Kinoshita Junji (1914-2006)

Kinoshita Junji was one of Japan’s foremost modern playwrights. His work consists of several plays based on Japanese folk tales and history. His work also often interrogates the interactions between war, guilt, and responsibility. He died in 2006.

Kinoshita Junji was born in Tokyo on August 2, 1914. He remained in Tokyo until 1923, when his family moved to Kumamoto. After graduating from Kumamoto Fifth High School with the equivalent of a Bachelor’s degree in 1936, Kinoshita attended the Tokyo University to study English literature, eventually graduating with a MA in 1939 with a specialization in Elizabethan drama. Kinoshita also founded the theatre company Grape Society (Budō no kai) in 1947 and taught for many years at Meiji University. Kinoshita died from pneumonia in 2006 at the age of 92.

He began to write soon after graduation, with his first play, *Wind and Waves* (Fūrō) produced in 1939. Partially as a result of the increase in militarism and censorship during the war years, he began to write plays based on Japanese folklore and mythology. Based off of both the ethnographic writings of Yanagita Kunio (1875-1962) as well as influence of the Kotoba no Benkyōkai (Language Study Group, 1967) Kinoshita wanted to create a theatre that merged both modern and pre-modern modes of performance. The result was what became known as his “folklore plays” (*minwageki*), including *The Story of Hirokichi* (Hirokichi banashi, 1946), *Requiem on the Great Meridian* (Shigosen no matsuri, 1979) and perhaps his best-known play, *Twilight Crane* (Yūzuru, 1949). In these works, Kinoshita blended elements of both modern and pre-modern language and acting techniques, borrowing plots, language, and performance styles from classical Japanese literature and theatre styles such as nō and kabuki and meshing them with colloquial language and acting styles.

Kinoshita also wrote plays that dealt explicitly with Japan’s wartime actions and issues of guilt and responsibility. These historical plays (*gendaigeki*) were written in a very Western modernist tragic mode, with the tragic hero caught in the momentum of historical events. This is the case in several of Kinoshita’s works, including The *Ascension of the Frog* (Kaeru shōten, 1951), (Kaeru *A Japanese called Otto* (Otto to yobareru nihonjin, 1962) and *The Judgment* (Shimpan, 1970). The best known of these plays, *Between God and Man* (Kami to hito to no aida, 1970), examines the life of an innocent man convicted by the Tokyo war crimes tribunals and asks what responsibility everyday soldiers and civilians carried for the war. With works such as these Kinoshita aimed at engaging his audience on issues of wartime guilt and responsibility through the use of traditional shingeki social realist theatre.

Kinoshita was also an accomplished scholar, with numerous texts on theatre, especially including The World of Drama (1959). He was an accomplished translator as well, finishing a complete translation of Shakespeare’s work in the 1970s.

DAVID JORTNER