



Profile

Roba Shimori

Born in Aomori Pref., Roba Shimori is a playwright and director. She founded the Fukinkobo (Windy Harp) theater company in 1993. She is the company's leader and is responsible for the playwriting and directing. The *fukin* of the company's name means organ in Japanese and was chosen as symbolic of the wish to be "an instrument that plays the beautiful music that is words." She is acclaimed for the ability to take social issues such as youth crime, sexuality and pollution and craft them into tightly woven dialogues with an orientation that is personal and relevant. These plays are characterized by the ability to weave a poetic verbal aura in the abstract space of the stage. Among her recent plays are *Sabaku no Onkai* (Musical Scale of the Desert) which takes as its model the actual life and work of a scientist named Ukichiro Nakaya known for his studies of snow; *Kikai no Ongaku* (Music of Machines) about a group of Russian avant-garde architects; and the diptych *hg* composed of *Neko no Niwa* (Cat's Garden), which deals with the inside facts about the internal research conducted by Chisso Corp., the company responsible for the Minamata disease epidemic, and *Nukumori no Ie* (Warmth of the Home) staged in a workplace for children born with Minamata disease. In 2003, Shimori won the Japan Playwrights Association New Playwright Award for Excellence for the work *Akaki Fukazume* dealing with the subject of child abuse. In 2010 he published his first novel *Kioku, aruiwa Henkyo*.

<http://windyharp.org/>

Artist Interview

アーティスト・インタビュー

May. 7, 2015



The resolve of Roba Shimori Confronting reality head-on

現実と真っ向勝負する
詩森ろばの決意

Roba Shimori is a playwright and stage director who applies an approach involving painstaking research to confront the uncomfortable realities that surround us, from child abuse, the plight of sexual minorities and historic tragedies such as the Japan Airlines Jumbo Jet crash of 1987 to economic issues. Shimori has been active on the theater scene for more than 20 years with her company Fukin Kobo (Windy Harp). In recent years, she is striving to create entertainment that can reach a larger audience and make some difference in the world by creating affirmative theater telling stories of people who, despite their hard-line orientations, are unable to ignore the diversity of values they see around them. In this interview we seek to trace the vision behind Shimori's theater art that stands out for its diligent pursuit of social issues in these times when many contemporary artists are concerned primarily with their own personal sensitivities and expression.

Interviewer: Kumiko Ohori

I am told that you were born in Sendai and your family moved to Morioka when you were in elementary school, and that you were a member of your schools drama club in middle school and high school. What started your interest in theater?

From the third grade of elementary school it was required that we join some kind of club activity, and I choose the drama club just because I thought it might be interesting. That was the start. I loved books, and in elementary school I was sort of teased for that, because I was the kind of child who would spend all my time reading in the library. I read everything from biographies to mysteries. I also liked writing, and I think I wrote my first play when I was in the second grade. I remember writing one to be performed in our school play.

When I was in fourth grade my teacher told me to try writing a play version of a children's book for elementary students, and when I did I was really complimented for it. I wanted to do acting, but I don't remember ever being complimented on my acting. So, I vaguely remember thinking I might be better suited to writing up through my high school years.

What were your first experiences viewing theater?

The first play I ever saw was when my mother took me to see *Yuzuru* My mother took me to see many excellent plays. Showing a child like me real theater would be a sure

Artist Interview

The resolve of Roba Shimori
Confronting reality head-on

現実と真っ向勝負する
詩森ろばの決意

penalty killing

(Feb. 12 - 18, 2015 at The Suzunari)

(C) fukinkobo



way to send me off on a course different from most. The first play I ever decided to go to of my own will was when the theater company *Kuro Tent* (Black Tent) came to Morioka with one of their productions. I was in middle school when I first saw them perform, and although I didn't understand anything about what was happening in the story (laughs), I was amazed at how fascinating the production was. The moment I saw it I knew this was the kind of theater (small theater) that I liked. It was probably because of seeing that that I am still doing theater today.

During high school, I was going all the way to Tokyo at times like summer vacation and winter vacation to see plays. The first play I saw in Tokyo was one by the company *Dainana Byoto* (Hospital wing No. 7). It was a production of the play *Otoko to Onna no Gogo* (A man and woman's afternoon) written by Tetsu Yamazaki and performed at the *Machiya Studio* (Atelier Hui), and I was stunned by the acting of actress *Mako Midori*. Her performance made me feel that only someone of her ability should be allowed to perform as an actor, and I realized that I could never be like her. I saw all kinds of plays from the straight plays performed by the *Gekidan Shiki* company at the *Nissei Theater* to plays by companies I can't even remember the names of.

When you were active in your school's drama club in high school, were you writing plays?

Yes. At the time, *Kohei Tsuka* was highly acclaimed as a contemporary playwright, but I liked [*Minoru*] *Betsuyaku*. So, I writing some esoteric type of plays that mixed the two in what you could call 'theater of the absurd' with a bit of a *Tsuka*-like aspect. Since our high school was a serious prefectural prep school, we didn't have many members in our drama club and in order to enter things like our prefecture's student drama contest we had to borrow members from other clubs. Since we had so few members, I did the prop-making and lighting and back-stage work myself. Still, I wanted to act, so I was also doing dance and voice training with the hopes of entering a university that was strong in theater. But, I ended up failing to be accepted.

They didn't accept such a talented person as you?

Well, I guess I was too poor as an actor (laughs). Still, I wanted to be in Tokyo where I could see a lot of theater, so I ended up going to a vocational school there that had nothing to do with theater. After a lot of struggle, I was able to start doing theater with a drama circle at *Sophia University* that was doing underground type theater thanks to a former upperclassman of mine from high school. Meanwhile, as a spectator, I was going to see all kinds of plays as much as I could.

Like the bookworm you were as a child, was it a case of seeing anything you could?

It was perhaps because I was searching for the type of theater that I wanted to do. From around the age of 19, I think I was going to all kinds of plays not because of what happened to be my preferences but because I felt a need to study all kinds of theater as reference for what I would eventually be writing.

Would you tell us about the series of events that followed from participation in that college theater circle to the point where you established your own theater group?

Artist Interview

The resolve of Roba Shimori
Confronting reality head-on

現実と真っ向勝負する
詩森ろばの決意

There was already a writer in the circle, so I didn't write plays for them at the time. Still, I had the desire to try writing and directing a play just once, so I solicited members to work with me on a production using the *PIA* information magazine's "Hamidashi Joho" ("fringe information" side column for people of similar interests to connect) and then with the people that responded we did a performance at the Akaishi Studio. In the end, the performance was fairly well received, and the people who had gathered to work with me on it were saying, "Why did you ask us to join you if you only intended to do one production?" And, I realized they had a point. So, we kept working together and it eventually resulted in the founding of my company Fukin Kobo in 1993. For the first ten years or so there were a few changes in the members, but eventually it came down to the same group of all young women doing what you could call "underground fantasy" type plays.

So, you were doing the writing and directing and acting too?

By the time we started the company, I had given up on acting. Most of all, the reason was that as a director, I didn't really like actors who had an acting style like mine (laughs). At one point, I suddenly found I didn't want to act anymore, and with a rather clear intention I decided to concentrate on directing instead. In the theater world I think I was being looked at primarily as a writer, and I myself recognized that that was the area where I probably had the most ability, but in terms of motivation, it was directing that motivated me most strongly. However, in order to do good directing, the script has to be strong, and that is what makes me work hard on the writing side as well, I guess.

I have heard that finally made you strengthen your resolve to become a writer was the play *Ningyo no Hakobune* (1996, *Ark of the Mermaid*) that you wrote about a world contaminated with radioactive material based on the Chernobyl disaster.

That's right. When the Chernobyl nuclear power plant accident occurred (1986) I was really shocked that such a thing could happen. But, even before that, even though it was in the context of "underground fantasy." I had been writing with material about social issues such as anorexia. Still, since I was young myself, most of my writing was about sensitive young men and women. Around the time I wrote *Ningyo no Hakobune* (*Ark of the Mermaid*), however, I was starting to write about bigger issues and subjects.

Since I had the experience of being bullied when I was a child, I had strong sympathy for the plight of minorities and from childhood I used to wonder why these things happened. Perhaps it was in my nature to think about such issues. Then in high school I naturally started reading philosophy and debate and discussion came naturally as well I feel. At the time, the first film I went to see on my own was the movie *Reds* about the Russian Revolution.

So, you feel that with that kind of character, your interest was naturally drawn to larger social issues?

At the end of the 1980s there was Chernobyl, in the 1990s there was the Aum Shinrikyo cult incident (sarin gassing in the Tokyo subway, etc., 1995) that made me

Artist Interview

The resolve of Roba Shimori
Confronting reality head-on

現実と真っ向勝負する
詩森ろばの決意

think that soon there would probably be an increasing number of incidents caused by distorted child deviancy, and sure enough there was the Sakakibara incident in 1997 (multiple murders by a 14-year-old boy in Kobe). In 2001, came the 9.11 terror attacks in the U.S. that made me anticipate a growth in problems in the Middle East that would spread worldwide and reach even to Japan, and in each case my misgivings became reality.

As a result of the 9.11 terror attacks in the U.S., I decided to turn my focus as a writer to works for mainstream culture. When writing books or scripts I made it a point to write in a way that would be easy to understand to some degree. That doesn't mean writing about subjects that are easy to understand but finding ways to write in a style that makes the issues easier to understand [for the general public] even when writing about what inherently very complex issues. Believing that doing so need not have a deterrent effect in theater, I believe it is something I have to do. That is my attitude.

Once you decided to take on social issues through theater, did the style of your plays change from your earlier underground fantasy style?

In 1997 I did a series of six or seven plays dealt with illnesses under a series title of *Yamai no Kioku* (Memories of illness). They were performed over the course of a year at the Studio Ars Nova, which is like an old ruin of a theater. Each play was about an hour long, and two or three of them were written in a traditional dialogic play style. These were very well received. That made me think that the dialogic play style would be a viable style for me.

Is that when you started working in your current style, doing exhaustive research of your subjects by means of interviews and reference materials?

My play *Sukitoru Hone* (Transparent bones, 2000) was a work that resulted from the fact that there was a young woman in our company at the time who was a sexual minority. I had had friends who were gay before, but never a woman, and through her I learned just how difficult it made her life. It made me think about how I could write about her difficulty and pain in a way that people who aren't gay could understand, and eventually I wrote a play about intersexual (hermaphrodite) men and women. The style was close to my existing [underground] fantastic style, but for the first time I began by doing interviews of the people themselves, having them come to the rehearsal studio and doing other research for the writing process. At that time, I found that process of writing a play based on interviews and research to be very interesting, and since I love listening to people's stories, I thought it was a style that suited me well. That discovery was very important I feel in bringing about the change in my style.

In other words it was a process of facing and interacting with the "real living people" directly, isn't it?

Because there are people who have worked so hard as pioneers of the movement for recognition of sexual minorities, I strongly feel that I have an obligation to protect their heritage. So, I received many phone calls from a variety of people. Some made me feel ashamed of my thoughtlessness, while others led me to think, no what this person is saying is a misgauged personalization of the issues; and sometimes in such

Artist Interview

The resolve of Roba Shimori
Confronting reality head-on

現実と真っ向勝負する
詩森ろばの決意

a case and verbal fight would result. It was difficult work, but it turned out to be a very valuable and rewarding experience.

It was also my first experience of having the [intersexual] people involved and others [the general audience] seeing the play together at the theater. And from this experience, I feel that I learned a lot about what it means to “write with people.” Until then my writing process was only one of dealing with the world of images. But, with this new process of writing with people, there emerged a growing discrepancy between what I had originally intended to write and the final output that resulted from the process. And, I realized that this was a measure of the discrepancy between what I thought I knew and what I learned in the process.

Was there any play that became a turning point for you in terms of writing a play based on historical records?

There was, and it was *Kioku, Arui ha Henkyo* (Memories, or frontiers, 2004). After the 9.11 terror attacks in the U.S., which had been such a big event and by that time had in fact actually led to a state of war, I thought that continuing to write fantasies was no longer meaningful. With that feeling, I wrote a story about the Sakhalin Koreans, whose plight I had been researching for some time. That was the first historical play I had ever tried to write and it involved a lot of searching and trial and error for me.

I read a tremendous amount of reference material, and I was just able to interview some of the few Sakhalin Koreans who are still alive that had actually made it back from Sakhalin. The fact is that as a playwright, the things I want to know most of all aren't written in historical records. What you find in those records is almost exclusively the things of concern to the authorities, but the things I want to know is things like whether or not they wore *monpe* (Japanese work trousers for women) and what kinds of supplies they were issued. Those types of facts about how the people actually lived can't be found in historical records. And, during this research, another interesting thing was that I got to hear a lot of things from people of my parents' generation. And, after *Kioku, Arui ha Henkyo* I have almost totally stopped writing fantasy type plays.

There are many playwrights who write plays based on historical records, but one thing that distinguishes your historical plays is the real-life aspects you depict in your characters, so it seems like you are recreating living history. Does the difference between the process of writing from historical records and the process of writing based on interviews of people who are alive and suffering now make a difference in the final plays?

The latter is more difficult, for certain. I can't help but get the feeling that I have to do my best not to hurt the people involved. Since I am not writing a documentary, in the course of the creative process I am always concerned about to what degree and along what lines I should seek material through my interviews and from what point I can fill in the blanks with my imagination. So, it may be that in fact simply reading the historical records and leaving the rest up to my imagination might be the process that produces better plays. Because, in that way, I can use the material more freely.

Since your plays are basically composed around a group of characters rather than a

Artist Interview

The resolve of Roba Shimori
Confronting reality head-on

現実と真っ向勝負する
詩森ろばの決意

single main character, the relationships between the characters seem to develop with twists, such as in cases where it seems from one standpoint that what a particular character is saying appears to be correct, but from another standpoint it may seem wrong. When a writer is writing about social issues, it would seem to me that, regardless of the material emerging from interviews, the tendency would be for a writer to begin with a pre-concluded concept of what the final outcome will be and then simply fit the characters into that storyline.

I definitely make a concerted effort to not write with a foregone conclusion, so I am very glad to hear that you find twists in the character development in my plays. Of course, when I write I have a solid plot in mind but I try to leave open the possibility for unexpected things to happen in a particular scene when I begin to write. That leaves the possibility that the characters will end up saying something unexpected. This is probably a result of the fact that during interviews, I will often find unexpected things coming out of the people I interview. So, what happens is that when a particular character says something unexpected, it leaves open different possibilities for how the other characters will react to that. That is part of the process in the way I write.

This is also a result of the fact that, to begin with, when I choose my subject I am choosing one that is certain to involve a diverse range of values, or value systems among the people involved. I think I am rather good at finding those different viewpoints among people; it is something I do consciously. With regard to historical subjects, I am not interested in subjects for which the values involved are a foregone conclusion, and even if the value judgments have already been made, I may want to approach it from the standpoint of questioning those values.

In terms of creating such theater works, are there any theater artists that have particularly influenced you?

In the past and in the present, I believe there have always been numerous theater companies that deal with social issues as their subject matter. However, to be honest, I don't feel that there has been any artist in particular with whom I have felt a similar way of thinking. However, I do feel that there are many artists with a dramatic sense and approach.

I particularly liked the work of Tenkei Gekijo, and from the first performance of *Mizu no Eki* that I saw as a high school student at the Akasaka studio, I saw all of their performances up until the company was dissolved. I never studied directly under Shogo Ota, but I feel very strongly that I learned a lot from Tenkei Gekijo about things like use of the human body and the way that things happen between people [characters on stage].

In fact, I had the opportunity to learn a good number of things from the playwright Ren Saito. In 2003, he did a series of study sessions for mid-career playwrights and I participated in about ten of them. Mostly I recall being reprimanded by him, but I did learn many important things from him. One that impressed me strongly was being told that a writer shouldn't write with one's own ideas and beliefs as the core of what you write. Rather than writing that you don't like war, you should think about the people who were unable to say that they didn't like war, and even if you don't understand, for example, it is more important for you to try to think about the will or consciousness of

Artist Interview

The resolve of Roba Shimori
Confronting reality head-on

現実と真っ向勝負する
詩森ろばの決意

the people at the time [of the war]. This was something he stressed numerous times. It is indeed important after you write something to stop and re-examine it to make sure that you haven't written it the way that was most convenient or easiest for you, and I believe that I was also influenced by his teaching in terms of the way to read a play script and how to view theater.

With your Fukin Kobo company, in addition to the plays you write, you also occasionally do productions based on other playwright's works such as *The Glass Menagerie* (Shokutaku Yaso, 2006) and a series of short plays based on theater of the absurd works by Ionesco, Kunio Kishida and Shiro Maeda (2007). In 2009, you also started a series called "Orugan Senshu" (Organ Selection) in which you have actors choose a contemporary novel that you then write a theater version of.

I have done this consciously out of both the desire to nurture young actors and my own desire to improve my skills as a director. When the company does one of my own plays, about which I naturally am more informed due to my research and writing of them, the actors tend to feel somewhat defeated in spirit. However, when we do a play by another writer, the actors and I can create a situation where we are starting on equal footing. Also, because I am spending an increasing amount of time on research when I write a new work, I can't do more than a couple of works a year. At that pace it is hard to keep my writing skills sharp, so I want to write adaptations of other writers' works in an attempt to sharpen my skills.

So, is it safe to say that since around the latter half of the 2000s you have been intentionally working to hone your skills as a director?

Yes, quite so. In some cases I do other writers' works and in some cases with my own works I have tried directing them in different styles that I haven't tried before.

In terms of directing, besides the small theater The Suzunari, which can be considered your regular venue for your Fukin Kobo company's performances, you have also used different non-theater venues, like an old rundown movie theater (*Saigo no Suashi*, 1998), a giant former warehouse (for the play *Sukitoru Hone* mentioned earlier) and galleries (Orugan Senshu series, 2010).

When we use interesting venues, it pleases the audience and I have also chosen such venues for the purpose of creating more intimate performance spaces. But, when we do use such venues, I want them to be interesting ones that no one has used before, and I want to do performances in them that make the audience feel glad they were able to see it at that particular venue.

Among your recent productions, you used a rental home for an Orugan Senshu series play (2013) and a gorgeously decorated party space full of chandeliers for your production of Yukio Mishima's *My Friend Hitler* (2014). It has surprised me the way you have been able to find such spaces.

Since I have clear images of the kinds of spaces I want to use for specific works, it is actually rather easy to find them.

My Friend Hitler
(Sep. 9 - 14, 2014 at Shibuya Trump Room)
(C) fukinkobo



Artist Interview

The resolve of Roba Shimori
Confronting reality head-on

現実と真っ向勝負する
詩森ろばの決意

Kokugo no Jikan

(Feb. 22 - 28, 2013 at Za Koenji 1)

Photo: Kaoru Okuyama



hg

(May. 9 - 18, 2008 at The Suzunari)

(C) fukinkobo



For your production of David Auburn's play *proof* you used an all glass-walled space in the Shibaura House, and it seemed as if the space was designed specifically for that production.

The play *proof* is about a Chicago university professor who was a mathematician of genius that suffered from mental illness. Chicago is a lakeside city so I thought it would be good to have a venue in a rather old waterside area.

When you do productions at the Suzunari, you have stage designs that would not seem possible for other companies in that small theater space. Your stage art is done by Itaru Sugiyama, who did the stage art for the Fukin Kobo 20th anniversary production *Kokugo no Jikan* (2013, written by Kiyoshi Ori) that won the Best Staff Award of the 21st Yomiuri Theater Awards.

It is because I leave our stage art creation almost completely up to Sugiyama-san. Of course, I give him my ideas concerning the general image but he always comes back with something more than I expect. The first time we worked together was on our 2005 production at Theatre Tram of *zero-no-hitsugi* (a story of men condemned to death on death row in the part of the prison known as "the zero cell block) and the set was designed as a cell jutting out into the middle of a road. Since then I have only worked with Sugiyama. I think it may be that the sense of scale of my productions suits Sugiyama well, and the more wildly creative he gets with his designs, the more it stimulates my creativity as well. It may just me, but I believe that we have good creative chemistry together.

Considering the breadth of subjects you deal with in your plays, ranging from historical figures and social incidents to the contemporary maladies people suffer from today, I can't help but be surprised with the extents of your curiosity.

Since I began writing based on interviews and research, I have truly had a many unique experiences. For the play *Sabaku no Onkai* (The Desert's Musical Scale, 2006) about the scientist Ukichiro Nakaya who succeeded in creating artificial snow crystals, I went to Hokkaido University and was able to visit his low-temperature laboratory, and for the play *Beni no Mau Oka* (The hill were scarlet dances, 2007) about a woman who started a cosmetics company, I was able to meet a number of female company presidents. I would interview one and that person would introduce me to another, and so would that one, so the chain went on and on (laughs). The powerfulness of those women was amazing, and it turned out to be a fascinating experience.

In 2008, you wrote the play *hg* dealing with the Minamata industrial poisoning disaster.

To tell the truth, that was a work that I feel I could have done more on, but *hg* was also a groundbreaking work for me in the sense that it showed me just how much effort could be put into creating a play. I visited the town of Minamata numerous times in the research process and one time I went there with all the actors, including the people making guest appearances in the production, which turned out to be a very vivid experience.

When you go to Minamata, the big Chisso (former Japan Nitrogenous Fertilizer

Artist Interview

The resolve of Roba Shimori
Confronting reality head-on

現実と真っ向勝負する
詩森ろばの決意

Soso no Kyoshitsu

(Oct. 6 - 13, 2010 at The Suzunari)

Photo: Kin'ya Yoshida



Company) building stands right in front of the station. Somehow we tend to think of the Minamata disease as a problem of the past, but the town is still dominated by the Chisso company and the [environmental poisoning] problem still goes on. But that is something you don't actually realize until you actually go there. And, there is also a bright side to the town. My play is written in two parts, one dealing with Minamata of the past and the other is about the Minamata of the present, but I still feel that I didn't delve deeply enough into Minamata when I wrote the plays. Because of that, I now feel very strongly that I should have committed more time to the project until I could write about the relationships in a way that could be fully accepted.

Your next major work after that was about the Japan Airlines Jumbo Jet crash, titled *Soso no Kyoshitsu* (Classroom of Funeral Rites, 2010). It is a play that was very well received in the theater world in general, being nominated as a finalist for the Tsuruya Nanboku Drama Award among other things. What made you decide to write about this subject?

It is a subject that has been dealt with in theater several times, so originally I had no intention of writing about it. However, I happened to read in a book about the families of disaster and accident victims an episode talking about family members of victims of the JAL Jumbo Jet crash that had engaged in a movement to improve the safety of airliners. It was just at the time of the 25th memorial of the accident, and although it was a famous accident, I decided to take it as a subject once because I felt that it would provide a base for thought about a range of subjects.

It was also a big discovery for me when I went to interview people at JAL and listen to them talk about all the measures they have taken as a result of the lessons of that accident. I also felt directly that the image JAL had been tagged with as a merciless company was in fact a very one-sided one. For the families of the victims, the spiritual redemption is the important thing, and I feel that in my play I was able to include something of the process by which that spiritual compensation was accomplished. At the same time, it was a play that made me realize that there were still a lot of pre-suppositions regarding the realities of the incident that people are still unable to free themselves of.

After that your subjects expanded again into the world of economics with your play *Archives of Leviathan* (2011) about the scientists who have invented light-emitting diodes, and the play *hedge* (2013) about investment funds.

It goes back to what I was saying about the 9.11 terror attacks in the U.S. because it was from that time that I began to realize that if you don't have a strong grasp of economics you won't really know anything about what is actually happening in today's world. Everything is the result of things like the effects of petroleum control on the global economy, and of course Japan is exposed to these effects as well, which is the reason that we can't stop depending on nuclear power, isn't it. I was even more ignorant about economics than most women, so I really got serious about studying the subject. And as I started to learn something about it, it became more and more interesting, at the time I wrote *hedge* I felt that I had reached the point where I could write convincingly enough about the subject that it wouldn't sound like superficial knowledge. The story in *hedge* is about buy-out funds and restructuring a company,

Artist Interview

The resolve of Roba Shimori
Confronting reality head-on

現実と真っ向勝負する
詩森ろばの決意

and the most difficult thing for me in writing it was to how to make the subject easy to understand even for people who have no confidence in their knowledge about economics.

Apart from the flow of the drama's storyline, the measures you took to give even the explanatory parts an entertainment aspect made me feel that you had taken the theater experience into a new realm for the audience.

After working so hard on *Soso no Kyoshitsu* (Classroom of Funeral Rites), I felt that I would make it the last time I wrote about a famous incident [the JAL jumbo jet crash], so with *hedge* I might have indeed been motivated by the desire to write about a subject that no one had attempted to do theater about before, I guess. However, with *hedge* I have a bit of regret that I may have let it turn into story that made it too easy to branch off of the subject [of mainstream economics], so I now think that I would like to write something that deals more with mainstream economics. For example, something like the financial engineering involved in the Lehman Shock could be very interesting and is also something very symbolic of our times.

Normally, how long does it take from the time you first get interested in a subject and the time when it finally comes together as a play?

It depends on the play, with the shortest span being about a year and a half and the longest has taken about ten years of thinking constantly about a planned play. You never know if it is actually going to become a play, and there are cases where I have done a lot of research without ever having the intention of writing a play about the subject.

For example, I am doing research now about the damage insurance involved with the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami. If a property is covered with earthquake insurance, an assessment has to be done, but in this case the stricken areas were closed off after the earthquake and tsunami, so assessments couldn't be made. Assessors couldn't get to the areas necessary. This seemed to me to be a case where there was a cross-over in perspective that existed between the insurance company principles and people's lives and their connections, so I began investigating the subject little by little. But, with regard to the question of how close a mere playwright can research and interview her way to the truth of the matter, I still don't have any confidence of reaching an answer.

As soon as I thought you had turned to economic subjects, however, you suddenly change to a physical education-related subject this year in February with an ice hockey story titled *penalty killing* about an actual pro team, the Nikko Ice Bucks. Your idea of turning the Suzunari theater into an ice arena with the audience surrounding its full 360-degree perimeter and staging a hockey game on it was simply mind-blowing for me.

Partly because the Ice Bucks are Japan's only professional ice hockey team but financially they had fallen on hard times, I thought of this as subject as one related to economics (laughs). As I was writing it, however, the fact that it is a team based in the local community gradually became a larger aspect and the story eventually became mostly one about the local community. Also, it became more a story about the sport

Artist Interview

The resolve of Roba Shimori
Confronting reality head-on

現実と真っ向勝負する
詩森ろばの決意

itself than I had originally intended. Considering the fact that it was a story about a sports team, that may seem only natural, but because I knew much less about sports than either the community or economic aspects, in the process of doing the research and interviews in the sporting aspect as best I could, it actually became quite thrilling and exciting for me.

What are the elements you discover that make you want create a work from them?

I always have in mind some problematic themes that I feel I must write about, but it seems to me that when I write it is with the intention of writing something that will upset the foregone conclusions associated with those themes, or subjects. I believe it is always important to question things, and it is thrilling for me when A is added to B and the product that comes out is [an unexpected] C. That is what keeps me interested in writing.

When your curiosity leads you to research something you have doubts about, it leads to an encounter with a new subject.

That's right. And then, like a gift from heaven, I find that, "Perhaps it is ice hockey," and I begin to write (laughs).

It seems to me that the discoveries you make in your process of interviews and research has led to the growth of a unique sense of human potential within you.

During my interviews and research on a subject, there are always moments when I come to face with my own shortcomings. I realize that my way of thinking was too shallow. To have such realizations at my age is definitely a good thing, and I am aware that seeing new worlds I have never known before is something that opens up a new door to the next discovery. I don't know whether it is an actual form of growth, but having learned that no matter how old a person gets there can still be moments when even a small discovery can bring a complete reformation of one's thinking has been an invaluable lesson for me. A major premise for me is that during the process of writing a variety of things will be changed in a positive way.

How has this long period of interviews and research in your creative process shaped your view of human nature?

Well, what should I say? I guess my basic feeling may be that people are lovable beings. Compared to other animals, human beings have a more complex mental make-up and living habits, and for that reason our differences in values cause us to be hurt by and to hurt others and to have many other difficult aspects that are hard to accept, but including all that and despite it all, I guess people are basically lovable beings in my mind.

In writing history, we find that there are many things in human nature that should be changed and we can't help but wonder why we never change. In the last five or six years, I have come to believe strongly that in order to help us change for the better, I want to use playwriting not as a means to negate human actions and work and confrontations but as a means of affirmation of human good. Through an affirmative approach I want to write plays that lead us to think about the next means of progress.

Artist Interview

The resolve of Roba Shimori
Confronting reality head-on

現実と真っ向勝負する
詩森ろばの決意

Burai Bobo

(May. 10 - 18, 2009 at The Suzunari)

(C) fukinkobo



Human beings are difficult creatures and full of aspects we don't understand. But, it fascinates me to think about why we are such strange creatures, and I believe that is why I am doing theater.

Finally I would like to ask about your plans for the future and if there are any new things you want to try.

I will be doing a restaging of my play *Burai Bobo* from 2009. It is a story about a newspaper company in the Taisho Period (1912 – 26), and it is a story I have wanted to do because of the feeling I have that the reason for the mistrust that the media is increasingly subject to since the earthquake and tsunami is rooted in the changes that newspapers underwent from the Meiji into the Taisho periods. I want to rewrite it and add some of the entertainment aspects I am stressing in my directing now to make it a work that is relevant and fitting to be performed today. Also, next year I will be working with theater makers from my home prefecture of Iwate in a directing project. It is a critical biography drama about Keiko Sono, a one-time Takarasienne (Takarazuka actress) and Sakuratai member who died in the atomic bombing of Hiroshima.

It was a great learning experience for me when I did my first translation of a foreign play with *proof*. It isn't possible to translate even one line without some amount of interpretation being involved, isn't it. So, I have the desire to find more good plays to translate. Also, I have long had the feeling now that I want to do a tour of the areas stricken by the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami with my play *Soso no Kyoshitsu*. This is a play that deals with recovery from a sense of loss that exceeds the personal level, and it is a work that I don't even think I would have been able to write had it been in the time just after the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami. But, in a year or two, I feel that I will be able to join hands together with the people of the region as they look to the future.