

Inoue Hisashi: Crusader with a Pen

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By Tanaka Nobuko

So wide-ranging are 71-year-old Inoue Hisashi's talents and activities – including playwright, director, novelist, public intellectual and activist, that it is difficult to know which to focus on at the expense of others.



Inoue at east during his recent Japan Times interview Miura Yoshiaki photo.

Inoue not only writes plays regularly for numerous theaters in Japan, but his own

Komatsu-za company that he founded in 1983, and which only stages his plays, is constantly touring the country. He is also a prolific best-selling novelist and has been president of the prestigious Nihon Pen Club since 2003 -- as well as being director of Nihon Gekisakka Kyokai (Japan Playwrights Association), director of Sendai Literature Museum and the director of a library of his own collection of books in his small hometown of Higashi Okitama-gun in rural Yamagata Prefecture.

Reflecting his irrepressible, often self-deprecating wit, that library's name is Chihitsu-do, which means Slow-writer's Hall, since Inoue is well known for not being the speediest of creators. Indeed, because of his "sense of responsibility to the audience," he is often still rewriting his scripts as the curtain rises.

Looking back, it's clear to see that the roots of Inoue's hectic lifestyle run deep.

In the early postwar years, Inoue first got his foot on the literary ladder writing scripts for a striptease theater in downtown Tokyo when he was a student at Jochi University. From there he moved to writing for radio and the fledgling medium of television. In the 1960s he created "Hyokkori Hyotan-jima (Bottle-gourd Island)," a children's puppet-adventure show that ran every weekday on NHK and notched up a total of 1,224 episodes between 1964-69. After that, Inoue turned his main attention to writing novels and plays. Now, as president of Nihon Pen Club, he was one of the forces behind a Pen Club statement in May highlighting a perceived threat to freedom of thought implicit in a proposed new conspiracy law.

Inoue recently made space in his non-stop

schedule to talk to The Japan Times about his work. He talked fluidly and unceasingly, drawing on his wealth of historical knowledge, leavened with witty asides. No doubt his great charm contributes to the busyness of his life, as he is certainly one of those people who acts like a magnet to others.

Why did you become a writer?

My father wanted to be a writer. He ran a pharmacy in a small town in Yamagata Prefecture, and one day a novel he'd written won a prize and he got a job as a scriptwriter in a big cinema company, Shochiku in Tokyo. But when he was preparing to move to Tokyo, he contracted a disease called spinal caries and soon after, when I was 5, he died at age 34. I grew up hearing that story from my mother all the time, so it was natural for me to take over his dream of being a writer from when I was small.



A scene from Inoue's "Yumena Namida," which follows a family after the mother joins the Tokyo

Trials defense team for accused Class A war criminals. Yako Masahiko photo.

I was writing hero-story novels when I was 7, but I always got bad marks for composition at school. The teacher asked me why I always wrote made-up stories, and told me that I should write "true" stories from my daily life. After that I intended to be a newspaper

journalist as I thought it would be difficult to be a novelist from the beginning. But just then, radio and television were becoming influential, so I became a scriptwriter in those media and started to write plays. Finally, I began writing novels in my 30s.

Why do you mainly write plays nowadays?

Because I realized that since the bubble economy [which "burst" in the early 1990s], people have not been reading novels in their daily lives as before. When my novel "Kirikirijin (The Kirikiri People)" was a best seller in 1981, I saw people reading it on the train and I could get a sense of instant feedback about my work from society. But since the '90s it has become difficult to get readers' response to novels.

On the other hand, through theater I can get the audience's response immediately and directly then and there. Audience members have all taken the trouble to get their tickets in advance and to come all the way to the theater, even these days when everything is normally geared to convenience. Naturally, the audience gets angry if the play is bad, but if it's good, they thank us in the lobby after the performance.

Also, I am sure that most young people now read younger-generation authors' books, and it's probably older ones who read my novels. However, people from all generations -- from teenagers to retired people -- come to see my plays, so I can address a wider span of society through the theater.

Meanwhile, novels have to be translated, but a good play can be appreciated in other countries even though the language it's performed in is different, because people can enjoy many aspects, such as the direction and physical expression, the stage sets and lighting and so on -- not to mention the acting skills. So I believe theater is more accessible internationally even though we stage it in our own language.

Are you normally involved in the staging of your plays, or do you give any special orders to directors?



In this scene from Inoue's play "Yume no Kasabuta," a family in a remote town in northern Japan learn they have been chosen to put up the Showa Emperor for a night during his postwar national tour.

No. My task is writing the play and I just give my script to the director and say nothing afterward.

Recently, I heard your speech at an event titled "Promoting the renunciation of war by theater people." What is your opinion on the current nationalistic movement in Japan -- and how should this be tackled?

Japan should learn more from Canada how to deal with the United States, I think. The U.S. has always used horrible new weapons. It started with atomic bombs, then napalm bombs, Agent Orange and depleted-uranium shells. They have become the boss of the international gangsters.

Canada is normally quiet toward the U.S., but they also irritate the U.S. sometimes as well, for example by establishing diplomatic relations with China at an early stage and taking up the land mine and demining issues before others. At first the U.S. gets irritated, but later it respects Canada's position. Japan

also should take its own resolute attitude and not just follow the U.S.

Why does the Japanese government not say anything against the U.S.?

First and foremost, Japan was roundly and viciously beaten by the U.S. in World War II. In the Great Tokyo Air Raid in 1945, more than 100,000 Japanese died in one night, and 97 percent of those in downtown Fukagawa were killed -- that means only three people survived out of every 100. The U.S. showed off its overwhelming material power then, following it with the atomic bombs.

In article 11 of the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty, it says that Japan accepts the judgments of the International Military Tribunals for the Far East and of other Allied War Crimes Courts both within and outside Japan. So, prompted by the U.S., Japan got its national sovereignty back by agreeing to the treaty. The other foreign countries that signed the treaty had to abandon their rights to demand compensation from Japan. That's even though, officially, more than 15 million people died in Asia and 10 million Chinese died, compared with 3 1/2 million Japanese who died during wartime.

So, postwar Japan restarted through acceptance of the 11th article. That also meant that Japan got its sovereignty back after World War II by accepting the U.S. fiction at the Tokyo Trials that some evil militarists led the country into war -- and the citizens and even the Emperor were their victims.

Yes, but why does Japan still appear beholden to the U.S.?

Well afterward, when Japan restored diplomatic relations with China in 1972, the Chinese government had to accept this same fiction that a handful of militarists were the only war criminals in Japan, and the other Japanese were victims of the war along with those 10 million

Chinese. So, China could not demand compensation from Japan.

However, in 1978, Yasukuni Shrine secretly enshrined 12 convicted and two indicted Class A war criminals there -- so they suddenly became gods. As a result of this, the basis of the postwar fiction disappeared -- and the Chinese got angry about this contradiction. The current Yasukuni issue and the problem between Japan and China will never be sorted out without taking this point into account -- that China gave up on huge compensation to accept the story that only some people were war criminals, and the rest of the Japanese were victims.

So actually, Japanese governments have had a strong sense of obligation to the U.S. for offering the solution of how not to pay compensation to other Asian countries.

Although that fiction was agreed by international consensus, and the world decided to move forward on that basis, I wonder why Japan forgot about that agreement to blame those 14 war criminals and then enshrined them as gods at Yasukuni and stuck to its own understanding in isolation from other Asian countries.

All my works focus on that point. What was that war? Without searching for the answer to that question, how can we accept responsibility for the war. I experienced militarism when I was small, and the nation became independent when I was a high-school student -- so I have seen many of these things myself.

What is the most dangerous weapon in the 21st century? Probably, many people would say nuclear weapons, but I think it's "information." Amassing information and being able to sell it and use it and control the timing of when things are revealed -- all of these things will be the key weapons in international conflicts.

What do you think about Japan's current

relationship with the U.S.?

Now, the relationship between the U.S. and China is expanding. The U.S. used to need Japan as a base in Asia during the Cold War period, but the Cold War has finished and I think America's interests are now leaving Japan. But anyway, it is a worrying thing to rely so much on the U.S., and for Japan not to stand on its own feet.

It is a similar mentality to Japanese people who believe they won't have any problems if they get a position at a big company -- but I don't believe that.

There are many first-rate aspects to Japan, such as our culture and food and manga, for instance, and our Constitution has lots of brilliant ideas that are suitable for this 21st century and which many countries look at and admire. We have also been tackling environment pollution since early on, and Japanese companies have been earnestly working to remove pollution in their production processes. So, if Japan takes a lead in such fields, we will find our place on the global stage -- but we only ask the U.S. to give us a position in the world, which is so regrettable.

Another good thing about Japan is that it is what you might call "lukewarm" or "open-minded" about religion. Each of the monotheisms -- like Islam, Christianity and Judaism -- are having arguments and fighting, but if the world followed the tolerant Japanese way regarding religion, the situation would be far, far better.

Why do you write about the effects of the war on Japan?

"What was that war to the Japanese?" -- that is my lifetime question. I've been searching for the answer to that and to discover what it is about Japanese people's fundamental mentality that brought the militarism about. This task has not yet finished, as the Japanese have not

bothered to clarify the root causes or the responsibility for so long as they have hidden behind U.S. protection.

When the Cold War finished, the U.S. removed its protective veil and Japan became bare in front of other Asian countries. Fortunately, those countries have had their own problems -- China's internal struggles, for example, and Indonesia becoming independent from the Netherlands -- so they could not make claims against Japan. Now, though, they are looking to talk with Japan about wartime compensation. Many Koreans are also asking for individual-level compensation, but the government repels all these actions.

On the other hand, the only case of Japanese becoming victims involved prisoners of war detained in Siberia -- and now those people are asking the Russian government for compensation. Russia insists the matter has already been officially concluded between the two countries, but they continue to make claims as individual cases -- and the Japanese government actually supports their action.

It is very contradictory, isn't it? This two-faced attitude gives Japan a reputation of just doing things to its advantage without there being any firm policy. If we don't change this attitude, we will lose our position in the international community. We have to admit our mistakes, and we have to overcome our past mistakes by ourselves for the sake of our future.

What is the main reason Japan cannot overcome its problems with the past?

The main problem is our education system. Japanese children learn Japan's history starting from the ancient period and moving toward modern days. Normally, in other countries, they learn history starting with the present and moving into the past to learn where things come from.

But in practice in Japan, history teachers

generally teach up to, and including, the Meiji Era [1868-1912] and they don't teach about the Showa Era [1926-89]. Often this is because they run out of time to cover the curriculum -- which includes the Showa Era. This means that the government has not settled what is Japanese history yet, so history lessons stopped at the point where they suspend judgment on the Showa Era. So they never talk about the responsibility of starting the war.

Japan played a big role when the Kellogg-Briand Antiwar Pact was formulated in 1928, and three Japanese -- including Foreign Minister Shidehara Kijuro -- were on the list of candidates for the Nobel Prize that year. So why did Japan plunge into militarism in such a short time? We should examine this question, and teachers should explain this history to children more clearly and precisely.

Recently you published a children's book about the Constitution, and you sometimes you visit schools to give lectures to small children. How do they react to your story?

They understand it so well. The adults, however, don't listen to my opinion, and they just say it is an idealistic theory. Fundamentally, for example, the idea of the European Union was also said to be a dream idea, but everything sounds like a dream story when it starts. Of course, nothing is achieved by ideals alone, but it's also no good just going in for "realistic" thinking. The balance of these two elements will make the goal happen in the end.

Your plays not only carry strong messages, often about political and social issues, but they are also high-quality entertainment at the same time.

We take money from the audiences, so first of all we must make them enjoy the play. This is our -- theater people's -- job ethic. The most important thing is that every customer/audience member should delight in

the play. So many types of people, from normal housewives to old ladies, scholars, politicians and students gather in the theater and share the play, and we must make all of them interested in it.

This is the fundamental theory of the theater but, for example, shingeki [the "new drama movement" that started at the end of the Meiji Era under the influence of Western drama] was part of the social movement, so they emphasized parts that were a bit difficult for the audiences to understand. Well, they may have been very "important" plays, but in my opinion that's not real theater; that's a sense of elitism. It's as if they thought they had a role to advance the stupid masses and raise their intelligence -- as if people should see the play even it's difficult and boring. That's completely wrong.

There are many dialogues and arguments in your plays, but I also feel the actors throw the questions out to the audiences as well.

Any staging is a quite serious fight between the maker and the audiences. A play should not be done only on the stage, and the words should reach out to every corner of the theater. We have to find the best way to get our message across. So we consider the most effective way of presenting the message, and I compose the lines to let the audiences think naturally during the play about the subjects or themes. This is professional theater people's work.

The current tendency is that young playwrights do not tackle big subjects like political issues very often, and Sakate Yoji is one of the few writers who deals with big subjects. Writers need to raise greater themes when they write daily-life plays; and naturally they need to describe small details well when they write big-theme plays. There are many young writers who can write about familiar, daily issues with sensitive observation. I hope to see more young writers who can use different-scale subjects

that are the most appropriate for the occasion. In my case, I believe that individual lives are inevitably influenced by big social movements, and also that individual lives can have an influence on those movements. So I try to put both -- ordinary people's lives and political or social issues -- in the play together.

One other task, I believe, is for theater people to take responsibility for someone who is visiting the theater for the first time in their life. If that person enjoys the play, she or he will believe the magic of the theater and will continue to go even though the next play may be boring. I feel apologetic toward earlier dramatists such as Shakespeare and the others involved in making theater if I can't give an excellent experience to that first-time visitor.

Why will people still go to the theater in the 21st century?

Completely different types of people may be standing in line to see the same play at a small venue, but strangely, each person's thoughts and feelings spread throughout the venue and they share that experience. In the small space, each person becomes related to the others in an invisible chain. Furthermore, that also links to the stage, to the actors, and finally there is a magical moment, a sense of unity and cooperation there. So a good play takes people back to a pure condition, and I see so many people who leave the theater with a bright look like after having a sauna.

Your recent production of "Kamiyacho Sakura Hotel" was quite different from its successful 1997 staging. Why did you do that?



Poster for Kamiya Sakura Hotel, August 2006 production

It depends on the audiences. Plays change every day they are staged, and after a certain number of stagings the actors become able to adjust to the feeling of that day's audience. If they sense that many in the audience seem interested in a political matter like the issue of the Emperor's war guilt, the actors will take the stage more in that direction; while if there are many in the audience who loves jokes and wit, then they can switch direction. So, people liked it because we adjusted the play depending on the structure of the audience each time. We never do exactly the same play; it changes every day. Actually, the audiences are the center of the theater world.

When I went to Australia, I found out that they

have drama courses at every university, so a huge number of drama students graduate every year. One day I asked a professor how all those graduates found a job in the theater world. He said they are not only producing professional theater people, but they are cultivating informed theater audiences through that education. So many may start to work in non-theater companies, but they cultivate theater fans in each community. I thought that's a good system.

What are your future plans?

I have to write a play about Nagasaki regarding the atomic bomb. [In 1994, Inoue wrote a play about the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, titled "Chichi to Kuraseba" that was translated into English as "The Face of Jizo."] My recent work at the New National Theatre, my trilogy of the Tokyo Trials ["Yume no Sakame (Crack of a Dream)"; 2001), "Yume no Namida (Tears of a Dream)"; 2003) and "Yume no Kasabuta (Scab of a Dream)"; 2006)] will continue with two more plays so that it becomes a series of five.

This is top secret: I am planning to make a new play whose characters include Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini and the Showa Emperor -- the gigantic dictators in the 20th century. I'll adjust the story to fit the history as logically as possible and let them meet all together. Because of them and the same trick -- reigns of terror -- people suffered for a long time. Actually, nowadays the people holding power use the same trick as they control citizens by implanting a sense of terror. So, if I write about the 20th-century dictators, and I search for the fundamental mentality, the play will work for any time.

"Chichi to Kuraseba" was translated into English, German, Russian and Italian, and will soon be staged in Italy. Now, we also have

offers from Britain and even from the U.S., which I thought would never happen as it's about the atomic bomb. When I did it in Moscow in 2001, so many young Russians came to see it and they remained in their seats for a while after the play. Theater can break barriers -- and people are fundamentally the same, I believe.

Inoue Hisashi 's book "Kodomo ni Tsutaeru Nihonkoku Kenpo (The Constitution We Want to Pass on to Children)" was published by Kodansha in July 2006.

The next production by Inoue's Komatsu-za company will be an as yet untitled new work by him about the German pacifist, satirist, poet

and novelist Erich Kastner (1899-1974). It will run Jan 14. to Feb. 25, 2007 at Kinokuniya Southern Theater in Shinjuku, Tokyo. See the following for further [information](#).

Tanaka Nobuko is a freelance drama writer for publications in Japan and elsewhere. This article appeared in The Japan Times on 1 Oct 2006. It is published at Japan Focus on October 8, 2006.

On related themes see [Roger Pulvers, The Human Condition after Hiroshima: the world of Inoue Hisashi](#).

and "[A Freedom That Rocks the Boat](#)": Yoji Sakate's Small Theater.