



Profile

Hideto Iwai

Born 1974 in Tokyo. Lived as a stay-at-home from the age of 15 until about 20. Iwai graduated from Toho Gakuen College of Drama and Music in 2001 and in 2002 he participated as a stand-in in the Takenaka Naoto no Kai production of *Gekko no Tsutsushimi* (written and directed by Ryo Iwamatsu), which became his introduction to vernacular style theater. In 2003 he founded the theater company hi-bye and presented as its inaugural production the play *Hikky Cancun Tornado* about a stay-at-home youth who longs to be a pro wrestler. Since then he has written and directed all the hi-bye productions and acted in them as well. Many of his works are gritty but laughable comedies based on Iwai's own personal experiences. His thoroughly objective treating of the theme of human relationship of protagonists overly self-conscious and concerned about the distances between the self and the other invariably create humor and poignancy. In recent years Iwai has worked increasingly outside his own company as a director actor and scenario writer. Representative works include *Onegai Hokago* (2007), *Te* (The Hand) (2008) and *Nagerareyasui Ishi* (2011) among others. *Hikky Cancun Tornado* is also scheduled to be performed at the South Korean performing arts market PAMS in Oct. 2011.

<http://hi-bye.net/>

Artist Interview

アーティスト・インタビュー

Sep. 6, 2011



Stay-at-home reclusiveness is the central theme, the mixed up plots and humor in Hideto Iwai's plays

「ひきこもり」が原点
岩井秀人のジタバタ演劇

With a motto of “From *hai hai* (infant crawling) to *bai bai* (goodbye)” (birth to death), the company “hi-bye” has won a popular following among a diverse audience with the farcical confusion and poignancy of the dramas it draws from amidst the joys and sadness of the everyday life of the overly self-conscious. The group's leader, playwright, director and actor Hideto Iwai (born 1974), experienced years of social withdrawal as a stay-at-home from the ages of 16 to 20, and connecting that experience to theater eventually made it possible for him to overcome his fear of interacting with others. In recent years his activities are expanding to productions outside his own company, while his subject matter also expands from his personal experiences to his family and neighbors of different generations from his own. In this interview Iwai talks about his experiences from childhood into youth, his encounter with theater and his creative activities in theater today.

(Interviewer: Rieko Suzuki)

Your company hi-bye's inaugural production *Hikky Cancun Tornado* was also your maiden work as a playwright and is a work with numerous autobiographical elements. Could we ask you to begin by telling us something about your experience as a stay-at-home recluse that underlies this work?

Hikky Cancun Tornado is a story about a stay-at-home who is in love with the world of pro wrestling and depicts his interaction with his mother and a “delivery counselor” hired to encourage his return to self-reliance as he tries to get out into the world again. I was a stay-at-home from the age of 16 to about the age of 20. During that time I watched a lot of pro wrestling and other fight and martial arts programs on satellite TV. So, it is essentially a straight autobiographical story (laughs).

The reason I became a stay-at-home was not the usual case of being bullied but an extreme case of xenophobia, a fear of people. When I was a child I grew up watching my father's one-sided violence, so I thought that was normal, you might say. As a result, I didn't think of other people as having a life and consciousness of their own. It was as if the world was a movie that I was starring in, and when things didn't go as I liked, I'd go into a panic and start punching people.

Then, one day when I got into a panic and started punching someone as usual, that person punched me back. That woke me up for the first time to the realization that other people besides me might have thoughts and feeling just like me. So, I began

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hi-bye
Hikky Cancun Tornado



(Oct. 2008 at Performance Gallery
"Littlemore Chika") Photo: Tsukasa Aoki



(May. 2010 at Atelier Helicopter)
Photo: Wakana Hikino

*Yutaka Ozaki [1965 – 92]

A Japanese singer-songwriter who gained charismatic popularity among young people in the late 80s. He died at the young age of 26 in 1992.

thinking that if that were true, how should I interact with other people, how should I act, how much do I need to take other people's thoughts into consideration? And, the more I thought about it the more confused I became about the distance between people. That was happening when I was about 13 or 14, I believe.

So that made you start to stay at home more and more?

That and also the musician Yutaka Ozaki (*). From my older brother's influence I started listening to the songs of Ozaki, and in his songs he sang that "love is everything." That made me realize that I had lived to that point without ever giving anyone that kind of love. So, I thought that from that point on I should pay back the love I had received. Also, Yutaka Ozaki sang that "you have to learn to live by yourself." That made me decide that I should first learn to live by yourself and then I could start thinking about how to interact with people. I had started high school, but then, like Ozaki, I quit and went off to live a dorm life in the YMCA hotel in Shizuoka while making a living with a part-time job washing dishes. But, I kept getting into fights with the Chinese men in the dorm, so I gave up and I came back to Tokyo. In short, my attempt to go out and live by myself in the world was a complete failure. That became a major trauma for me.

What eventually got you out into the world again and involved in theater?

My mother was a psychological counselor, and rather than bugging me to get out into the world, apparently she thought about how to help me find anything that would connect me to the outside world. So she subscribed us to a satellite TV station that I mentioned earlier. I was interested too, so I started watching lots of movies and a fight channel called Rings and Italian Serie A league football for hours and hours. As I watched I gradually got the desire to do those things myself. So, I called some of my middle school friends to get together and play football, and I hung a sand bag that I bought by mail order from a tree and practiced kicking it. But, I still wasn't recovered to the point where I could do things in the daytime, so this was all at night (laughs). And in the same way, I began to get the desire to be involved in movies. But I still didn't have any distinctions at that time between the people who made the movies and the people who starred in them, between the actors and the director.

Why did your interest in film turn to interest in theater?

I had it in my head that in order to get into movies you had to go to the Arts School of Nihon University, and I started studying for the entrance exam. At the same time I started attending a course called "Try Being an Actor" at an evening culture school that my mother signed me up for. There I ended up having to take part in a musical with a group of middle-aged women in their 40s and 50s. That was my first experience in theater. It was Stephen Foster autobiographical work and I was given the lead role. They made me up with heavy nose shadow and blue on my eyelids and put me on stage. The blue was supposed to make your eyes look blue from a distance (laughs).

Didn't you feel reluctance to performing in that type of style?

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The lines of the script were in a very literary style and I had to stand looking straight out at the audience to deliver the lines, so indeed it was rather embarrassing at first. But everyone was kind and supportive and it made me happy when they complimented me on my performance. I did think that there must be better ways to express things, but it did inspire me. Eventually I failed to get into Nihon University, but one of my instructors told me that I was interested in acting I should go to the school that people called the best for theater, Toho Gakuen College of Drama and Music.

It seems that the transition from a stay-at-home to a thespian must be quite a big one. What was it like for you?

I'm often told that it sounds like choosing the complete opposite, but it wasn't like that for me. You could say that when you are so excessively self-conscious you worry about people's opinions to a ridiculous degree as well. But, when I started doing theater I found that for the first time I was able [through fiction] to go out and learn about what people were thinking. It had a different feeling from what until then [in my xenophobia] had been the dreaded process of receiving the frightening other [individual].

Also, an important thing was the fact that, within the context of theater, I could say, "Let me try that," to things that I would not do otherwise in daily life because they might seem boring, or because people might tell me I shouldn't do them. In actual life I would give up on things that people told me I couldn't do, but I believe that when I am doing theater I am able to try new things because I am able to set aside the parts where I feel contradictions or lies.

What did you learn during your university years?

Well, I'll tell you, it was a time when I learned what shouldn't be done in theater today. I am not really interested in seeing actors debating about their interpretations of a play, and the kind of actors that think they can become the character are the ones who usually give the worst performances. And then there is the way they all tried to speak in great voices and stand with impressive postures. It made me think, "What are you trying to communicate like that?"

In other words, you didn't find anything there that struck you as relevant for contemporary theater expression?

That's right. However, it did give me some material that was useful for me later when I began writing plays. One of our professors was a type who used to intimidate the actors. He had a kind of brainwashing technique where he would pick on a student who was acting part of a script in class and shout, "What you are doing is a lie!" And in fact, the same student that he was yelling at the day before would be the one sitting closest to that professor the next day in class. But I was a bit older than the other students and I would be thinking that in fact it was that professor who was telling the lies, and how interesting it would be if this rehearsal stage were surrounded audience to watch what he was doing to the students.

So, when I began writing plays I created a character modeled on him. And it turned out to be very popular. I was happy because I had been successful at showing his sins and also getting people to laugh at him. But, after using that same character

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type a few times it began to look like my father, and it also made me realize that I had some of the same characteristics myself. At times it takes the form of expressing how you have been hurt in order to inspire feelings of remorse and sympathy, and at other times it takes the form of pretending to comfort someone you have hurt and then indulging alone in the catharsis that leads to. The father image and the relations with the father that appear in my plays are, I believe, a fundamental root of my work.

As someone who originally wanted to be an actor, what made you begin writing plays?

I wanted make sure I could continue to participate in theater and be on stage, so after graduating from university I started looking for interesting scripts that I felt I could do. But, most of the plays I found were quite complex and difficult. In my case, if there are more than three characters in a play it is hard for me to keep track of who is speaking at any one time (laughs). Just when I was beginning to think that it would be difficult for me to continue, I was invited to participate as a stand-in for the rehearsals of Ryo Iwamatsu's *Gekko no Tsutsushimi*, and that was my first experience with "colloquial (vernacular) theater."

In Iwamatsu's script there are three characters and while characters A and B are talking the stage focus is on character C. To begin with, that really surprised me, and it made me feel that this form is indeed a true rediscovery of value in the everyday. And, it also made me feel that this was a style that I could imitate (laughs). That is what led me to write *Hikky Cancun Tornado*. Just after that I also saw Oriza Hirata's *Tokyo Notes*, which is also a play using colloquial (vernacular) language, and I got an even stronger feeling that I had found what I was looking for.

Didn't these encounters make you want to join one of the companies of either Iwamatsu or Hirata?

The way Iwamatsu-san directs is to rehearse the same scene over and over again in an attempt to erase the actor's intentions concerning their lines and thus get closer to a more fundamental essence. However, as an actor myself, I guess I want to put a little more faith in the actors. I thought it would also be possible as an actor to deliver lines as a natural extension of everyday conversation without unnatural or excessive intent [and achieve it without resorting to Iwamatsu's type of directing technique].

Another reason I didn't think of joining their companies was because I had a basic distrust of companies at the time. They seemed a bit too religious in character. Since Toho Gakuen College is an actor's school, the graduates don't have much knowledge about production work. Whenever they mount a performance, each of the actors is given a certain number of tickets they have to sell, so they get their friends from other theater companies to come to their performance and then pay them back by going to their performances in turn. All of the Toho graduates were in situations at companies where they were just repeating that close cycle. Seeing that made me think that there was something wrong with the company system. But, I also didn't know of any alternative, so I start hi-bye alone with myself as the only member and gathering a different set of actors for each production.

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Nonetheless, you eventually came to call hi-bye a theater company, and personally you also joined the directing department of Hirata's Seinendan company in 2007.

The year after I started hi-bye, one of the members working with me suggested that we call ourselves a company and I decided to accept that. For me as well, after I began writing and directing for other productions besides hi-bye's, I came to the conclusion that it would be nice having a company of my own with actors that I liked and the freedom to experiment with different things.

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The year after I started hi-bye, one of the members working with me suggested that we call ourselves a company and I decided to accept that. For me as well, after I began writing and directing for other productions besides hi-bye's, I came to the conclusion that it would be nice having a company of my own with actors that I liked and the freedom to experiment with different things.

I was interested in the fact that in his book *Gendai Kogo Engeki no Tame ni*, Hirata-san says, "It doesn't matter what actors are thinking when they speak." I don't necessarily think that is the best way of thinking but I became interested in the sense that he was approaching things logically rather than trying to do something by calculation alone. However, the actual reason I entered Seinendan wasn't because of Hirata's drama theory but because I was interested in learning about the workshop-like "communication teaching" he does on things like stage art and production. Also, the influence of former Seinendan members Shu Matsui (present leader of Sample) and Junnosuke Tada (current leader of Tokyo Deathlock) was very important. When you are just writing plays or novels, it is a solitary task, so you don't know what others are doing. It was a big thing for me to join a group where there are other creators working next to you.

During your time at Seinendan you planned and executed a series called "Classics in Vernacular" that took classics of Eastern and Western theater and created new adaptations in the contemporary vernacular (colloquial-language) theater style.

One of the great things I found after joining Seinendan was that they had a program that select proposals for projects by young members and provide support for their actualization. That provided me with a lot more opportunities to talk about and write about concepts I had. That was a very positive thing for me. When you work to put into actual words things you had previously only felt vaguely, it helps you move on to the next level, or it makes you feel that you need to go to the next level.

"Classics in Vernacular" was a project I had wanted to do for a long time. For example, why does it sound interesting when you hear a synopsis of *Hamlet* from someone but when you start reading the actual play it seems annoyingly wordy? Shakespeare goes to great lengths to express the same universal feeling of sadness, doesn't he? In Shakespeare's day, of course, the theater environment was different and apparently a play was something that people watched while chatting with the person next to them, and they say that is why Shakespeare had to go to such lengths of eloquence. But, if that is true, it seems that it could be done differently now to fit today's environ-

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hi-bye

Te



(Oct. 2009 at Tokyo Metropolitan Art Space)

Photo: Wakana Hikino

ment, couldn't it? If you boiled down the contents well to a good essence, couldn't it be more interesting? Instead of doing that, however, it seems to me that Japanese theater until now has wasted so much effort trying to imitate the appearance of foreigners.

With your works like *Convini* (Convenience Store) that dramatizes an experience you had of a quarrel in a convenience store, and *Te* (The Hand) that portrays the family drama surrounding the death of your grandmother, more of your works seem to be rooted in personal experiences than do the works of other playwrights who create plays based in everyday conversation. Would you tell us about what it is you seek in drama and how references to yourself relate to it?

These are two things that are naturally connected within me. The production *Nanatsu no Oinori* (Seven Prayers) that we performed recently is an omnibus work consisting of seven plays written and directed one each by our hi-bye company members, and the one I wrote, *Kaneko no Tanjobi* (Kaneko's Birthday) is simply about a "hidden camera" type trick that one of the company members, Kaneko, played on me on my birthday. I often wonder how private experiences like this can be shared with others, but it is often more successful than you would expect. In the end, people will listen to any kind of story if it is interesting, and they won't listen if it is boring. I think it is fine as long as you consider the other person's relationship and explain your intent properly. And, I frequently ask people what they think of a story. With a play in the theater you can't actually ask the audience, but I am doing theater in that spirit.

In fact, before writing the *Kaneko* story or the family story of *Te*, I did talk with a variety of people about the stories. In the process, what may begin as a purely tragic story starts to take on other interesting aspects. And when you include those in the final writing, it often communicates well. For example, I feel that Japan's *rakugo* form of narrative comedy is close to this in a way. I believe that the root of *rakugo* is simply a comedian relating stories about something that happened to an acquaintance or, in an extreme, things someone said at a bar.

Although both your subject matter and the verbal delivery are based in actual everyday life, your staging methods seem to accentuate the imaginary. With things like the so-called "hi-bye door" which consists on nothing but a metal stand with a doorknob on it, your sets are very simple, and you often have men playing female roles.

Both my staging and stage art were strongly influenced by the Berliner Ensemble production of *Richard III* (directed by Claus Peymann) that came to Japan in 2002. It was a joint production employing the Stanislavski System that teaches actors to become one with their role and the Brecht-oriented Berliner Ensemble that says playing a role is futile, so you had a combination of actors who were trying to be completely into their role and others who just said their lines without any concern for what the emotions of the character might be. In it all, the most shocking thing for me was when someone shouts "A ship has come!" and then a ship made of paper is brought out (laughs). That really caught me off guard. That instantly erased all the discomfort I had long felt about the need to believe that what you were showing the audience was real. If they had tried to create a magnificent reproduction of a ship for the set, it would still end up as nothing more than an attempt to show off the stage artist's ability

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to create something impressive. From the standpoint of stimulating the audience's imagination, the paper boat is much more effective, and I think it would also be better received from the standpoint of contemporary criticism. We can't begin to know what things were actually like in theater in the age of the monarchies, but I thought it was very mature and sophisticated at times like when Richard is talking about finally having won the crown and he is holding that flimsy paper crown in his hands.

An actor can never completely become his character. Theater is different from reality. I feel that if you at least begin a play with that intention you will allow the audience to come close to the story and to its characters when they like and in the manner they like. That is why I come out on the stage during the warm-up dressed in a middle-aged woman's clothes so I can show the audience as early on as possible that I am going to be playing the mother in the play but I am not the mother, that the story is a lie [fiction] from the beginning.

I seems to me that the work in which the three elements of the documentary type subject matter, a truly theatrical structure and the staging came together most clearly was your play *Te* (The Hand) that you premiered in 2008. In this play the same story is told from two different characters' perspectives, and with a reversal in the temporal order of events.

Te is a story about a hot-blooded older sister who takes worries about the family's grandmother falling into a state of dementia as an opportunity to call the broken family back together for a family conference. Her aim is to try to rebuild family bonds but the meeting ends up in a terrible state of affairs. Since it was so direct a story about my actual family, I was worried that it might not have any relevance for other people. So I ended up using some special measures in the way the information is presented and the order of events in the storyline.

At first I was planning to make villains of my older brother who had become very cold toward our grandmother and my father who destroys the hard-won family reunion. But when I interviewed my mother about the events involved, I found that she had a completely differently from the way I did. Especially concerning my older brother, she said it was hard for him to accept my grandmother's decline into dementia because he had known her in her most vital and energetic period. Since that view didn't fit into the morality play of right and wrong that I had envisioned, I realized that the only way to resolve the problem was to write from both my and my mother's perspectives.

That was the first time that I had reworked the structure of a play I was writing and, to be honest, the result was better received than I thought it would be. But I must admit I had mixed feelings when people came to me afterwards saying, "Your brother really was a good person, wasn't he?" And I thought, "That's just because that episode comes out later in the play!" (Laughs) I had seen the plays of Yukio Shiba and Tomohiro Maekawa and saw how they could create interest simply through the order in which they present the information in a story. I thought it was amazing how they could gain so much just through the composition of the storyline, and it showed me how important the use of the time element is.

Near the end of the play there is a scene where the family comes together to make

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a pyramid while singing some vaguely remembered song in chorus. It is a touching scene in which the pyramid they are trying to create is symbolic of the attempt of this broken family with its twisted members trying nonetheless to come together again. In *Hikky Cancun Tornado* as well, the pro wrestling scenes that appear repeatedly throughout the play reflect the themes of struggle to get out into the world and to interact with others. The climaxes of your plays seem to consistently have physical expression as a unifying element, don't they?

I have never been specifically conscious of using "physical" elements. However, I learned from Iwamatsu-san that it is a failure if it depends on words alone. That is why I don't have much interest in the literary aspects of plays. Said in extreme terms, I have the sense that a play can become more interesting if you just put out there a straight and simple synopsis that, for example, "This is a story about a stay-at-home trying to get out into the world but can't."

Eventually, what I want to show is a situation, I guess. For example, in *Onegai Hoko-ago* which is a story about a college student inflicted with a rare disease that causes him to age three years in each year, there is a scene where he is singing a rock song in front of the mirror with all his heart. All by himself, he is going through all the actions like a rock star, just like I did when I was absorbed in Yutaka Ozaki and his music. That is the kind of scene I want to act out myself, and I want to have other actors perform, too. It may be something you could laugh at, but I really want to show that kind of lovable, poignant situation.

In addition to creating and presenting new works, hi-bye is also actively re-staging or doing revivals of your existing works. In particular you have done regional tours of your works *Hikky Cancun Tornado* and *Te* and they have become representative works of the company's repertoire in the process.

The more I restage or do repeat performances of a work, the less I feel that I am recreating my own experiences and the more I feel that the work becomes something belonging to the actors and the audience. I don't feel that I am suited, either technically or psychologically, to the process of writing new works one after another, and I think it is better for me to be content with repeating performances of my plays that people say they like. From the second performance onward there are always things that can be added on to the basic contents to communicate more, and I can think of ways for the actors and us to get more out of it.

At the same time you have been expanding your solo activities outside your company with productions like the renewal of *Te* (as *Sono Zoku no Na wa Kazoku*), you also expanded your company members to seven in 2009 and did a production titled *Nanatsu no Oinori* (Seven Prayers) as an omnibus work consisting of one play each by the seven members. What is your thinking now about hi-bye as a company?

When actors become members of a company it can gradually make them lazy until they completely forget their original motivation for working in theater. Even though the potential for what each actor can do in a work is infinite, they can reach a point where they are simply waiting to be told what to do by the director.

It was actually this problem that caused me to increase the number of members and

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also to plan the production *Nanatsu no Oinori*. When I confess to Oriza Hirata-san and Hironori Naito that I was thinking of quitting it all if things went on like they were. But they said quitting is easy, but before doing that why not try increasing the number of members. I realized that indeed when we were just four and two were getting lazy, it really bothered me, but I found that when it was just two out of seven, I was able to accept it with more tolerance (laughs).

Also, with regard to *Nanatsu no Oinori* I had the feeling that giving them the experience of doing their own writing and directing would be helpful when they were invited by other directors to work outside the company. Because it can only be good to experience the tension and excitement of knowing that whether the work was interesting or not it would all come back to you. There is nothing lost in experiencing that feeling of responsibility and it should change a person's way of looking at a script.

Besides being responsible for their own work, what else do you feel is necessary for the actors of hi-bye?

What would it be? Of course, a big thing is having people that I can share things I find interesting with, but on the whole, what we have is a group of people whose facial expressions are interesting when they talk, and who aren't very skillful talkers and aren't good at striking good-looking postures on the stage.

You could say that I value essence, and concerning things like personality or the enunciation of word endings, I tell the actors to go back to the way they usually talk. In my workshops and such I don't tell them how I want them to present their lines, instead I often tell them that all of them have experienced at least 20 years of life, so I want them to use their own experiences. Because it isn't my intent to stage the "words" in the script. The actors should be able to create something unique on stage because of the experiences they have lived and carry inside them, and that should be easier for them and also more beneficial for them.

From what you have said, it seems to me that the foundation of your creative process is repeatedly telling about your personal experiences until they become stories with a universal essence. What kinds of subjects and methods are you thinking about for the future?

I believe that no matter what the original subject matter is, the success as a story depends on how it is told. For the "Factory Tour Group" event that we did at Atelier Helicopter I used the hi-bye actor Takenori Kaneko as the subject and wrote a short work called "Half the Life of Kaneko." It was 80% true stories from his life and the rest was a complete lie (fiction) about how he tried to commit suicide and I saved him and he went on to become a hi-bye actor. Apparently some of the audience took it as the truth and came up afterwards to say how sorry they were to hear what sad experiences we had been through. Until then I had always been interested in writing about myself and the things I knew, but with this Kaneko work I discovered that people could enjoy my work the same way even when it slid into the realm of fiction. That doesn't mean that fiction is suddenly going to start making up larger portions of my writing, however.

I have felt that someday I would like to write about subjects from after my stay-at-

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home period, like my experiences in cram school or at the college, but my feeling now is that there is not too much more that I can write about myself. For my next work I plan to write seriously about someone I have been interviewing. I can tell you specifically that it is about a woman who keeps getting involved in extramarital affairs. I really like interviewing people and I want to continue asking people about how they have lived and sharing in their fears and interests. By doing that, I feel that I can continue to write about a variety of subjects, and that is something I would definitely like to do.