Abe Kobo

Abe Kōbō (1924-93) was a pivotal *shingeki* playwright and director as Japanese contemporary theatre matured after the Second World War. Known also as a novelist, Abe addressed themes of Japan’s struggle to redefine itself after the social and physical devastations of the Second World War. He did so without following a specific socialist agenda, and before the rise of 1960s counterculture political activism characterized by *angura* theatre. His works of fiction and drama have surreal characteristics, and his drama verges on Absurdism.

Abe began writing fiction in the early 1950s, and most of his literary output is novels. However, he established his theatrical credentials by winning the Kishida Drama Prize in 1958 for *Yūrei wa koko ni iru* (The Ghost is Here). His reputation as a dramatist had begun as early as 1955 with *Dorei gari* (Slave Hunting). His 1962 novel *Suna no onna* (Woman of the Dunes) brought him widespread fame, but he continued writing plays until 1979. Abe’s 1967 play *Tomodachi* (Friends), with its disturbing portrayal of Japan’s suffocating social pressures may be his best known play.

Abe often set his works in confined spaces that embodied his theme of oppressive Japanese social constraints. *Friends* depicts society coming uninvited into peoples’ lives. As a young man moves into a new apartment, a completely unrelated family offers to help him. The young man declines, to no effect. By the end of the play the entire family, grandparents, parents and children, have also all moved in to the tiny apartment, and the young man’s marriage is being planned.

The past is also a theme that, literally, haunts the characters of Abe’s plays. In *The Ghost is Here*, a former con-man who can see ghosts lives under the confined span of a bridge. Others have lost touch with the dead, especially soldiers killed in the Second World War. The con-man helps them reconnect. Sins of the past haunt an apartment in *You Too are Guilty*. Two criminals drop a corpse off in a young man’s apartment. He arrives home looking forward to an evening with his girlfriend, but the corpse resists his efforts to dispose of or hide it. Although the young man has no connection to the corpse’s death or its arrival in his apartment, the corpse insists that the man take responsibility. He cannot avoid implication of guilt from neighbors, the girlfriend, and the original criminals. Confined to a room in a mental hospital, the main character in Abe’s *Midori-iro no stokkingu* (The Green Stockings, 1974) struggles with his suicidal tendencies and obsession with green pantyhose.

Abe felt there was still a need in the early 1970s for well-trained actors in Japan. He and a group of experienced actors established the Abe Studio in 1973 to fill that void. The company made an American tour of his last play, *Kozō ga shinda* (The Baby Elephant is Dead, 1979) in 1980, but unable to have the desired impact in Japan, the company disbanded in 1982. Abe’s plays remain popular today, receiving frequent professional and amateur productions.

JOHN SWAIN