—the fact that it goes both ways.

It is suggestive that a work like *silent* appeared in 2022 amid the ongoing pandemic. While it does not address COVID-19 directly, its story does feel like a metaphor for a future world in which we put pandemic-induced isolation behind us and move toward becoming a continuum once more. What can be read from this is a vision of a post-COVID age—a gaze that looks beyond the pandemic.

In Closing

This year also saw many other worthy dramas, including *The Two Who Do*

Not Love (Koi senu futari, NHK), which explored different ways to be a family through the shared life of an aromantic and asexual couple; *Shizuka and Papa (Shizuka-chan to Papa*, NHK), a domestic comedy about a deaf single father and his daughter, who has always helped him with communication, learning to let each other go as she prepares to marry; *Lost Man Found (Hirowareta otoko*, NHK), a biographical drama about real-life actor Matsuo Satoru in which some of the actors in his story are played by themselves; *If My Wife Became an Elementary Student (Tsuma, shogakusei ni naru*, TBS) in which a widowed husband and his daughter are visited by his late wife, who has borrowed the body of an elementary student; and *Hey, Handsome!! (Oi hansamu!!*, Tokai TV), a domestic drama about the day-to-day life of a cantankerous father and his three daughters who have terrible taste in men.

In 2022, the relationship between television dramas and social media also became a topic of discussion. Viewers took to social media to discuss their “interpretations” of works, and trending “review and evaluation meeting” tags brought together doubts about how characters were depicted or stories were progressing. This is certainly a valid way to enjoy the genre. On the other hand, I hope we can also recall how many television dramas like the ones described above were created this year—works that moved us deeply and afforded realizations that cannot be put into words.

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(Translation: Matt Treyvaud)