

The Unending Quest of Minoru Betsuyaku,

The playwright who has laid the foundation of Japanese theatre of the absurd

Minoru Betsuyaku, a playwright, novelist and essayist, was born in 1937 in the former Manchuria (present northeast China) during the Japanese occupation. In July 1946, a year after the sudden Soviet invasion of Manchuria, his mother succeeded in boarding a repatriation ship with her children. The family arrived at Sasebo in Kyushu, then spent two years in Kochi, Betsuyaku's father's hometown and in Shimizu, his mother's hometown, and finally settled down in Nagano, the mountainous area in the middle of the mainland Japan. The family remained in Nagano until Betsuyaku graduated from high school, and then moved to Tokyo. Betsuyaku entered the Department of Political Science and Economics at Waseda University in April 1958, but soon involved with the Free Stage [*Jiyu Butai*] theatre group (later renamed as Waseda Little Theatre) he formed with his classmate Tadashi Suzuki, left the university before graduation. Strongly influenced by Samuel Beckett's "theatre of the absurd" [*Fujori-geki*], both Betsuyaku and Suzuki pioneered postwar Little Theatre Movement in Japan. In November 1961, Betsuyaku got a job in the office of an independent trade union but he continued writing plays for the Free Stage after he went off his duty. He left Waseda Little Theatre in 1968, and in 1970 he married actress Yuko Kusunoki who has been an indispensable partner in many productions of Betsuyaku's work, especially in her small theatre group, the Snail Theatre Group [*Katatumuri no Kai*] (1978-99). In 1971 a daughter was born. Betsuyaku began to work with people from the New Theatre [*Shingeki*] that had a long tradition of the socialist realism from the pre-war period. In Betsuyaku, the border between the post-war Little Theatre and the New Theatre is blurred.

Since his debut play *A, B and a Woman* [*A to B to Hitori no Onna*] in 1961, Minoru Betsuyaku has written over 130 plays that have been produced, in addition to essays, children's stories, criticism, and screenplays. Betsuyaku's plays have been performed by many theatre groups, including the Literary Theatre [*Bungakuza*], the Circle Theatre [*En*], the People's Art Theatre [*Mingei*], the Theatre Office Kiyama [*Kiyama Jimusho*], and the Theatre Office Natori [*Natori Jimusho*]. He is Japan's leading playwright of the "theater of the absurd" and a social critic.

It is evident that Beckett's pseudo-couples influenced Betsuyaku's characters. *A, B and a Woman* explores a destructive interdependent relationship between Mr. A and Mr. B (Betsuyaku's characters are often nameless, just labeled A, B and C or Man 1, 2, and 3). Like a tree in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, a telephone pole is often set in a bare stage of Betsuyaku. Betsuyaku's plays are filled with lots of absurdities that happen in the everyday lives of the common people in Japan, and therefore not that abstract as Beckett's world. His second play, the major work *The Elephant* [*Zo*] (1962) depicts another disastrous interrelationship between two atomic bomb victims at a hospital in Hiroshima; one who has an indomitable spirit who wants people to remember what happened to him there, and his nephew who fears people's prejudice against Hiroshima victims and warns him not to go out of the hospital. No one in Betsuyaku's world has done anything all that bad but an individual is powerless and easily becomes a victim. *Byoki* [*Sick*] and *Uketsuke* [*The Receptionist*] show such misfortune and victimization that happen in our daily lives. Although Betsuyaku does not deny Beckett's influence upon him, he alters the original play to suit the time and situation. In his *Godot Has Come* [*Yattekita Godot*], two tramps are aware of the fact that Godot has come, but they are unable to "experience" or grasp the reality of what the arrival means. Betsuyaku explains why he altered the situation of *Waiting for Godot* like that:

In "Waiting for Godot," it is fundamental that Godot will never appear. In today's Japan, people only rarely have a chance to experience something in reality, but they get a huge amount of information from different sources, so they may understand things intellectually

without having any actual experience of them. Therefore, I thought that if Godot came today, people would not be able to meet him or experience the drama of the meeting. People nowadays understand the meaning of waiting for Godot but not the experience of meeting him. (Betsuyaku interviewed in “When Godot finally arrives” by Nobuko Tanaka, *The Japan Times*, March 22, 2007)

Betsuyaku also explains why he revises a classic in the same article:

Plays should be altered to suit the situation or place or community, and I encourage people to modify mine and sometimes ask people to do them in their local dialect. Theater is about anding down tradition and converting it to fit its current context.

Awards: In 1968, Betsuyaku won the 13th “New Theatre” Kishida Kunio Drama Award for his plays *The Little Match Girl* [*Match-Uri no Shojo*](1966) and *A Scene with a Red Bird* [*Akai Tori no iru Fukei*](1967). In 1971, he won the Kinokuniya Theater Award for *A Town and a Blimp* [*Machi to Hikosen*] (1970) and *Alice in Wonderland* [*Fushigi no Kuni no Alice*] (1970). The following year, he won the “New Artist” Award of the Ministry of Education’s Selected Artists Encouragement Awards for *The Revolt of the Breeze Tribe* [*Soyosoy-zoku no Hanran*](1971), and in 1987 the Yomiuri Literature Award for his collection of plays entitled *The Story of the Two Knights Travelling Around the Country* [*Shokoku wo Henreki Suru Futari no Kishi no Monogatari*] and *Other Plays* (1987). In 1988, his play *Giovanni’s Journey to His Father* [*Giovanni no Chichi e no Tabi*] (1987) won the Minister of Education Award for the Arts. In 1997, he received the Cultural Award of Hyogo Prefecture and in 1998 the Special Award of the 39th Mainichi Art Award. In 2007, he received the Kinokukniya Theater Award for *Godot Has Come* [*Yattekita Godot*](2007) and *If a Dog Turns to the West, Its Tail faces the East* [*Inu ga Nishi mukya O wa Higashi*](2007). In 2008, *Godot Has Come* [*Yattekita Godot*] won the 11th Tsuruya Nanboku Play Award and the Asahi Award.

***Sick* [Byoki]** Premiere: 1981

A nurse (Woman 1) calls Man 1 to halt and asks, “Are you not sick?” Man 1 answers “I am not sick.” Then a funny and quaint conversation starts between them. During their heated exchange, Man 2, who looks like a tramp, appears. The three of them, selfishly asserting themselves, keep talking at cross purposes. The ramble goes on when a doctor (Man 3) comes and joins them. Man 3 further dislocates their argument. Man 1, painted into a corner, finally becomes sick and lies down on bed. Left alone on the street in the end, he grumbles, “Help me, God...What did I do?” This is an excellent piece of work, a dry comedy, which illustrates those who cleverly evade responsibility by driving a good person to a corner.

***The Receptionist* [Uketsuke]** Premiere: 1980

When Woman 1 is working at the reception desk of a charity organization, Man 1, a company man, passes by. Woman 1 calls him to halt, asking questions such as “Are you single?” and “Are you near-sighted?” As Man 1 responds to her unguardedly, she starts to demand relentlessly from him “donations for refugees,” “a membership fee for the Euthanasia Society,” etc. This is a masterpiece that exposes the loneliness of a man by comically illustrating with refined humor the process of an ordinary man involuntarily becoming an easy victim of a charity organization.

***Godot Has Come* [Yattekita Godot]** Premiere: 2007

This play borrows the dramatic setting of Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* to create a new latter-day version. The Godot that Vladimir and Estragon have been waiting for so long finally appears one day. The two are aware of the fact that Godot has come, but they are unable to “experience” or grasp the reality of what the arrival means.