



Profile

NAGAI, Ai

Ai Nagai is playwright, director and leader of the theater company Nitosha. She graduated from the Toho Gakuen College of Drama and Music with a major in theater. She is one of the most sought-after playwrights in Japan today for her “Well-made Play” that treats social issues from a critical perspective. Nagai presently serves as the President of the Japan Playwrights Association. Nitosha was founded in 1981 by Nagai and her fellow theater artist, Shizuka Oishi, as a two-woman theater company. Both being born in the Year of the Rabbit, they named their company Nitosha (meaning a company of two rabbits). They took turns writing plays for the company’s productions, while also acting in them. From 1983, Nagai assumed the role of director for these productions. In 1991, Oishi left the company to concentrate on scriptwriting, after which Nitosha became a production company for Nagai’s plays directed by Nagai herself. These activities continue to this day. Nagai’s plays have won a strong reputation for their outstanding story development, the interesting characters she creates, the witty lines and contemporary themes. Particular acclaim has been won by her “Sengo Seikatsushigeki Sanbusaku” (Postwar Life History Play Trilogy) which began in 1994 as a series of plays that tells the stories of groups of characters whose daily private lives reflect the changing times. Her plays *Miyo*, *Hikoki no Takaku Toberu wo* and *Ra Nuki no Satsui*, written for the Seinen-za company and Theatre Echo respectively have also won critical acclaim. And, the Nitosha production of her play *Ani Kaeru* was awarded the 44th Kishida Kunio Drama Award (sponsored by Hokusai-sha) in 1999. Expectations are high for Nagai’s continued contributions to Japanese theater.

<http://www.nitosha.net/>

Artist Interview

アーティストインタビュー
A look into the theater craft of Ai Nagai
A leader in the genre of social comedy

2006.1.31



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Ai Nagai is a playwright and director who creates plays that deal with contemporary themes in the context of daily life with a comical touch. Her artistic activities have especially attracted attention since the 1994 start of her “Postwar Life Drama Trilogy” (*) of plays dealing with the rapidly changing values of Japan’s postwar years in a home comedy format that has won her a number of major awards. In the wake of her winning the 2005 Asahi Drama Awards Grand Prize for her play *Utawasetai Otoko-tachi* (Men Who Want to Make Us Sing), which deals with the problem of mandatory singing of the national anthem in the setting of a public school, we spoke with Nagai about her works.

(Interviewer: Roger Pulvers)

What was your initial encounter with theater?

When I am asked why I wanted to do theater, I really think that I would have to go all the way back to our group dances in nursery school. Looking back, I realize that I liked doing things in front of people, an audience, from a very early age. When I was complimented on my singing, I dreamed for a while of becoming a singer. But in the end I gave up that idea and next I decided that I wanted to become a stage actor. My father is a painter and he had a number of friends in the theater world, and he once wrote an essay about Van Gogh for the pamphlet for Gekidan Mingei’s production of *Hono no Hito, Gogh*. And, I think I may have been influenced to some degree by the fact that young stage actors often visited our home.

When I graduated from high school I was a member of the Friends of the Haiyu-za theater company and saw all their productions. At the time I became a fan of their lead actress Etsuko Ichihara and thought that I just had to become a member of the Haiyu-za company. That is why I chose to enter the theater department of Toho Gakuen College of Drama and Music. When I was in college in the 1970s the “*angura*” theater (underground theatre / theatre noir) movement was popular, so I was always going to performances at small underground theaters like Jokyo Gekijo, Kuro Tent (Black Tent Theater) and Jiyu Gekijo. That killed my desire to enter a company of the “Shingeki” (naturalistic western-style theatre) genre. But, I also didn’t have the courage to try to enter one of the “*angura*” companies, so I took the test to enter the Kobo Abe Studio but wasn’t accepted. Eventually, I left home saying that I would do theater while earning my own living with part-time jobs. It was the kind of era where we didn’t think about being recognized by the existing establishment. And while I was drifting from job to job I got an invitation to join a theater company called Shunjudan, and that is where I met Shizuka Oishi. The company disbanded after two years, so Oishi and I decided to try to do something on our own. That is when we started our Nitosha company. At that time I had no intention of becoming a playwright or a director, but I really had no choice, because if I didn’t write my own play I wouldn’t have a play to act in.



Utawasetai Otoko-tachi
(Oct.-Nov. 2005 / Benisan Pit)

Cast: Keiko Toda, Ryosuke Otani, Moeko Koyama, Masami Nakagami, Yoshimasa Kondo

* "Sengo Seikatsushi-geki Sanbusaku"
(Postwar Life History Drama Trilogy)

Toki no Monoooki (Time's Storeroom) (1994)

A proud family being changed by the pragmatism of Japan's era of high economic growth rate.



©Nitosha

In 1961, even though the heat of the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty conflict remained, Japan was entering its era of rapid growth of the economy, when the government was promoting a program to double per capita income, a leisure boom was raging and families were hoping to bring home the big three consumer items: a TV, an automatic washing machine and a refrigerator. The country was also looking forward to hosting the Olympics three years later. The "poor but proud" Shinjo family doesn't have a television yet. But, the mysterious woman Tsuruko who rents a vacant room in the Shinjo house receives a television and that leads to frequent visits by people from the neighborhood. The wife of the Shinjo house, grandma Nobu is deeply concerned. There was surely a reason why the daughter Tokiko and her husband sent Tsuruko a television. The son of the family, Mitsuyo teaches middle school while writing novels. The grandson, Hidehoshi, is a college student who has decided to run for president of the local community association. The granddaughter Kasumi wants to be a Shingeki actress. The living room of the Shinjo house harbors memories of times that none of them can forget.

You are known today as a playwright who deals with social issues. How is it that you came to take this approach?

When I look back at myself, I was still a child during the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty protests of the 60s, and I remember that for some reason we children used to shout "No to the Security Treaty!" when we were running around playing choo-choo train. I don't know why, but it was a time when even ordinary shop owners were hanging anti-Treaty posters in their shop windows. It is hard to imagine in Japan today. But, I also participated in anti-Vietnam War protests when I was in high school.

My father was a member of the Communist Party and we were a family where political discussions were commonplace. But that was something that, in my child's mind, I disliked. I didn't want to listen to political talk, I wanted to talk about brighter, more optimistic things, the things that dreams are made of. I wanted to live on a lighter, easier level. I would go to my friends' houses and they would be talking about TV shows or the latest electrical appliances, not about what is wrong with Japan or how the world should be. And, I would envy that kind of atmosphere. But, when it came time for me to go out into society and start making it on my own, I realized that I could never be like those people.

For example, in *Utawasetai Otoko-tachi* I dealt with a problem that is actually happening now in the public school system. It is now mandatory that the national anthem be sung and the national flag be displayed at certain ceremonies and events in the public schools, and in Tokyo, teachers who don't obey this rule are dealt with harshly. When I read about this in newspaper articles, it disturbed me, even though it is not something that affects me directly. The public authorities do not allow freedom of choice in this matter and, as a result more than 200 teachers have been punished for not standing at attention and singing the national anthem. But the general public doesn't speak out about this problem. I decided to make it into a play and ask if this isn't a problem worth speaking out about.

Why do you think most people have so little interest in problems like this?

There was a big resurgence of political protest during the 1960s with the Security Treaty controversy, but the opposition movement eventually died out and Japan entered its period of high economic growth rate when everyone became bent on acquiring material wealth. There was also a flurry of political protest in the 70s, but the mood eventually soured as a result of several rather grotesque incidents where activists from different sects were murdering each other. So, people were told that such protest was only destructive and didn't lead to any constructive good. While this was going on, Japan entered its bubble economy period and, in the end we were told that the protest had been meaningless because the establishment had brought prosperity to the country

We can probably say that it was the repetition of a cycle of political thought being repressed in these ways that led to today's mentality. In Japan there has been a long tradition in which people are told to go with the flow, and those who stick their heads out get them chopped off. Living in this kind of an environment for so long, people have never gotten into the habit of thinking for themselves. I believe that it is this history of never questioning your own conscience and just following the powers that be that has produced today's complacency and apathy with regard to political issues.

Could you tell us about *Utawasetai Otoko-tachi* in a little more detail?

Even though I have taken up this theme of what is happening in the public schools,

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Papa no Democracy (Papa's Democracy) (1995)

Defining the Japanese of the Postwar Era" in a depiction of the confusion brought on by the sudden change from militarism to democracy.



©Nitoshia

The setting is Tokyo in 1946, just after the end of World War II. The priest of a Shinto shrine, Tadanobu Kinouchi, is being criticized as having been a running dog of the militarists and is therefore woefully out of place in the new age of democracy. His eldest son is being held in a Soviet labor camp in Siberia and in these times when food is scarce he has to support his son's wife, Fuyu, his second son, Nobukiyo, and a live-in freeloader named Motohashi (former special political police officer). To add to his troubles a former member of the Women's Association for the National Defense now turned democratic activist, Midorikawa, shows up demanding that he take in seven people who lost their homes during the war. Among them is an assistant director from the Toho film studio named Yokokura who is deeply involved in the debate about what democracy is and frequently gets into fights about it with Tadanobu. Fuyu becomes completely absorbed in Yokokura's activism and begins organizing strikes to improve labor conditions. To this, an adopted son, Chiyokichi, returns from the war. Fuyu tries to get the weak-willed Chiyokichi to get involved in her activist movement by preaching to him about democracy, but

I have not written it as a play of accusation. And, I believe that even if I took that approach, it would not be interesting. Instead, I wanted to write a play where we could experience what happens when a system is put in place that "forces" us to do something. We may read about these issues in the newspaper, but I think it is hard for most people to imagine the things that are actually going on in these situations and what the people involved are actually saying and doing and what the atmosphere is like. By writing a play about this issue, I first wanted to find out what I personally would experience. Then I wanted people to experience it through my play so that I could find out what they think.

Can you imagine that in our municipal schools today teachers are subjected to questioning and are seriously reprimanded by the board of education for teaching that the Japanese constitution ensures the right of freedom of thought to all citizens? They are actually being seriously reprimanded for teaching about the constitution! Can you believe it? I wanted to get people to experience the absurdity of what is going on and ask them if they think it is natural for a teacher to be called in and reprimanded by the principal for not standing at attention and then for the school to employ the principle of collective responsibility and all the teachers forced to attend a [corrective] study group. Would things like this feel strange or would they feel natural? What would the common-sense reaction be? I wanted to find this out from the audiences' reactions. And, to make sure that I wasn't just selecting the materials that supported my point of view, I also included in the script parts giving the board of education's side of the argument. Some of the audience even misinterpreted those parts as being my true message. But, the most frequent answer we got on the play's questionnaire was that the audience was definitely worried about living in a Japan where this kind of situation is progressing. Although I may not have changed most of the audiences' stance as bystanders in this issue, I think I did succeed in getting most of them to start thinking and make judgments with an attitude that this is a problem that involves them, too.

People say that one of your characteristics as a playwright is that the more you make your plays about everyday lives of everyday people the more they come to involve social problems.

Even if you are not focusing on social problems per se, if, for example, you have an elderly mother you have to care for, that automatically involves issues like Japan's medical system and welfare system and the circumstances of the person(s) involved. In this way, the everyday lives of everyday people always connect to problems of the society. So, it is not a question of having any particular political consciousness that brings these problems into my plays. It is rather that if you are portraying the lives or ordinary people, who are in fact social entities, some social problems will always emerge. I want to continue to write about them without avoiding the social and political aspects that come out when you try to portray ordinary human beings.

I hear that you do a lot of research when writing a play.

Compared to writers like Hisashi Inoue or Ren Saito, you could not call me one who does a lot of research. But, I think you could say that I am a writer who investigates the things that puzzle me and then take a lot of hints for my writing from the facts I discover and the realities they reveal. Because when you do research you always discover things you didn't expect. There are also times when research leads to discoveries of some ridiculous things that supposed adults are doing, or discoveries that really make you laugh. These are the kinds of discoveries that

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“Postwar Life History Play Trilogy
Boku no Tokyo Nikki (My Tokyo Diary)
(1996)

A “cat crisis” in an apartment house in the closing days of the young people’s era of rebellion.



©Nitosha

The setting is Tokyo in 1971. Even though the college student Mitsuo Harada’s home is in Tokyo, he has deliberately chosen to live in a small 4 1/2 mat room in an apartment house. Although he couldn’t really participate whole-heartedly in the often violent student demonstrations of the last few years, at least he felt that he had to move out from under the roof and support of his parents. By working at part-time jobs to support himself, he was determined at least to shake the image of a pampered son of a well-to-do family (*obottchan*). But at this apartment, Mitsuo gets to know Noriko, who lives with the New-Left activist Ide, and she gets him involved in a bomb plot. Meanwhile, he also has to deal with the other people in the apartment house, like a cat-hating salaried worker and a cat-loving woman who are engaged in an ongoing feud and a group of hippies trying to start a Love & Peace commune. Although it was independence that Mitsuo had sought, this apartment is throwing his life into deeper and deeper confusion.

make me want to write.

I write plays that are easy to understand and not really new in stylistic terms, but I want to create plays that always contain something adventurous in the contents and always offer the audience new discoveries. I think that I tried to bring “new” discoveries out in *Utawasetai Otoko-tachi*.

I find many truly appealing characters in your plays.

In the case of *Utawasetai Otoko-tachi*, the principal was an absolutely necessary character, and so were the opposition teacher and the music teacher. Also, the hard-line teacher was an absolutely essential character. In this way, once you decide what the subject of the play will be, you pretty much know what characters you will want to have appearing in it. Then you start to think about where the play should take place. Should it be in the music room, should it be in one of the hallways of the school, or should it be in the large hall where the graduation takes place? You work on ideas and then say, the infirmary might be a good, unlikely place.

It wouldn’t be natural to have it staged in the infirmary if there wasn’t a character or two who was sick or feeling bad, however, so that leads to the idea of the music teacher being under stress. Then you think, the reason for her stress is surely that she is new at this job and, wouldn’t you guess, she used to be a chanson singer If you ask me why a chanson singer, I would be hard pressed for an answer, but I know she isn’t a jazz singer and I’m sure she couldn’t be a Japanese enka singer! Going through this process, the rough outlines of the characters begin to take shape. The principal is rather easy to imagine. He probably used to be a labor union activist and anti-establishment when he was young. In the past, the hard-liner might have been a conservative physical education teacher, but today you might imagine him to be something like a smart English teacher who makes a show of being neo-liberalist.

As you are coming up with these character profiles you also think about who will play what roles, and from this point on I pin up pictures of the actors’ faces in a row on the wall and look at them as I think about the characters. There are many cases where the amount of information that comes out of a face exceeds the imaginations of the writer. For example, there might be a case like “a person who looks pliant at first glance but is actually quite stubborn deep down,” and if you rely too much on trying to define the persona of the character just with words you end up limiting yourself to that alone. But in fact, that face of a person expresses their world in a more general, less specific way. It is hard for me to write if I don’t have a face in front of me, so in cases where the casting hasn’t been decided, I may picture the face of one of my friends or acquaintances in my mind and take the freedom of imagining what they would do if they were in the particular role.

Do you have any plans for new works in 2006?

I will write and direct a new work for a production *Yawarakai Fuku wo Kite* that is scheduled from May 22 to June 11 at the New National Theatre (Tokyo). This play is set in an NGO office and is a story about the young people working and their activities during a period from before the start of the Iraq War until today.

In the autumn there is going to be a production of a new Nitosha production at the Setagaya Public Theatre (Sept. 30-Oct. 15). It is a work that takes the author Ichiyo Higuchi as the main character and its tentative title is *Kaku Onna (A Woman Who Writes)*. There were several turning points in Ichiyo’s career as a writer. In the beginning there was a period when she wrote for money. Then came a period

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when she came to dislike writing for money and tried to concentrate on writing true literature while living on the earnings from a variety shop. But when that business failed she returned once again to making a living purely by writing. During the period known as the “miraculous 14 months” before her death at the age of 24, in which she turned out one major work after another, her home was a veritable literary salon, with constant gatherings of young writers of the day. I want to write a work that looks at Ichiyo’s daily life from the perspective of the act of writing. How did love affect her writing? What was the effect of having served as ghostwriter for letters for the girls in the red light district? I want to put together my thoughts about the influences of living and daily life on the act of writing. As “a woman who writes” myself, I want to try to get an experience of Ichiyo through this play.

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Essay

The Woman Who Wants Others to Sit Up and Take Notice

by Roger Pulvers

When talking about their culture, the Japanese tend to think in terms of generations. Of course, they are not unique in this. In America, to take one country, there was the Lost Generation. Then, some three decades later, came the Beat Generation.

But in Japan, the demarcation lines are stronger, as if it is almost impossible for someone to cross over and be a part of a generation into which he or she has not been born. Writers are defined by the generation they “belong” to.

Modern theatre, or Shingeki, was revived after the war essentially in the prewar mold. Theatre groups such as Mingei, Haiyuza, Bungakuza and others, mounted productions of western classics and, in some cases, contemporary western plays, as well as well-made plays written by Japanese playwrights. There is really no exact translation of the word Shingeki. It really isn't just “western-style theatre,” nor is it simply “modern theatre.” Perhaps the closest definition is “naturalistic western-style theatre.”

The 1960s saw the emergence of the first real reaction against Shingeki in Japan. Shingeki, while boasting some brilliant practitioners, was essentially seen as something imported into Japan, not native to it.

The playwrights and directors who formed what became the mainstream of 1960s Japanese theatre—referred to as either the Little Theatre Movement or Angura (for “underground”)—reacted against Shingeki's perceived orthodoxy of acting style and naturalistic structure. Of course, playwrights and directors in the West, too, were creating their own alternative theatre, though experimental theatre in the West generally never came to symbolize the core of production values as it did in Japan.

Kara Juro, Terayama Shuji, Suzuki Tadashi, Sato Makoto and Betsuyaku Minoru, among others, with their non-naturalistic approach to theatricality, overtook Shingeki as Japan's representative dramatic art form.

The next generation arose some 10 years later (a generation in Japan lasts about a decade), with the emergence, primarily, of Tsuka Kohei and Noda Hideki, though Tsuka started work a few years before Noda.

All of the above people, by the way, with the exception of Terayama, who passed away in 1983, are still active in Japanese theatre. Just because a generation moves on, it doesn't mean its former representatives become what is called in Japanese *kako no hito* (has-beens).

I bring up the cursory outline of generations above to help find a context for the theatre of Nagai Ai. In fact, Nagai Ai does not fall easily into this type of categorization. Another writer, from a previous generation, who defies this kind of generational demarcation is Inoue Hisashi. And, in fact, there are similarities, if coincidental, between the theatre of Inoue Hisashi and that of

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Nagai Ai. Both writers see their task as writing about ordinary people found in somewhat extraordinary situations. Even when Inoue is writing about famous historical figures such as Dazai Osamu, General Nogi, Miyazawa Kenji or whoever, he invariably concentrates on their ordinary everyday struggles. They are really people just like us who have happened to become celebrities. Nagai Ai, who has not, to date, written a play with a famous person at its centre, is soon to take up the life of Higuchi Ichiyo. Interestingly, Inoue Hisashi, too, has written a play about this famous author of the Meiji Era.

As she pointed out in the interview which I did with her on 21 January 2006, Nagai Ai was late in entering her profession. Most of the Little Theatre Movement writers and directors were doing drama at university or establishing their troupes not long after graduation. As for Noda Hideki, he even dropped out of Tokyo University (it is the ultimate luxury to get into Tokyo University and then drop out) and formed Yume no Yuminsha.

Noda is actually four years younger than Nagai. By all rights, she should have been a “representative” of that generation. But it wasn’t until she was 30 that she felt she had the confidence to go out on her own. She was perfectly ambitious in her desire to enter the theatre, primarily as an actor. But most doors were closed to her. She had no choice but to start up on her own.

But this business of generations has more to it than mere age. Nagai Ai’s theatre, at least as it is constituted today, is very different from that of the people of her own generation. Her plays are plays with a message, whether she sets out to inculcate them with one or not. She said in interview, “I want the audience to sit up and take notice of what is happening to the people in my plays.” Noda’s theatre is largely presentational. He, too, of course wants people to sit up and take notice, but not particularly of what is happening in the lives of his characters, at least not in the realistic sense. He wants people to be overwhelmed by the entire spectacle of word, sound and light.

Nagai Ai is basically a writer in the Shingeki tradition. Her plays have a clear and logical structure which becomes the vehicle for the drama. This structure is, in essence, naturalistic. The characters find themselves caught in a dilemma of one sort or another. How they extricate themselves from or deal with the dilemma (the mechanism of conflict) becomes the driving force of the play’s theatricality.

For this reason, I believe strongly that Nagai Ai’s plays can be produced and understood well in the West. The context of these plays is, naturally, Japanese; and this may not be the exotic Japan that most foreigners are knowledgeable about or attracted to. But Ibsen’s plays often take place in the provinces of Norway, which at the time was a country on the fringe, both geographically and metaphorically, of Europe. Few people outside of Scandinavia had any interest in or familiarity with Norway, its language or its way of life.

Nagai Ai herself, in interview, shies away from any talk of social message. Needless to say, she is not striving in her plays to be political or tendentious. But the social message is at the core of most of her plays. This, too, makes her work accessible to western audiences, who are not only used to but crave such messages in their drama. Nagai Ai’s drama is both very Japanese and truly universal at the same time.

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The most recent example of all of this is her play, “Utawasetai Otokotachi.” She won for this the prestigious Asahi Prize in January, 2006. I think that Nagai herself was a bit taken aback by the amount of attention she has been given for this play, which played to packed houses in Tokyo and other cities around the country. Now it is time to recognize her talent, both as playwright and director, and promote it outside Japan.

The story of “Utawasetai Otokotachi” is a simple one. The setting is the infirmary at a high school at the time of the year’s graduation. A teacher named Hajjima had refused to sing the national anthem at the previous year’s ceremony, and the principal is trying to persuade him to do the right thing this year. The Ministry of Education has made it clear—and this is based on fact—that the entire school can be punished if a teacher doesn’t sing the anthem. The teacher in question can have his or her salary cut and may even be forced to transfer to a school in a remote district, as a form of internal exile.

The audience may or not be aware of the actual reality surrounding these government rules. In fact, as an issue, the mandatory singing of the national anthem never really captured the public’s imagination in the way that, say, a large-scale financial scandal or gruesome crime does. But to Nagai Ai, this is none the less a scandal and a crime. She wants the audience to “sit up and take notice.” Only then can each and every member in it begin to think about their own role in this, as citizens, as followers, as dissenters, as a silent majority that is ultimately responsible for whatever the society deems “proper.”

This is precisely what the naturalistic theatre of the West purports to do, from Ibsen to Tennessee Williams and, in our day, to David Hare. “Look at the stage”, it demands of the audience. “This may not be you but it is your problem. It concerns all of us.”

Sakate Yoji, whom I have also interviewed on this site, resembles Nagai Ai in the logic of theatre presented. His style may, at times, be more non-naturalistic than Nagai’s; but the driving force of his dramas is, as with Nagai, his social conscience. (He is more explicit about this than Nagai Ai, but in the end they are close in what they are achieving.)

Sakate and Nagai do not easily fit into demarcations of generation. They combine elements of Shingeki and Angura, having absorbed both long ago and very thoroughly at that.

The generational view of Japanese theatre is, in fact, no longer valid. Nagai Ai is at the forefront of playwright/directors whose work overrides such categorization. The upshot of this is that her work has achieved a kind of universality that has eluded even the best of earlier playwrights.

If this brings about a greater recognition of the riches of modern Japanese theatre in the world, all I can say to Nagai Ai is, “Please sing on!”