Tanaka Chikao (1905-1995) was a Japanese shingeki playwright and theatre director in the postwar period. His plays incorporated naturalistic dialogue as well as figurative and poetic imagery in an effort to explore philosophical and metaphysical issues.

Tanaka was born in Nagasaki in 1905. In 1923 he went to Keio University in Tokyo to study French literature; while there he also saw performances of Osani Karoru’s Tsukiji shōgekijō, Japan’s first professional shingeki company. In 1927 he joined Kishida Kunio’s Shingeki Kenkyūshō (New Theatre Research Institute) and studied all aspects of the theatre. In 1930 Kishida asked him to write articles on speech and dialogue for the magazine *Gekisaku* (Playwriting). Tanaka wrote the short play *Ofukuro* (Mama) to illustrate his ideas; it was performed in the same year. In 1938 Tanaka joined Kishida’s theatre troupe, the Bungakuza (Literary Theatre), primarily as a director.

It wasn’t until after the war that Tanaka began to write prolifically. Influenced deeply by his wartime experiences (his brother was killed in the Philippines and he narrowly avoided the bombing of Nagasaki) Tanaka began writing plays which explored issues of the ego, the metaphysical, and the relationship between self and society. In 1951 he joined director Senda Koreya’s Haiyuza (Actor’s Theatre) and in 1953 wrote the play *Kyōiku* (Education) for his students. The play won the Yomiuri Literary prize and was produced in the same year. The play utilizes figurative language to discuss issues such as the nature of love and the purpose of living. His next major work was *Maria no Kubi* (The Head of Mary, 1959) which explored the destruction of Nagasaki and the postwar sense of despair and hopelessness that pervaded the Japanese populace. The play was also one of Tanaka’s most “Christian” works; in it two women, a prostitute and a black marketer attempt to motivate disparate groups of people to reassemble a statue of the Virgin Mary.

Tanaka’s next play, *Chidori* (The Plover) was written in 1960. The lay was noted for its lyricism; in the work Tanaka discusses the desire for love through festival, fantasy, and memory sequences. In 1968 Tanaka explored the clash between Christian and Japanese thought in his the historical drama *Arai Hakuseki*. With this work Tanaka uses short scenes to create a metaphysical world that blends elements of Japanese traditional theatre and the Theatre of the Absurd.

Tanaka was also a theorist and scholar who wrote several books of criticism, including *Geki bungaku* (Drama as Literature, 1959) and *Shingeki kanshō nyūmon* (An Introduction to an Appreciation of Shingeki, 1963). He was named as a member of the Japan Arts Academy in 1981 and died in 1995.

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