Mishima Yukio (1925-1970) is the pen name of Kimitake Hiraoka. He was an acclaimed novelist, playwright, poet, and essayist. He was nominated three times for the noble prize in literature during the post-war era. His work explores issues of sexuality, power, love, and death through a combination of classical and modern Japanese aesthetics and ideas.

Mishima was born in Tokyo in 1925 to a well-off family; his grandmother was the descendant of Japanese royalty and spent muchtime with Mishima, going as far as to raise him herself until age 12. Upon his return to his family he began to read both western and Japanese authors voraciously, and write short stories and waka poetry. Mishima was mistakenly declared unfit for military service during the Second World War and graduated from Tokyo university in 1947. Through his father’s connections he got a job in the finance industry but soon left it to concentrate on writing.

Mishima had several relationships with both men and women; he married Sugiyama Yoko in 1958 and father two children with her. In 1955 Mishima took up private weight training; he was to remain an avid bodybuilder for the remainder of his life. In 1968 Mishima formed the Tate-no-kai (shield Society), a paramilitary group of young men who studied martial arts and military tactics with Mishima. In 1970, Mishima, along with four members of the society, entered the grounds of the Ichigaya Military base and took the base commandant hostage. Mishima then gave an address to the massed soldiers below; when they failed to heed his call for a coup d’etat he returned to the building and committed ritual seppuku suicide.

Mishima’s wrote 61 plays and screenplays in his lifetime. The work can be divided into two categories. There are the plays he wrote for the shingeki stage and the adaptations/modernizations of classical Japanese dramas such as nō and kabuki. Mishima was primarily interested in form and style; he focused on structure and language within the shingeki trope. Mishima used the shingeki stage as a vehicle for the expression of nationlist ideology; plays such as Rokumeikan (The Deer Cry Pavilion, 1956) and Waga Tomo Hitler (My Friend Hitler, published 1968, performed 1969) allowed him to use historical events to comment obliquely on Japanese national identity. Mishima also adapted classical plays from the West, including rewriting Brittanicus (1957) and the Orestia (1959) in a shingeki format. His shingeki works are also known for their strong female characters and their explorations of eroticism, death and suffering; perhaps his best-known work is Madame de Sade (1965), which explores the life of the wife of the Marquis de Sade and three of her female aquaintances.

Mishima also adapted kabuki and nō plays, incorporating the structure of the classical drama but updating the acting style and thematic concerns. His kabuki plays were written in the classical Japanese kabuki form but had character who espoused modern concerns, such as the romantic comedy at the heart of Iwashiuri Koi no Hikiami (Sardine Seller’s Net of Love, 1954). He wrote nine modern nō play keeping the structure of the original works but updating language and style, including the works Kantan (1950), Aoi no Ue (The Lady Aoi, 1954), and Aya no Tsuzumi (The Damask Drum, 1951).

Mishima, Yukio, *Five Modern No Plays*. Trans. Donald Keene. Tokyo: Charles Tuttle, 1957.

—. *My Friend Hitler and Other Plays of Yukio Mishima*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.

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