



Profile

Seigo Hatasawa

Born in Akita Prefecture, Hatasawa started out as an actor and has specialized as a playwright and director since 2000. In 2005 *Ore no kabane o koete ike* (Over My Dead Body) won the top prize in the short drama competition at the Japan Playwrights Association Congress 2005 in Kumamoto. In the same year, Hatasawa formed the theater production collective Watanabe Genshiro Shoten, based in Aomori, which later became a theater company in 2008. He is also involved in training local people in theater and is working to establish a new art network throughout Japan. With their blend of deep human insight and a unique sense of humor, Hatasawa's plays have been endorsed by a wide range of companies including Subaru and Seinen Gekijo. He also writes for other theater companies. In addition, he is a high school teacher and supervises the school drama club, which frequently participates in national high school drama competitions, which it won in 2005 for *Shugaku ryoko* (School Trip). Hatasawa has won the top prize at the National Arts Festival for his radio dramas, as well as other major awards in broadcasting.

Watanabe Genshiro Shoten

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Artist Interview

アーティストインタビュー

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The theater world of Seigo Hatasawa,
with its unique focus on “communities” and “schools”

「地域」と「学校」——

ふたつの視点から演劇界を見つめる畑澤聖悟

Seigo Hatasawa is the leader of the Watanabe Genshiro Shoten theater company based in Japan's northern Aomori Prefecture. The plays he writes from his perspective as an active high school teacher have won a broad-based following, due to the insightful relevance with which he depicts the distortions that emerge in the relationships between parents, students and teachers, informed by his intimate knowledge of the actual workings of the world of education. This interview explores the theatrical roots of Hatasawa, who is active today not only in writing plays but also education through theater, personnel development training programs and creating a network of regional theater companies. In the process we also get a look at his vision of the future of regional theater.

(Interviewer: Kumiko Ohori)

You live in Aomori Pref. and are an art teacher in a prefectural high school. You also teach high school theater (*), write scenarios for radio drama and are the leader of the local theater company Watanabe Genshiro Shoten. Would you begin by telling us how you became involved in theater and the other broad-ranging creative activities you are involved in?

It was actually quite a silly thing that got me interested in theater. I am originally from Akita Prefecture. and I played basketball all through junior and senior high school. Basketball was my entire life. (laugh) I was good enough that I was even offered a scholarship from a university in Tokyo. But when I was in high school it was at the time when girl's manga with a very high level of literary sophistication like *Hi Izuru Tokorono Tenshi*, *Wata no Kuni Boshi* (The Star of Cottonland) and *Eroika yori Ai wo komete* (From Eroika with Love) by the manga artists Ryoko Yamagishi, Yumiko Oshima and Yasuko Aoike. And I really got into those manga. I couldn't go buy girls manga myself, of course, so I had the girl who was manager of our basketball team go and buy them for me (laughs).

Meanwhile it was nearing the time for my college entrance exams, and since the Akita Prefectural High School I was going to was right next to Akita University and was almost like its affiliated high school, I eventually decided to enter the education department there.

When I'd get tired of cramming for the entrance exams, I'd go to spend my time at the book store, and one of the things I discovered there was Suzue Miuchi's manga *Garasu no Kamen* (Glass Mask). I read through the whole series of that manga, and reading the descriptions of the main character Maya Kitajima's performances, I got the idea that I could do that myself (laughs). That's when I decided that when I went to university I would join the drama club.

So “Glass Mask” was your point of departure (laughs). But wasn't the drama club a lot different from what you imagined from the manga?

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Aomori Chuo High School drama club
Shugaku Ryoko (School trip), first edition
(Oct. 2004, Hachinohe Kokaido hall)
Photo: Masaru Nisizawa



*High school theater

High school theater refers to the theater activities of the drama clubs in high schools and their equivalents throughout Japan. There is a National High School Theater Council confederated by drama club organizations in each prefecture and the administration is divided into eight blocks, consisting of Hokkaido, the Tokoku, Kanto, Chubu Nihon, Kinki and Chugoku regions and the islands of Shikoku and Kyushu. Each year a nationwide theater contest is held with twelve competing clubs that have won preliminary competitions at the prefectural and block levels. The winner of this contest is presented the National High School Theater Council Chairman's Award.

It was completely different. I entered Akita University in 1983 and I joined its Kitanokai drama club and became an actor, but the plays there were doing were very dark “Angura” (underground) style plays (laughs). But, I did find that theater was something that suited my nature.

The first play I was in was **Soh Kitamura's** *Hogi Uta* (Ode to Joy; a dialogue drama in which two traveling performers, Gesaku and Kiyoko, and a Christ-like figure named Yasuo (Yaso) talk about the approaching end of the world), and from that very first play just after the school year began, I was given the lead role of Yasuo. With the heat of the spotlights and my nervous excitement, I was getting nose bleeds and such (laughs), but I also got a good taste of the rewards and enjoyment of acting.

Being in good shape from years of playing basketball also proved helpful on the stage. With a strong back and set of legs, I could move well and nimbly on stage, and the strong voice I had developed from shouting and cheering in basketball games gave me a good stage voice from the very start. We would practice and rehearse long hours almost every day, from the time classes ended at 5:00 pm until about midnight.

From my second year in university I began acting as a guest actor outside the university as well. It happened to be the year that Akita city began to sponsor its public musical series and there was a plan to do a production of **Hisashi Inoue's** musical *Juippiki no Neko* (Eleven Cats). I got really absorbed in it, discovering what a great playwright Inoue was. That led me to read a lot of his plays.

After that, our Kitanokai club did things like the plays of **Juichiro Takeuchi**, but the underclassmen coming into the club were not as serious and the rehearse-till-midnight atmosphere got lost somewhere. So a few of the leading members broke off and formed a new company that we called Mankindo. One of the members was a writer, so we began doing our own original plays.

Weren't you thinking about writing plays yourself at that stage?

I did some directing, but that was still a time when I was thinking only of becoming an actor. At the time I was a member of two drama clubs in our university and a company named Theatre Le Faucon Bleu outside the university. I was also involved in an art seminar and making 8-milimeter parody films independently with members of that group. So, I was involved in a lot of creative events.

Despite all those activities, you became a school teacher after graduating. Didn't you think of becoming an actor?

Maybe it is just that I'm indecisive, or tend to go with the flow (laughs). In the case of the teacher qualification exam, it wasn't so much my own intention as much as it was the fact that I was in the education department and all the other students around me were preparing for the exam, and watching then I began to think that maybe I should be taking it too. It was a fact that on the one hand I was thinking of going to Tokyo and trying to make my way as an actor, but will I was trying to make up my mind the exam came around and I took it. I didn't pass the second-level exam the first time around, but I did manage to get a job as a part time teacher in Akita city. So I taught for a year while also doing theater with the local theater company. Then I passed the second level exam the next year and got a job teaching at a middle school in Hiuchimachi (present Odate city). There I became the coach of the basketball club, and for the next three years I was immersed in basketball again.

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The fact is, my father, who passed away early at the age of 53, was also a teacher and a well-known basketball coach in Akita. There is even a basketball tournament named him, the “Hatasawa Shosaku Cup,” and everyone thought it was the picture of filial piety that his son should also be a middle school basketball coach.

But somewhere in my third year of that I suddenly got a glimpse of the future. A middle school teacher’s job is a very busy one, with classes all day and then coaching after school until about 8:00 in the evening, then it was back to the office to finish up the paperwork. I wouldn’t get home until after 11:00 at night. Then I began thinking: Am I going to go on like this and end up like my father? Can I really give up acting? When I was asking myself this, what came to mind was the Hirosaki Theater.

Hirosaki Theater is a company that is active in Aomori Pref. Had you seen there performances when you were a student?

A friend who wrote for our Mankindo company was a fan of theirs and he had brought them in to perform at our university culture fairs twice or so. The Hirosaki Theater had only been active for about five years at that time, and I believe they had just begun to do original productions of their own. Unlike today, the Hirosaki Theater at that time had a very strong “Angura” (underground) orientation, and I remember there was always Beatles music playing at the end of their plays (laughs). Their main actor, then and now, Kenji Fukushi, was a very strong presence on stage, and I had the desire to be able to perform with him some day.

I went to Hirosaki for that reason several times and I searched out their rehearsal studio. When I introduced myself, some of the people in the company remembered me from my acting in my college days. That was around February of 1991. After that I immediately asked to become a member of the company. Once I became a member, they had me doing lead roles in their studio performances right away, so I was able to make my theater comeback quite quickly. Until then I had been trying to decide whether to go to Tokyo and pursue an acting career or to make teaching my career, but after joining the company I realized that in Hirosaki I could do both.

Half a year after joining the company, I married one of the company’s actresses and moved to Aomori, even though I was still teaching in Akita. It was a two-hour commute to work and two hours back, which was really tough (laughs). I tried hard to find a school to teach at in Aomori, but there wasn’t an opening until four years later and I finally got a job teaching at Aomori Prefectural Aomori Chuo High School (at the time a girls school) as an art teacher in 1995.

That was where you eventually got into high school theater.

At the time, Hirosaki Theater was receiving support from the Agency of Cultural Affairs, and the conditions of that arrangement was that the company had to put on four productions a year. That meant that in order to continue teaching and acting at the same time I had to take off a week from my teaching four times a year to perform in the company’s productions. Even if some of those could be worked into the longer school vacations, there were no other teachers taking that much time off. Although at first the headmaster and the other teachers had been encouraging with regard to my acting endeavors, after a while their patience grew thinner each time I asked for time off. I soon realized that I would have to prove the value of having a teacher involved in theater. And, after struggling with that problem for a while, I decided that I should become the advisor for our high school’s drama club. I thought that would be the best way to use my experience in theater to make a contribution to the school.

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Hirosaki Theater

Shomei

(Premiere: Jan. 2000 at Studio Denega)
In the not-so-distant future there is even more chaos in the school education environment and the increasingly powerless Ministry of Education has introduced a policy by which school faculties decide among themselves who will serve as school principal. As the person who must take final responsibility whenever there is an incident or misconduct occurring at a school, there are great pressures on the principal, and the death rate among principals is soaring as a result. The play is set in a public middle school in Aomori Pref. where debate is going on concerning who should be chosen as the new principal. The discussions, open elections and debate heat up, but still no decision can be reached amidst the outpouring of individual feelings.

Hirosaki Theater

Ore no Kabane wo Koeteike (Leave my dead body and press onward)

(Premiere: April 2002 at Namioka Contemporary Art Space)

At a long-established radio station in Aomori city, an aggressive new president has been brought in to restructure and get the station out of its deteriorated financial situation. He initiates a “360-degree Evaluation System” (employees are evaluated by their superiors, peers, subordinates and the employee him/herself) with the aim of firing all redundant staff to reduce the payroll. As part of this initiative the younger employees are asked to come up with a list of candidates for management-level firings. Among the six younger employees gathered to create the list the weighted discussion commences with some making accusations about subordinate bullying, some who want nothing to do with other people’s business and some who try to argue on principles.

Until that time I had been a coach of the school’s tennis team. It was a school that placed greater importance on sports, while there was a tendency to be looked down on culture-oriented clubs. If there was something like a caste system among the school’s clubs, the drama club was definitely of the lowest caste (laughs). In fact our school’s drama club had never made it past the local competition to compete in the prefectural level competition. But I was determined to take them to the prefectural level, so I wrote a play for our drama club. That was the first play I had written in my life and I titled it *Shitsucho*.

At the beginning of the school year (April in Japan) the students in each class are assigned or elected to different positions, like the library assistants, physical education assistants, health program assistants. I took an incident that actually happened in my class and made it into a play. It was an incident where all the positions were decided except the representatives for the student committee. I had the ten or so students who hadn’t been assigned or elected to any position stay after school and discuss among themselves who would be the student committee reps. And, as I had promised, our drama club was able to make it to the prefectural drama competition with that play.

Among the plays you have written, there are a number that share the format where a group of people gather in place meeting to discuss a problem, and this is a pattern that was already there in your maiden work, *Shitsucho*, isn’t it?

There is definitely a format I like and use frequently that you might call the “conference type,” in which the scenario develops around the process of discussion of an issue. I rewrote *Shitsucho* two years later so that the scenario became one of a school choosing its own new principal. I titled it *Shomei?* (The Calling) and a production of it was also performed by the Hirosaki Theater company. Among my other plays of this type are *Ore no Kabane wo Koeteike* (Leave my dead body and press onward) in which a radio station must decide which of its employees will be laid off in a restructuring, and you could also call *Oya no Kao ga Mitai* (I’d like to see the faces of such parents) that I wrote for the Gekidan Subaru company a “conference type” as well, because it involves a meeting of the parents of children that have been the perpetrators of a case of bullying.

When you work as a teacher you are often forced to think about the true meaning of democracy. In a school class, things are decided all the time by a show of hands, and if the vote is decided by a count of 20 to 21, then the 20 side becomes “wrong” simply because they lacked one more person. And when there is a disagreement among the children, they usually try to settle it with a vote. They seldom try to debate or talk things out. And doesn’t this contribute to the unique ways of thinking and action that the Japanese have? It was my idea that this can be condensed into “conference type” stage scenarios set in the school environment is what led me to think of the plays of this type.

After you became its advisor [and playwright], the accomplishments of the Aomori Chuo High School drama club have exceptional. Your club has twice one the national high school drama contest, with *Shugaku Ryoko* (School trip) in 2005 and *Kappa* in 2008. And *Seito Sokai* (Student general meeting) in 1999 won the Excellence Prize and *Shugaku Ryoko* was even invited to perform overseas in South Korea. *Shugaku Ryoko* also toured nationwide as an officially selected play for high school audiences in a production by the professional theater company Seinen Gekidan. Furthermore, the Aomori Chuo

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Gekidan Subaru The Third Stage

Oya no Kao ga Mitai (I'd like to see the faces of such parents)

(Premiere: Feb. 2008 at Theater Tops)

In a private Catholic girls middle school in the city, a student has committed suicide. A group of parents have been gathered in a school conference room one evening. They are the parents of the children named [for bullying] in the suicide letter of the deceased child. The parents are all from different family backgrounds, life environments and professions, but they all rant on with one-sided defenses of their children and try to place the blame on the school environment. But when a second and third suicide note are brought out along with eye-witness evidence [of the bullying], the true faces of the parents begin to be revealed.



Oya no Kao ga Mitai, first edition
Photo: Wataru Umehara

Aomori Chuo High School Drama Club *Seito Sokai* (Student General Meeting)

(Premiere: Dec. 1998)

The day before the General Meeting of the student body, the members of the student council organizing committee have gathered for a rehearsal. At the insistence of some of the male students they decide to have another discussion about whether to propose a movement to eliminate school uniforms. In the process of discussing whether uniforms should be eliminated or not and whether or not it is really right to decide it by majority vote, the debate heats up and gets off course in a direction that drive the organizing committee into a real crisis situation.

High School drama club was also the recipient To-o Award (organized by Aomori's To-o Nippo newspaper) that recognizes persons or groups who had contributed to the development of Aomori Prefecture.

None of these accomplishments are things that I expected or aimed for. At first it was all simply a means for me to continue theater and an outgrowth of my sense of responsibility as a teacher. But, once I started working with the drama club it became so interesting that I don't think I will ever be able to give it up. High school students make so much progress in a very short time.

Teachers have what can be the extremely highhanded job of teaching people things. Education that is truly worthy of the name is of course something that takes a lot of time, and often the results are hard to see. But, with regard to theater, if I tell the student that “This is what we should aim for,” the drama club members will work together very hard to achieve that goal, and in the process they will acquire the tools and the skills they need and continue to make progress. If the scriptwriting is behind schedule and it doesn't get finished until three days before the performance, they will still give a solid performance. This is because they are at the age in their lives when they have the best powers of memorization. For someone like me in the position of instructor, you are able to be there can witness them learning and progressing so fast that you can almost hear the gears turning in their head. Nothing is more exciting and rewarding than that.

Also, there were a good number of people around me who criticized high school drama as being a closed world. That may be true in some aspects, but it is absolutely not true to say that the plays coming out of high school drama don't have the power to move people. Although you have the limitations of the fact that the actors are all in the 16 to 18 age group, it only means that you need to work within that given framework, and in that respect there is no difference between high school theater and what we do at my Watanabe Genshiro Shoten company. *Shugaku Ryoko* as good proof of that fact, and I consider it a victory for high school theater.

What are the types of ideas or inspirations you have received from high school theater as a playwright?

Through my experience with *Shugaku Ryoko*, I learned that it is not really a defeat if all of what the playwright intends to say is not communicated to all the people in the audience. It made me come to think that a play is something that the viewer should be able to enjoy each at their own level.

Shugaku Ryoko (School trip) is a story about a raucous night when a group of high school girls from Aomori who are a school trip and get into a fight at the inn where they are staying in Okinawa and end up in a pillow fight. That is the scenario on a superficial level. And it is also fine with me if the audience simply laughs at that superficial slapstick level of the play. But the five girls who at the center of the story are actually representations of America, Iraq, Japan and Russia and metaphorically, the pillows they through can be seen as the [N. Korean] Taepodong-2 missiles that fly over Japan or the shower of metal that fell on Okinawa. And of course, it is good if there are people in the audience who understand that and appreciate the play at that level. I believe *Shugaku Ryoko* is the first play that I wrote making intentional and strategic use of the possibility of it being seen from those two levels of audience understanding.

In high school theater, it is a natural assumption that not only these people creating the production but also the audience watching it are high school students. They make all their judgments based on their only one or two years of theater

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Aomori Chuo High School Drama Club

kappa

(Premiere: Dec. 2007)

The setting is an ordinary classroom in an ordinary town high school. The only thing unusual is that one of the students has suddenly turned into a *kappa* (a green human-like river creature of Japanese folk tales). The students have vowed together to accept their transformed friend, but what comes to school is the *kappa*-Himeno wearing a school uniform. But faced with the smelly, slimy reality of Himeno, the students who had vowed to be accepting turn away one by one from the diminishing group of the understanding supporters. And with each incident of rejection, Himeno becomes more and more *kappa*-like.



kappa

(Aug. 2008, National high school drama contest at Gunma Prefecture's Kiryu City Performing Arts Center)

Photo: harasei photo studio/Toshiaki Hara

experience when deciding whether the play is interesting or not. So, I believe that a play should have something for to take home for people of all levels, from high school students and people who are knowledgeable about theater.

In 2006 you moved to another school, but since then you have continued to write plays for the Aomori Chuo High School drama club and continue to be involved with them in other ways I hear. It seems like your actions and accomplishments have brought changes to the high school theater world. Do you feel that in any way?

If I were to comment professionally as a teacher, at first our school was at the lower end of general high schools in terms of standard deviation scores but with the drama club's achievements I feel that we gave some more pride at least to the students in the liberal arts. In fact we were able to compete five times in the national high school drama contest, which only eleven schools in the country qualify for, and we were champions two of those times. I think it is a good thing that our students were able to say that their high school were national champions in theater when they went to college entrance or employment interviews. And it is not just something that the members of our drama club could enjoy, it has to be a point of pride for the entire school.

However, when I think about how it is at other schools and in the Aomori region, I am afraid that it is still the exception rather than the rule. Aomori Chuo High School may be doing it, but what about the rest? Still, I believe that more people should get the message that high school theater can be a viable platform for providing people for the local theater world, not only in Aomori but in all regions. In many regions, high school theater may only place where that can serve that role.

After graduating from high school, maybe half of them will leave for Tokyo or other cities, but I believe that after they become mature members of society, having experienced high school theater may be a great opportunity, a chance to have them continue to be good theater people and good theater audience and good at expressing themselves in other ways. They don't all need to become actors or staff, but even if they have an experience of encountering theater there and feeling the positive and interesting qualities of it, that is enough. After that the things that can be learned are limitless. I believe that high school theater is the best place to get the foundation that will lead to the possibility for lots of realizations later on. In my case I am working with high school students in Aomori, but this applies in any region and it also connects to an important issue for the theater world as a whole, nurturing and building an audience.

I would like to ask you about your activities not only as an actor but also as a playwright and director. Can you tell us what led to those activities.

Actually, before I began writing for Hirosaki Theater, I began writing radio dramas. There was warlord in the Warring States Period named Tsugaru Tamenobu, who was the lord of the Tsugaru Domain, and was about 30 years younger than Oda Nobunaga and of the same generation as Uesugi Kagekatsu and others. There had been a serial manga in the local newspaper Mutu Shinpou about his career until the time when he and his child built the Tsugaru Castle. A request came to Hirosaki Theater from the local radio station saying that they wanted to make a radio drama based on it. It was a request directed at the company's leader and playwright, Koji Hasegawa, but he was too busy to do it, so it was passed on to me. The only experience I had with writing was some things I wrote for an art textbook, but since I always tend to go with the flow, I thought, "Hey, I can do this." (Laughs)

The program's title was "Manji no Shiro Monogatari (Tale of the Castle of the

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Subaru The Third Stage

Neko no Koi, Subaru wa Ten ni

Noboritsume

(Premiere, July-Aug. 2006, Sanbyakunin Gekijo)

Many years have passed since her father left for work one day and disappeared and Sakura, who has kept up the traditions of the grand old family's home all by herself, has now reached the age of 43. The only one living the big house with her is the old cat Masa-chan, some 15 years of age. Due to the intervention of relatives who are concerned about Sakura living alone and more than happy to get involved, a groom has been found for an arranged marriage and the engagement gifts have been exchanged. But it turns out that the prospective groom, Masao Akata is from a family where everyone seems to be hiding a problem. Amidst the intricate tangle of thoughts and feelings of the people around her, an "unexpected person" suddenly appears who is apparently more solicitous than anyone of Sakura's welfare.

Buddhist Cross) and it was scheduled to run in ten-minute sequels five days a week from Monday to Friday. The actual broadcast time was about eight minutes, so it required a script of about five 400-word pages. That wasn't an easy amount for an amateur to write, but as I did the research and made trips to the actual castle ruins and other historical sites, I got more and more interested in the story. Now researching old literature and records has become one of my hobbies. At first they were saying that it would be nice if the program continued for three months or so, but it has continued for 15 years now and more than 3,000 sequels. We were fortunate that some business company in Hirosaki became the sponsor for the program, and it has the highest listener rating for any of the station's original programs. The station has told me to continue it forever (laughs).

That program led to jobs writing other radio dramas and although no one makes a big deal about it, I have secretly won four big radio awards in the Geijutsusai Award, the Galaxy Grand Prix, the Minkan Hoso Renmei Award and the Hoso Kikin Award (laughs). Writing for radio really gave me hard-earned experience as a writer.

The first work I wrote for Hirosaki Theater was in 2000. It was the play *Shomei* I mentioned earlier, which was a rewritten version of a play I wrote for our high school theater. The Theater had a policy of having two writers, but with the conditions of the Agency of Cultural Affairs grant that I mentioned earlier requiring that we do four productions a year, they needed more writing and I happened to be the closest one at hand.

So you write for high school theater and write plays and direct for the theater company and also write for radio. In addition, you are now writing plays for outside companies as well. How do you switch gears to do the different types of writing?

There is no switching gears involved at all, for the way of thinking or the writing method. For the high school drama club and for my Watanabe Genshiro Shoten company that I started in 2005 after leaving the Hirosaki Theater, and also in the radio jobs, there are first of all actors or staff that I want to create something with and my creative process begins by thinking what I can create that would make them happy. The process is the same for all of these.

So, you are saying that the inspiration when you write comes more from the presence of the actors or staff than the play's subject matter?

Yes. I get an idea like, "it would be interesting to have actress so-and-so play a widow." And then that connects to an interesting subject. That's the usual order of occurrence. There are subjects that I have interest in at the time, like the death penalty or bullying among children, but the scenarios don't come directly from the subject but from thinking about what would bring out an interesting side of the actor I'll be working with, and the story then evolves from churning ideas over and over in my head. And it is the same when I write for other companies. When Gekidan Subaru asked me to write a play for them I asked them to first give me some time to get to know the actors. Over the course of a year I went to all the company's performances and then wrote the play *Neko no Koi, Subaru wa Ten ni Noboritsume* (2006).

Another thing I make a point of doing is to make sure that what I write is not something that could not have been written any place besides Aomori. Take a subject like the "Death Sentence" and I believe the way people will think about it is different in Aomori and Tokyo. There is no reason to write something in Aomori that could have been written in Tokyo. There is a distance of about 700 kilometers between Tokyo and Aomori. This distance means a difference in climate that surely creates clear differences in its people and environment, and in this sense it can

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provide potent “weapons” for creating works if used to advantage.

However, the director for the works I wrote for Subaru, director Ryo Kuroiwa of Seinen-za, advised me that there are times when I shouldn't put unnecessary importance on that approach. When he directed *Neko no Koi* and again when he directed *Oya no Kao ga Mitai*, he gave me advice like, “If you are too interested in the character of the actor, the development of the story will be sacrificed to some degree.” Or, “When there are certain aspects of human relationships you want to portray, there will be times when it will be more effective if the setting is in Tokyo rather than Aomori.” So I am now more flexible regarding that rule I have applied in my work.

The story in your play *Senaka kara 40 pun* (40 minutes from the Back) has been performed repeatedly after that seems to be a bit different in impression from the other plays we have talked about up to this point. It is a story set in a hotel room at night involving a man who seems to have a secret and a female masseuse, and the scenario unfolds during the course of the massage. The story starts with the identity of the characters and the things they are struggling with unrevealed and the development of the plot is not one-directional but one that jumps between concurrent storylines.

The fact that I wrote this play with the Kenji Fukushi and the actress Miyuki Moriuchi in mind is the same as the writing process for my other plays, but with this play *Senaka kara* I tried something different by taking the act of massage and using it as the medium for repetitions of multi-layered storylines.

The point of departure with this play was my interest in the concept of soothing people or relieving their pains and burdens. When you have stiff shoulders, you can massage them yourself, but then your hand gets tired, doesn't it? I call it the “principle of stiffness retention.” (Laughs) And if that is the case, a masseuse is someone who soothes other people's fatigue or stiffness or grief by absorbing it into their own body. If so, where does the fatigue or grief of the people who have been massaged actually go? As that image developed in my mind, I got the idea of depicting the changes that take place in the person who is being soothed and the person doing the soothing during the course of a massage.

However, that alone would not be enough to make a play, so I added the aspect of the love liaison between two people intending to commit suicide together. This act of committing suicide together [shinju in Japanese] and in the [Kabuki] plays like *Shinju Ten no Amishima* (Double Suicide) and *Sonezaki Shinju* (Love Suicides at Sonezaki), there is always a scene of a love liaison before the suicides, isn't there? Although I have no idea how they get their statistics, when you read books on the subject they say that some 80% of couples involved in love suicides have sex before they commit suicide. So, in *Senaka kara 40 pun* I thought of using the massage as a substitute for that act of sex. In fact, it seems that people who work in jobs that involve soothing people's pains are actually the ones who are seeking to be soothed the most. This play is one where this “transmission or connection of soothing is played out along two lines, the line of the progression of the massage and the line of conversation between the guest and the masseuse. Still, nobody understood that I was writing this play as a tribute to “love suicide plays” and [the great 17th century playwright and master of love suicide plays] Chikamatsu Monzaemon. Actually the first time it was pointed out was at a drama reading in New York, where someone in the audience said, “This is [like] Chikamatsu, isn't it?” So, I'm thinking that this play might be a success if it were performed in Europe under a title like “The Chikamatsu.” (Laughs)

Artist Interview

The theater world of Seigo Hatasawa,
with its unique focus on “communities”
and “schools”

「地域」と「学校」——
ふたつの視点から演劇界を見つめる畑澤聖悟

Watanabe Genshiro Shoten

*Senaka kara 40 pun (40 minutes from the
Back)*

(Oct 2006 at Komaba Agora Theater)

Photo: Nagare Tanaka



*Tori no Gekijo (BIRD Theatre Company
TOTTORI)

Tori no Gekijo is an NPO involved in theatrical activities and theater management with a theater facility renovated from a former elementary and nursery school facility in Shikano-cho, Tottori City, Tottori Prefecture. Director Makoto Nakashima is the theater's leader. The theater is involved in a year-round program of activities in the performing arts based on the four pillars of “Programs to Create,” “Programs to Invite,” “Programs to Participate” and “Program to Experiment.”
<http://www.birdtheatre.org/>

Now I would like to ask you about your activities with Watanabe Genshiro Shoten. The company is based in Aomori city and from 2008 you are managing a facility called Atelier Green Park that includes your rehearsal studio and theater space. For a small theater company like yours to have your own performance space is something that is unthinkable in the Tokyo area.

I believe that one of the few advantages there are to being a regional theater group is the relative ease of getting a place to do your creative work. Atelier Green Park is the rented second floor of a building that used to be a restaurant, and it is a completely hand-made studio space that we created from scratch, beginning by having all the company members get together and punch the holes in the perforated sound-proofing board. In addition to being the space for our performances, I want to make it a “site” where people can experience all aspects of theater. Just like I felt no need to go to Tokyo because of the existence of Hirosaki Theater, I want to make Green Park a site where people know they can do theater without feeling the need to go to Tokyo.

For some people it may be just a place where they come to find play scripts or back numbers of theater magazines, and for others it is a place where they can participate in performances or workshops. The reason I chose a location in seaside area a bit removed from the station is so that there would be enough parking space for bicycles for events that gathered large numbers of middle or high school students.

Since last year we have begun workshops at Green Park for middle school students. This is because I know there is here is a limit to what can be done in high school theater alone and I wanted to provide the opportunity for children to experience theater and an even earlier age. And it is also because of the need I feel to engage in outreach efforts to increase people's knowledge of theater. As the first workshop under this new program last year I use *Shugaku Ryoko* and titled the workshop “Peace Education for the Mind and Body - Doing *Shugaku Ryoko* in Seven Days”. It began by having them learn how to read a play, and I also had them do research on things like the Taepodong-2 missile and the Middle East Conflict that appear in the script. By having the students do their research together about the background of the play setting, they become able to give a presentation and discuss the terms that appear in the script while interjecting their own background knowledge. At the end of the workshop we also did a performance, and because the students parents also come to see it, I think this is a fantastic thing.

We will also do a workshop using *Shugaku Ryoko* in Sapporo this summer. And in the latter half of August we will have our second workshop at Green Park, which is titled “Thinking about Discrimination with the Mind and Body - Doing *Kappa* in Seven Days.” We are now negotiating to rent the first floor of the Green Park building as well, and eventually I want us to be making full use of both floors as studio and performance spaces.

So, you are working not only as a theater company but also as a group involved in education using theater and also human development.

That's correct. I was influenced greatly by meeting Makoto Nakashima, who leads the Tori no Gekijo theater in Tottori Prefecture (*). I just returned from a visit to Tottori in February and Nakashima told me that he is working on establishing a network of regional theater companies that doesn't have Tokyo as its hub and enables regional companies to deal directly with each other. The aim is not to create a bond between the weak but to build a network of groups aiming toward activities with shared conviction.

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Tori no Gekijo has advanced experience in dealing with public agencies and the processes for getting grants and they are one rank above us in terms of budget size as well. In the case of Watanabe Genshiro Shoten, where I, its leader, am a civil servant (teacher) and don't have an address in Aomori city myself even though the company is based in Aomori city, there are a number of reasons like these that are obstacle to our getting grants. But, in a case like this where there are “no precedents” [for support], I believe that those barriers can be broken down eventually by continuing to make appeals for our value as a theater company and the public nature of what we do. I want to continue to expand our range of activities but strengthening ourselves as a group in that way, one step at a time. There are still lots of things I want to do, like holding study groups for high school students to learn to read and interpret plays, and holding workshops exclusively for people over 60.

But that doesn't mean I am thinking about quitting my job as a teacher at this point. But I believe it is right to have a job in the community to make ones living by and do theater at the same time, and I also believe that there are plays I can write exactly because of the time I spend working as a teacher and the fact that I am involved in high school theater. It is true that the world of the teacher and school are closed, narrow worlds, but the things I see there and the things I feel as a teacher are my point of departure and the original source of inspiration for many of my ideas. So, for as long as possible, I want to continue to have my feet in the four different fields I'm involved in now.