

A Dialogue With The Japanese People--The Life and Work of Inoue Hisashi 日本人との対話—井上ひさしの仕事と人生

Roger Pulvers

A Dialogue With The Japanese People--The Life and Work of Inoue Hisashi

Roger Pulvers

"One person can do a little. Two can do a little more. Three people together can do even more for others."

Inoue Hisashi made this simple statement on Japanese television on 7 October 2004 from Bologna, Italy, a city with a radical political tradition that he had been fascinated by for 30 years. To my mind, it symbolizes his motivation for his writing and his faith in the goodness of human nature. Inoue, Japan's most brilliant and popular modern playwright was, above all, a humanist.

Where did his inspiration come from?

"I will never get out of my mind," he told me back in the mid-1970s, "the suffering of the people of Tohoku who streamed into Tokyo for many decades before and after the war looking for work, uprooted and having to scrounge around for sustenance."

The primary theme running through his writing is the plight of the weak and their struggle to keep their head above water in a heartless society. He never let his gaze slip from society's dispossessed. He strove to give the underdog the benefit of the doubt and the tools to rectify their helpless circumstances.

"I want to show people who have little power the way to use their ingenuity alone in order to

make their presence felt and gain some advantage in their misery," he said to me.

It is precisely these humanistic themes that run through his more than 60 plays and 40 novels.

In addition to these, he published in excess of 50 books of essays and miscellany, virtually all of them permeated by a scholarly approach to subject.

One more personal reminiscence, if I may.

In the early 1980s, while working as literary editor at the Mainichi Daily News, I decided to translate and serialize his historical novel on the life of Luis Frois, the Portuguese missionary of the 16th century, *Waga Tomo Furoisu* (My Friend Frois). (The translation was subsequently published by Inoue's theatre company, Komatsuza.) This novel, needless to say, includes many references to the names of ships and the like, all of which were in katakana in the text. It was long before the era of the internet, when these things could be readily looked up.

"I'm having trouble with the historical references," I said to Inoue on the phone.

"Could you send me a few of the books or whatever you used for research?"

"Sure. I'll get them out to you by courier," he replied.

A few days later a huge box of books was delivered to my home. Every volume had scores of lines highlighted. I phoned him again.

"I received the books, and thank you so much.

But, my God, did you really do such prodigious research for the Frois novel?"

"Well," he said, "I sent you only about one-third of what I used. Want the rest, too?"

"No, no! It's enough. Thank you!"

Inoue, who loved books, established a library called Chihitsudo, or "Late Writer's Hall," in his hometown, sending them a whopping 100,000 volumes. Inoue was notorious for keeping directors, actors and publishers waiting for his scripts and manuscripts (hence, "Late" Writer), due to the fact that he delved deeply into minute historical detail for every one of his works, and was generally unable to deliver on time. He spent most days at home in his study poring over books, often not going out of the house for weeks. He was essentially a shy and very reserved man. He didn't like partying. He had disdain for Japanese men who easily became inebriated and lost their inhibitions.

(This disdain stemmed, in part, from his aversion to the behaviour of his stepfather, a man, by his account, who became crude and violent when he drank.)

Despite the scrupulous attention to detail—particularly in the kind of language a particular character in a particular era or setting would use—Inoue never lost sight of the big picture. And the big picture for him was his dialogue with the Japanese people over their history, culture and future.

In his plays he took up the lives of famous Japanese people, from writers as disparate in temperament and style as Matsuo Basho, Higuchi Ichiyo, Natsume Soseki, Miyazawa Kenji and Dazai Osamu to generals (Nogi Maresuke) and monks (Dogen). These are warts-and-all portraits. Inoue was intrigued not by those elements in their personalities and character that set them apart from ordinary people, but rather those that bound them to the commonplace. These characters, with their quirks and foibles, resonated with audiences,

forming a human-based—as opposed to a conceptual, sociological or ideological—notion of what it means to be Japanese in our day and age.

This character-centred humanist approach set Inoue apart from most of his contemporaries, such as Terayama Shuji and Kara Juro. The moment I saw his play "Dogen no Boken" (The Adventures of Dogen) in 1971, I was attracted to his ingenious use of language, his cutting humour and his radically critical take on the narrow orthodoxies of Japanese culture. And yet, Inoue was somehow left out of critical discussions about the revolution that Japanese theatre had undergone in the 1960s. Because his dramaturgy was ostensibly less iconoclastic than that of the playwrights mentioned above and because he was, thanks in large part to the soft humour in his works, reaching wide audiences, he was not easy to categorize as an "underground" playwright.

"You are an amazing humorist," I said to him when I first met him in December 1974.

"Thank you. But that's not such a good thing in Japan. Japanese critics prefer very serious writers. They look down on humour."

The critics long failed to see that lurking behind Inoue's wonderful wordplay and the clever situation-comedy-like skits within his plays was a slyly hidden and sharply honed blade aimed straight at the heart of ruthless authority. Ironically, now that he is gone, many people, looking over his entire body of work, have begun to see just how deftly he wielded his Juvenalian whip. Humour to Inoue was satire; satire, a weapon in the hands of the weak.

Even the villains in his plays are treated with the psychological respect he feels they, as fully-drawn characters, deserve. One of his favourite novels was Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield*; and he shared with Dickens the astute inner depiction of evil, not only in its

effects but also in its causes.

Inoue Hisashi was born on 17 November 1934 in the small town of Komatsu, now Kawanishi, in Yamagata Prefecture. His father, who aspired to be a writer, died when he was five.

"The only memory I have of my father," he told me, "was of him carrying me on his back as we went into the subway at Ueno on a trip to Tokyo."

His mother sent him off to board in Sendai at a school run by the Catholic order of the De La Salle Brothers. From there, armed with a recommendation from the brothers, he entered Sophia University in Tokyo. But he then was far from the studious person he turned out to be, spending more time—and learning more?—at the Furansuza, the vaudeville France Theatre in Asakusa, where he cut his teeth on writing dialogue for the actors. The trendy areas of Shibuya, where Terayama had set up his Tenjo Sajiki Theater, and Shinjuku, where Kara Juro was pitching his red tent, were the seminaries of the new theatre. But for Inoue, Asakusa, with its shitamachi, or low-city, culture was homeground. It was also the area of the city where many of the uprooted of Tohoku had drifted to and remained.

His initial popularity came from being co-author of scripts on the children's television show, "Hyokkori Hyotanajima," set on an island of the same name, which ran on NHK television from 1964 to 1969. In 1969 Teatro Echo mounted a production of his first play, "Nihonjin no Heso" (The Belly Button of the Japanese). This was a comedy with music and songs, a genre that dominated his works for the stage from then on.

His early radio work must be noted, too. In 1964, NHK produced his play about a small region in Tohoku called Kirikiri that declares independence from Japan, "Kirikiri Dokuritsusu" (Kirikiri Goes Independent). Seventeen years later, in 1981, he published

this as a novel that quickly became a bestseller.

Again we can see in this book Inoue's approach to satire. The residents of Kirikiri speak their thick version of the Tohoku dialect.

This novel is an attack on the centralized culture of Tokyo imposed on people all around Japan. It is Inoue's bittersweet revenge struck in the name of all of those poverty-stricken people compelled to leave their Tohoku home in search of a decent living in the nation's capital.

In the 1990s, Inoue began to turn his vision in the direction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In the introduction to the published version of his play "Chichi to Kuraseba" (The Face of Jizo), he wrote,

"Hiroshima. Nagasaki. When these two are mentioned, the following opinion is increasingly heard. 'It's wrong to keep acting as if the Japanese were victims. The Japanese were the victimizers at the time in what they did in Asia.'

The second sentence is certainly on the mark. The Japanese were the perpetrators of wrong throughout Asia. But as for the first sentence, I remain adamant that this is not the case. This is because I believe that those two atomic bombs were dropped not only on the Japanese but on all humankind."



Face of Jizo in a 2010 performance.
Father (Tada Toshi) and daughter (Kato Kay).

With this statement, he turns the tragedies of Hiroshima and Nagasaki into the tragedy of Japan, transforming that, in turn, into a tragedy for all humankind. When he died, he was planning a similar drama set in Nagasaki.

In the months before he died on 9 April 2010, he was working on a play set in Okinawa. He said, "We Japanese must come to terms with what happened in Okinawa during the war and what Okinawa represents for us today."

I saw him for the last time on 3 October 2009, at the opening of his play about the life and death of the proletarian writer, Kobayashi Takiji, "Kumikyoku Gyakusatsu" (Suite Slaughter).

"You look great," I said.

"Really? I'm falling apart at the seams. Who knows, Roger, maybe I'll have another 10 years, maybe more."

As it turned out, a couple of weeks later he was diagnosed with the lung cancer that killed him six months later.

There is an expression in Japanese about just such a person. It is *yonin o motte kaegatai* (There will not be another like him.).

The voice for reason, peace and hope that he symbolized will project—if I may use a word from the stage—far beyond the stage. If it manages to cross over the oceans and to be heard by people in other countries, then my dear, dear gentle friend Inoue Hisashi will come to represent the generous, open minded, kind hearted and peaceful face of this country.

What more could be asked of any writer?

Epilogue: Inoue Hisashi, Nature and "The

Water Letters"

In September 2010, The Japan P.E.N. Club hosts the annual International PEN Congress, whose wide variety of lectures, readings and symposia will feature guests from Japan and overseas.

The theme of this year's congress of the worldwide association of writers is "Environment and Literature" — specifically, the ways that "literature can express and portray the environment as something which exerts such a controlling influence on human life."

This year marks the 75th anniversary of the founding of The Japan P.E.N. Club, whose first chairman was the father of Japanese naturalism, the novelist Shimazaki Toson (1872-1943).

For the official opening on Sept. 26, the congress is staging Inoue's play, "The Water Letters," and copies of the work's English-language translation will be handed out to foreign participants and guests. (I should note here that I have done the translation.)

The choice of "The Water Letters" is apt, not only because it delivers a profound and moving statement about human beings in their global environment, but also because Inoue was president of The Japan P.E.N. Club from 2003 to 2007. Yet although he was passionate about the protection of our natural environment, that didn't become a major preoccupation of his until relatively late in life.

Inoue began his writing career as a commentator on purely Japanese matters, some of them relating to the Tohoku region of northern Honshu from which he hailed. He wrote dozens of plays and novels on historical themes, taking up famous people in history and illuminating the social and familial pressures that shaped their destinies. Though he traveled widely around Japan, he made only a few trips

overseas, the longest being a nearly six-month stint in Canberra in 1976, where he researched and wrote "Kiiroi Nezumi" ("The Yellow Rats"), a novel about Japanese prisoners of war in Australia.



Inoue and Pulvers pore over a map of Australia in 1975 prior to the former's visit to Australia

But Inoue, whom I had the privilege of knowing well for more than 35 years — and in whose home I lived for the better part of a year — was, curiously, not the sort of writer to be described as an "internationalist." He approached human nature from a particular, provincial Japanese angle that shot sharp sideways glances and made pointed critical stabs at the Japan represented by centralized power in Tokyo.

An indoors' man, Inoue was a dedicated bookworm who read more voraciously than anyone I have ever known. He was a staunch champion of Article 9 of the Constitution, according to which Japan renounced "the right of belligerency" and also its right to maintain armed forces for anything more than self-defense. In addition, in many conversations, he explained to me his belief that Emperor Showa

should have taken personal responsibility for Japan's war crimes.

But Inoue, for most of his life, wasn't drawn to nature, the source of inspiration for so many writers and poets throughout the ages. Instead, he immersed himself in the subject of how people interrelated with others. Yet I believe that, in the early 1990s, something began to transform him. Perhaps it was the collapse of the economic model of seemingly unending growth that came with the burst of Japan's bubble at that time; perhaps it was an increasing awareness on his part that Japan did have a part to play in international peace and the ecology movement then coming to the fore.

However, throughout the 1990s, as Japan continued to be stymied for solutions to its economic and social problems, Inoue became increasingly concerned about its place in the worldwide ecology movement. He premiered "The Water Letters" in his predominantly rural home prefecture of Yamagata in 2003 — a decision that also reflected his typical approach to universal problems as being local ones, too.

The play centers on a group of letters read to the people of Yamagata, urging them, in the end, to link the fate of their own water with that of the waters of the world.

The people reading letters about how water affects them are the following: A brother and sister in Uzbekistan who are forced to leave their village because the Aral Sea is drying up; an old man bemoaning "the endless stretch of mud and the feeble flow" of his beloved Colorado River in the United States; a 12-year-old Chinese boy who is scared because the Yellow River "just vanishes away the closer it gets to the sea"; and a girl in Mexico City whose school is teetering on its foundations because the government has been pumping up too much underground water for the city's 20 million inhabitants.

In addition, theatergoers hear from a man who

lives in the Maldives, an island state in the Indian Ocean that's threatened by rising sea levels; a woman in Venice researching the sinking of her city; two little children in Chad who must walk 22 km a day to fetch and bring home two pails of water from a well; and a university student in Paris who decries the toll that acid rain is taking on the city's statues.

"What about Japan?" she asks the audience. "Are the bronze statues of Yamagata also corroding away?"

In this way, Inoue links people in Japan with people around the world.

"Earth is the planet of water," he writes. "Our planet is blessed by water. We are given life by its powers. But more than that, we were born of water and that's why we are water ourselves."

In the mid-Edo Period (1603-1867), a scholar from the city of Sendai named Hayashi Shihei(1738-93), wrote, "The water of the Sumida River (in Tokyo) is linked to the water of the Thames" — succinctly stating, at that time when Japan was a closed country, how, if anything connects Japan to the world, it is water.

Similarly, in "The Water Letters," a Japanese aid worker in Afghanistan says, "The water here flows into the Kabul River and from there into the Indus River and then into the Indian Ocean. Without a doubt, the water is carried in the ocean currents to Japan."

With its references to global problems we all face this very day, "The Water Letters" carries the perfect message for a congress concerned with environment and literature.

In his later years, Inoue was turning his attention to the problems of the world. But his feet were forever planted in his native Yamagata. "The Water Letters" are sent from him to Yamagata — and then, in a brilliant flash, back to whoever may be listening around the world.

This essay appeared in "Japanese Book News," Fall 2010, published by the Japan Foundation, with supplementary materials drawn from his article in The Japan Times on September 12, 2010.

Roger Pulvers is an American-born Australian author, playwright, theatre director and translator living in Japan. He has published 40 books in Japanese and English and, in 2008, was the recipient of the Miyazawa Kenji Prize. In 2009 he was awarded Best Script Prize at the Teheran International Film Festival for "Ashita e no Yuigon." He is the translator of Kenji Miyazawa, [Strong in the Rain: Selected Poems](#).

Recommended citation: Roger Pulvers, "A Dialogue With The Japanese People--The Life and Work of Inoue Hisashi," The Asia-Pacific Journal, 37-5-10, September 13, 2010.



Click on the cover to order.



