



## Profile

### Takuya Yokoyama

Born January 21, 1977 in Osaka, Japan.

Yokoyama is a playwright, director and leader of the theater company *iaku*. With a discerning eye for observation and research, he is skilled at creating conversational plays that make entertainment out of other people's arguments. As an advocate of "plays that are hard to wear out," he actively tours restaged productions of his works to cities around the country. His company's inaugural play *Hito no Ki mo Shiranai de* continues to be performed somewhere in Japan virtually every year, and his *iaku* company performances alone total have been performed on 70 stages in 13 cities (as of 2018). Yokoyama is a member of the Japan Playwrights Association (Management committee member for the Kansai Branch) and a member of the Quark No Kai. He is a 5th term graduate of the Itami So-ryu Shijuku. Awards include: the New Playwright Drama Award of the 15th Japan Playwrights Association Awards for *Edaniku* (2009); the 1st Sendai Short Play Award for *Hito no Ki mo Shiranai de* (2013); the 2017 Suita City Award for Meritorious Cultural Achievement (2017); the 72nd Agency for Cultural Affairs Arts Festival New Artists Award (Kansai) for the script for *Haitsuburi ga Tobunowo* (Script 2017); the 54th Osaka Cultural Festival Awards Honorable Mention Award for the results of *Shuku-shuku to Unshin* and *Haitsuburi ga Tobunowo* (2017).

*iaku*

<http://www.yokoyama-iaku.com/>

# Artist Interview

アーティスト・インタビュー

Nov. 22, 2018



## Dramaturgy of Quarreling The language power of Takuya Yokoyama

口喧嘩のドラマツルギー  
横山拓也の言葉力

Playwright and director Takuya Yokoyama (b. 1977, leader of *iaku*) is known for his conversational dramas depicting the conflicts between people of differing positions and mindsets play out in logical arguments set to the tempo of the Kansai dialect and laced with humor. Ever since he first drew attention with his 2009 three-man play *Edaniku* (literally: Dressed Carcass, Winner of the 15th Japan Playwrights Assoc. New Playwright Award) about the fights between employees of a slaughterhouse, Yokoyama has continued to write numerous plays that address the contradictions of society through conversations and quarrels where the characters blurt out the feelings and discontent they normally keep suppressed inside themselves. This interview traces the career of Yokoyama as a playwright who strives to write conversations that move people simply by reading them.

Interviewer: Kumiko Oohori

When you were a student at Osaka University of Arts, you participated in the launching of the theater company *Urikomitai beam* (the company has been recessed since 2011). The leader of the company, Katsuro Yamada, was a classmate of yours from high school. Were you interested in theater from your high school days?

From junior high school I was interested in writing. Loved reading things I had written to people and making them laugh.

So, rather than reading, you liked writing?

That's right. The fact is my father was a big science fiction fan, and he had the whole set of *SF Magazine* issues from the very first one, and he even majored in German at college so he could read the original *Perry Rhodan* science fiction novels (a relay series of novels published in Germany from 1961 written by numerous authors based on the original synopsis). And even that wasn't enough. He cried in dismay that he wouldn't be able to read all of the Japanese translations that came out 30 years after the originals. Although you couldn't really call it my form of rebellion, seeing a father like that I wanted to become a writer.

You are from Osaka, which is the comedy mecca of Japan, is that Osaka spirit that makes you want to make people laugh?

I think part of it may come from that Osaka comedy energy, but basically I just

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wanted to write things that made people laugh. In high school I did things like writing a novel in sequels in our student magazine of my own initiative. The theater company leader Yamada-san was a person who liked to be out on stage acting in front of an audience, but I didn't like being out in stage in front of people. Rather, my stance was to write things behind the scenes that would make people laugh.

Are there any writers who particularly inspired you?

The first authors I began to read seriously were Yasutaka Tsutsui and Shinichi Hoshi. I also learned something from the science fiction author Taku Mayumura in a practice exercise at Osaka University of Arts. I liked science fiction type works, but I didn't read them with the thought of becoming that type of writer, I just read them for entertainment, like listening to comedy or music. So, I don't really know what kind of an influence it had on me.

You were born in 1977. So you are of the same generation as the Tokyo playwrights Junnosuke Tada and Kuro Tanino (both born in 1976). Is there some particular culture scene that you were influenced by as a member of that generation?

I would check out the young Yoshimoto Promotion celebrities appearing on late-night TV, but I didn't have enough interest to actually go to theater performances. In my first two years of high school, I was on the soccer team, so I didn't see any theater then.

I didn't go to see theater, but in high school I did write and direct a class skit for our school's culture festival. Although members of the sports teams weren't allowed to perform in the culture festival but, although he was in a different class, my good friend Yamada had become a school star by directing his class' plays for the festival from his freshman year, I decided to try to do the same in my third year of high school. Since I didn't know anything about drama, I did a kind of slapstick piece that was actually a sort of collage of scenes from a couple of movies I liked, *Tenkosei* (Transfer Student) by director Nobuhiko Obayashi (1982) and *The Graduate* by director Mike Nicholls (1967). Even so, it won the 1st prize at our festival that year and I was feeling good about it when my friend Yamada told me that there was an interesting theater company named *Wakusei Pistaccio* (A small-theater company launched in Osaka in 1989, dissolved in 2000) and I should go and see their performances. So, the first theater performance I ever saw was their play *Hakai Runner* (Premiered 1993. A story about humans who compete in a super-human race at the speed of sound). That was the day before Kobe and Osaka were hit by the Great Hanshin Awaji Earthquake.

Was it that theater experience that made you apply to Osaka University of Arts to do theater?

No. That is another story. I just had the vague feeling that it would be best to go to college, and it happened that a lot of people around me, including Yamada-san were applying to Osaka University of Arts. I got the pamphlets and application forms for it and went to see their college culture festival and such, and since there was a department where you could major in writing, I thought it might be an OK college to go to. My parents were strongly opposed to it at first, but after I got a recommendation and was accepted, it became the easy choice. And when my Japanese language

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teacher from my sophomore year in high school told my parents that if I chose to pursue the course of a writer it would be good to let me do so, my mother took that in mind and decided that it might be the best to accept my choice.

In 1996, the year after you entered college, Yamada and others in the theater department formed the company Urikomitai Beam and held their first performance.

Shortly after he entered the college, Yamada-san began gathering members to form the company, and at the same time he asked me to write plays for him. The venue for the company's inaugural performance was an Osaka municipal facility that had to be reserved for use a year in advance, so we ended up rehearsing hard for a whole year for that first performance. As it turned out, I was made responsible for directing the play, but since I didn't know anything about directing, I ended up just watching the rehearsals, and from the second play I just left everything up to the actors. It was a company with a strong orientation toward entertainment, so at the beginning that is the kind of Pistaccio works I wrote.

There are some people who go into film from a literary course in college. Did you ever have a desire to write for movies?

In fact, I was interested in movies, and I had also applied initially for the film department, but I wasn't accepted. There are some movie directors from Osaka University of Arts in my generation like Nobuhiro Yamashita and Kazuyoshi Kumakiri, but I never had any connection to them when we were students. And it is the same with the relatively small number of theater majors of my generation from our college, I didn't have any association with them either as a student.

For me personally, theater was little more than a hobby at the time and my stance was simply to write the kinds of things that Yamada-san and the company members wanted, things that would make them happy, and things that would make the companies performances and the actors successful in terms of ticket sales. But as we gradually came to be compared with other companies and myself with playwrights in the Kansai region and critiques were also written about my work, I began to think more seriously about my works and what I wanted to express after graduating and reaching the latter half of my 20s. So, it wasn't until rather late that I began to be more aware of myself as an artist.

In addition that you work with the company, you also took part in the [5th year] So-ryu Shijuku seminar for playwrights headed by playwright So Kitamura at the Itami AI HALL.

In my last year at university there was a contest for college students called CAMPUS CUP organized by the municipality of Osaka. The winner of this contest would win the right to stage a joint production the following year with Masahiro Iwasaki, the leader of Gekidan Taiyozoku (an Osaka-based small-theater company founded in 1982, led by Masahiro Iwasaki, known for works such as *Koko kara wa Toi Kuni*, etc.). It was my first year out of college and when I had the opportunity to work with Iwasaki-san, I learned about the So-ryu Shijuku seminar where he served as an instructor. I was embarrassed by the fact that I hadn't previously known of Iwasaki-san's works, but I got to know him to some extent and decided to take the seminar.

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iaku *Edaniku*

(Jan. 2013 at Tsu-Akebonoza)

Photo: Takashi Horikawa



What kind of results came from that experience learning from successful older playwrights like Iwasaki-san and Kitamura-san?

A year after I entered the seminar, Kitamura san said to me, “In the end, nothing changed in you work.” Of course, I had written things in accordance with the subjects we were given in the seminar, and I was there with the intention of learning, but it appeared that, unconsciously, I was simply continuing the type of writing I had been doing all along for our company in the seminar as well. As I said earlier, I had been writing simply with the intention of creating things that the actors would like and enjoy staging, and since I had the vague idea that I was doing what I wanted to do, I guess nothing changed in terms of my writing. In fact, our company had won a certain degree of popularity and we were successful in attracting audience.

For the graduates of the So-ryu Shijuku seminar an exclusive group was formed called the Quark no Kai, which was open to graduates who had were already active creating theater with their own theater company, and I was able to join that group as well. It was a group where we would bring our new scripts to receive comments and critique from the group members, and since I found that among them our Urikomitai Beam was seen as a company that was “selling” successfully, once again there was no real impetus coming from that group to encourage me to change the way I was writing. But about six or seven years after our company was launched, I began to hear more and more negative comments from elder playwrights and theater people saying in effect, “Is this really what you want to keep doing?” Within the company itself as well, there had continued to be a fluctuation in the direction of the company policy, which in effect had us alternating between productions that were basically collections of comedy skits and more serious works I was writing with my own intent as an author to show the dark side of people as well.

In 2008, your work for your company titled *Kokujin no Blouse* (a detective play about people attending their high school class reunion trying to solve the mystery surrounding the suicide of one of their classmates 15 years earlier) was selected as a finalist for the OMS Drama Prize.

From the OMS jurors Makoto Sato and Yorozu Ikuta I received such caustic critiques that it brought tears to my eyes (wry smile). The criticism focused mainly on the extreme brutality of the scenes where the high schoolers push the classmate they had been bullying off the roof of the school and then burn the body in the incinerator. It was just at the time I was writing the play *Edaniku* (Dressed Carcass) (2009 winner of the 15th Japan Playwrights Association New Playwright Drama Award). This was a play I wrote at the request of the Manatsu no Kai (the unit of actors Makoto Hara and Natsu), and it was written specifically to be performed for one of their productions bringing together playwrights and directors they are interested in. This production is where I also got to know the director and actor Ikken Ueda, who has worked with us in our iaku company productions, and Susumu Ogata, who is now a regular actor with iaku.

*Edaniku* is a play set in the employee lounge of a slaughterhouse (butchery) in the suburbs of Tokyo. This play that won you widespread recognition tell a story about three male employees of a slaughterhouse who, due to an incident in which it is

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discovered that the medulla of a cow that was supposed to be sent for inspection for BSE (mad cow disease), break into arguing that leads to harsh statements regarding their occupation as slaughterhouse butchers and their identity in general. What was the writing process like that produced this play?

Manatsu no Kai asked me to write a play for three male actors, and that led me to think that there would be added intensity if I set the story in a particular workplace where the three were employed. The workplace setting I chose was a slaughterhouse. But when I started research, I found that this was not an easy work setting to deal with. It happened that a former classmate of mine from junior high school had become a slaughterhouse employee, so I contacted him and got him to show me his workplace. That was the first time that I had done research like that in order to write a play, and as I listen to the employees, it brought out unexpected hints for things to write about one after another.

At first, I had tried writing the play from the perspective of the slaughterhouse workers, but at the initial reading with the actors and director, I got the reaction that the story was not well balanced and the opinion that I should do some research on the livestock industry as well. So, through the connections I was given, I did research at farms in the industry and was finally able to get material for a more balanced play. Until then, I had never relied on the knowledge of other people in my writing, but with *Edaniku* I listened to the opinions of Ueda-san and the actors and rewrote the script many times. It was especially refreshing for me to work with Ueda-san in this respect, and we spent hours in coffee shops debating Ueda-san's suggestions and the things I wanted to stick with to gradually improve the script.

When it came to the actual performances of the finished work, I discovered an intensity in the reaction of the audience such as I had never experienced before, and it made me feel that this is the kind of theater I wanted to pursue. It was a very rewarding experience. Nonetheless, I continued to work mainly with the company (Urikomitai Beam) for three more years after that.

Can you describe what made that play such a rewarding experience for you?

It was experiencing the important power of research [in the playwriting process]. Another big experience was of the way that during rehearsals Ueda-san would try to direct the spoken lines not in a direction that made them flow easily and be more fun to deliver, but to shift it to a direction that encouraged everyone to read more depth into the lines. I was very grateful for the efforts Ueda-san made to find further depth behind the things I had written rather unconsciously for their humorous effect, so that everyone could bring more unified depth to the play. As I was writing it, I felt that there was different in *Edaniku* than with other things I had written before, but Ueda-san was able to help put that difference into words. When I work with him on our iaku productions as well, he is often able to bring new interpretations to things I have written unconsciously with the momentum of my pen.

In 2011, you suspended your activities with Urikomitai Beam, and in 2012 you started your own personal unit iaku.

As with *Edaniku*, I started doing plays that I wrote based on research, but things

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ia *Hito no Ki mo Shiranai de*

(Reproduction in Jul. 2018)

Photo: Takashi Horikawa



didn't go well. Urikomitai Beam had been planning to hold a performance in Tokyo the month after the March 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami. Although I had been able to maintain some emotional distance after the Great Hanshin Awaji Earthquake we experienced in my third year of high school, this time I couldn't stop watching the television broadcasts of the earthquake and tsunami in the East Japan, and I fell into a state that was close to traumatic neurosis. I wanted us to cancel the Tokyo performance, but the company insisted on it and I was forced to go along with their decision, and as it turned out that was the last performance before I suspended my activities with them.

In August of that same year, the leader of the Osaka theater company Kyokuto Taikutsu Dojo, Shinichiro Hayashi, contacted me and we ended up agreeing on a joint production of his representative work *Subway* and my *Edaniku* at the Itami AI HALL and the Oji-shogekijo in Tokyo. When I heard that those performances brought more attention to *Edaniku*, I realized that I had to do something to exceed what *Edaniku* had accomplished. It was that feeling as well as questions I had been dealing with in my mind after the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami about the distance between others' pain and the problems they faced and myself that led me to write the play *Hito no Ki mo Shiranai de*.

**The play *Hito no Ki mo Shiranai de* is one that the 3-woman actress group "Aripe" of Osaka asked you to write for them, wasn't it?**

Yes, that's right. The story is of a woman who has lost an arm in a traffic accident, and while she never appears on stage, the play develops among three of her work colleagues who have gone to see her in the hospital and, due to the different situations and feelings of the three, heated discussion breaks out among them as they try to figure out how best to give her support in her recovery. First I wrote it for four characters, three women and a man. To tell the truth, I had experience with a similar accident when I was with Urikomitai Beam, and it caused me a long period of self-questioning during which I thought a lot about the existence of responsibility for an accident like that. This is what forms the core of the play. And perhaps that is the reason why, although it is fiction, the writing proceeded very quickly with a sense of realism.

**Now that you mention it, it is indeed a work that leaves you with a strong impression of the gritty reality of the conversations.**

When writing a play, the first thing I think about is what to set as the core of the story and what characters I should set around it so that conflict and drama will spring naturally from them. After that, if I keep writing lines of conversation, the story will naturally fall into place. Of course, I also think separately about the human relationships involved and the backgrounds of the characters, but besides that, it is the skills I picked up in dozen years or so of working with the company that carries the story almost automatically to completion.

After I wrote *Hito no Ki mo Shiranai de*, I felt that I was now free of having to chase the phantom of *Edaniku* and could go on to pursue my writing without that burden. Then I was able to rewrite it as a play for three women and stage it as the first

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iaku *Shuku-shuku to Unshin*  
(Jun. 2 2017 at Shinjuku Ophthalmologist  
Gallery-Space Underground)  
Photo: Takashi Horikawa



performance of my new company iaku. After that I submitted it to the 1st Sendai Short Drama Award contest and won the Grand Prize.

*Hito no Ki mo Shiranai de* is a play that is built on an even greater volume of lengthy dialogues than *Edaniku*. Each of the three women come to the tea conversation table carrying the weight of their own life situations, their differing positions and their thoughts and feelings that they normally avoid causing conflicts with by hiding, but this time the whole play is made up of their conversations and the opinions they throw at each other. Though the audience may find surreptitious pleasure in hearing the women voice the same opinions they hold, in the end they must walk away with the frustration of the inconclusive arguments for which there are no answers.

I don't think about such overblown scenarios as that, but I am very conscious of how skillfully people lie to themselves in their lives. Said in extreme terms, I feel that people don't really have a self but just live by adapting themselves to the situations they encounter.

My plays are constructed around the process by which people enter human relationships initially through superficial interactions intended to avoid being hurt until they run up against some barrier that tears it open so that it becomes necessary to point out what is revealed in the break and the other person in turn has to lie in order to protect it, and through the repetition of this process arguments result and attempts are made to conceal the bad things they want to hide until it all evolves into something with a depth that would otherwise be impossible in daily life. But if I were asked how I write such things, I wouldn't be able to explain the method well. If I just write with the flow, the first half often becomes wordy, so an editorial type process of cutting out the unessential parts is always necessary. Ueda-san often helps me with that, so I believe that besides his work as director, he also serves a role like a dramaturge. In fact, for our iaku production *Shuku-shuku to Unshin* (Premiered June 2017. A story about two brothers who are told that their mother has cancer, one of whose wife is unable to tell her husband that she is pregnant, and the carefully worded conversations between their two families) I served as playwright and director and I asked Ueda-san to serve as dramaturge.

It is possible to write plays in which the setting and worldview evoked can replace much of the conversation it seems to me, so what is it that makes you concentrate so exclusively on conversation in your plays?

I like to watch a lot of different types of plays, and I enjoy ones that depict a grand worldview and plot developments, but at times, when I read those same plays' scripts, I don't feel the excitement that it had on stage. However, when I read back over my own plays, I can feel the power of the conversation has the potential to move the heart of the reader. I guess I am obsessed with the question of what makes conversations capable of moving the reader. However, I also find it rather suffocating when a conversation is woven too perfectly tight, so I think I make an effort to add some more gently balanced human imperfection in the ones I write. I feel that when I am able to weave some human weaknesses into the conversation, such as people being led astray by the inherent likes and dislikes in their temperament or being led off by their desires, sharp words stand out more brightly, and the result is that the

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Tengai Amano, an artist of the fantastic  
Commanding a nostalgia for the universe

宇宙的郷愁”を操る  
奇想のアーティスト、天野天街

iaku *Nagarena*

(Oct. 2014 at Mitaka City Arts Center-Concert  
Hall “Kaze”)

Photo: Takashi Horikawa



play can avoid falling into a style of stiff logical discourse and be enjoyed more as entertainment.

Also, besides of course with your play *Hito no Ki mo Shiranai de*, in your other plays as well, you seem to be very skilled at portraying environments, situations and psychology unique to women, as seen in characters like the sisters in *Nagarena* (Premiered 2013. A story set in a restaurant in a small harbor town that thrives on shellfish fishery in which the death of their mother brings out the suppressed conflict between two sisters amid the backdrop of a dissolution of a fishery processing company that has been hiding its practices that have led to pollution of the fishing grounds) and the wife in *Shukushuku to Unshin*.

Rather than portraying them as women, I feel that in my attempts to depict “life” itself I am portraying the irreplaceable presence of women as the beings that give birth to it. That is why I make a point of carefully observing women objectively and why I am particularly sensitive to the things that make life hard for them.

What kinds of phenomena or social issues regarding women are you interested in right now?

I am interested in the “Me too” movement we see on the social networks and harassment issues. I don’t want to be misunderstood, but in our world today “beauty” is commercialized in a variety of products that drive the economy, yet at the same time it is now a fact that almost anything that a man may say to a woman regarding beauty can be taken as harassment today. With this kind of contradictory state of affairs, I am interested in how men and women today will lead their lives, and I believe this can be a subject for theater.

My son is now in elementary school and at his school the children are being told to always use the “-san” honorific when addressing each other. And, because it can lead to bullying, the children are forbidden to call each other by nicknames. This is also being taught at public schools as well as private ones. I don’t know if LGBT concerns is the reason for using the “-san” honorific or if it is to eliminate differentiation between the genders, but I feel there is more to this than simply the fact that it is different from the way we grew up. In this new kind of world I am worried about the kind of love relationships my son will have.

Even in a society full of lies like having boys and girls calling each other by the “-san” honorific to avoid outward discrimination, if we use words to the fullest in conversation, the lies will be relieved to some extent. Your plays are a good reminder to us that words are the human race’s most powerful weapon. What’s more, there are also aspects of thrill and suspense in the way you use intense discourse almost to the degree that it destroys human relationships. (Laughs)

The style of plays we create now in iaku is based on the feeling that conversations and discussion in themselves can be entertainment. Just as I am speaking now, I get the feeling that what I want to do may be to answer the audience’s clandestine desire to get a peek at the discussions of others, while avoiding the discomfort of becoming the ones affected by the discourse.

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Commanding a nostalgia for the universe

宇宙的郷愁”を操る  
奇想のアーティスト、天野天街

You currently live in Tokyo, but the base for your creative activities is western Japan's Kansai region.

When it comes to writing works, I believe there is no difference whether it is done in Osaka or Tokyo. Since both are metropolitan areas. When I first launched iaku it was with the aim of making it possible for our works to be seen in a variety of regions, and in fact I frequently went to cities like Nagoya and Fukuoka to expand our activities through relationships with the local theater people there. In the end, however, now I am confident of the fact that the important thing is not where you create the works but simply how you create works of true quality. Most of my works use the Kansai dialect, and in light of that, I want to boost the strength of the works and have them judged as a set with the “Kansai, Osaka-born” brand value.

In May of this year, you had a “iaku Theater Work Collection” project to restage four of your previous plays at the Komaba Agora Theater, and of them *Shuku-shuku to Unshin* toured to five cities and *Hito no Ki mo Shiranai de* toured to two cities. It is your policy at iaku to do re-staging and tours of your works. Would you tell us about what plans you have for the future?

I don't know what constitutes a finished work, but I believe that repeated performances increase the precision and strength of a work. There is a difference in the number of works a playwright will write in his or her lifetime, but I want to write works that I am not ashamed of and don't have to make excuses about. “Works that don't grow old” is an overused expression, but I want my works to have contemporary appeal but to also be ones that will have value when re-read years from now. One of my dreams is to have my plays be in libraries, and I want the written plays to be the center of my theater-making heritage.

However when I am having lots of people see my plays through performances in Tokyo, I am also concerned that I don't get stuck in the formula that my job is writing plays. When I am asked to write a new play, I don't feel now that I have the strength to say, “Use one of my old plays.” To be able to say that simply means that I have to be able to increase the strength of my works, and so it is also a battle with myself.

Don't you have interest in having your works performed abroad?

In fact, for the coming performances of *Hito no Ki mo Shiranai de*, considering the large number of foreign tourists there, I am going to use English subtitles for the first time. While on the one hand I feel that my works depend to a large degree on the nuances of Japanese, but on the other hand I also think they are interesting works for foreigners to get a glimpse of present-day Japan, and I am very interested to see how they will communicate to them. And this is not only with regard to the English-speaking countries. I am interested also in seeing them performed in our neighboring country of South Korea, where the people love discourse and debate. I think some of my works like *Kamen Fufu no Kagami* (Premiered 2011. Literally “The mirror of a masked couple,” it is a story depicting the dispute between a couple after the wife gets plastic surgery without asking her husband first) that would fit the Korean national character (laughs).