

**Book Review***Unspeakable Acts: The Avant-Garde Theatre of Terayama Shûji and Postwar Japan*

by Carol Fisher Sorgenfrei (Honolulu:  
University of Hawai'i Press, 2005)

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Poet, playwright, stage director, photographer, filmmaker, novelist and critic, Pied Piper and Peeping Tom, Terayama Shûji's (1935?-1983) immensely fertile imagination had a profound influence on avant-garde culture in the 1960s and '70s, not only in his native Japan but on the international scene as well. Together with artist Yokoo Tadanori (who designed many of the posters for his stage productions), Terayama's photographs, collage postcards, and stage sets (replete with ominous men in whiskers, whiteface and top hats, naked fat ladies and dwarves, diabolical machines, and rising sun flags—all the apparati of a defunct popular culture and a discredited patriotism) helped define the 'look' of Japanese postwar underground culture: surrealist, sexy, anarchic, carnivalesque, disturbing, yet paradoxically nostalgic—both distinctly 'Japanese' and identifiably international in its sensibilities. Thanks to several international tours in the 1970s and early '80s of his theatre company Tenjô Sajiki (*Les Enfants de Paradis*), Terayama became almost as familiar a name in avant-garde theatre circles as Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski, Robert Wilson, and Ariane Mnouchkine. In his heyday, Terayama was arguably a more important figure than Kara Jûrô, Suzuki Tadashi or Hijikata Tatsumi, three of his contemporaries in Japanese underground theatre. Terayama had a substantial influence on the next generation of Japanese theatre—his epigones include the late playwrights Kishida Rio (who collaborated on a number of his productions, like *Knock*) and Kisaragi Koharu, directors Ryûzanji Sho and Ninagawa Yukio, and troupes like Banyû Inryoku (Universal Gravity)—and the past decade or so has witnessed in Japan a plethora of new studies on this artist, republications of his work and video and DVD releases of his films and plays. A museum dedicated to his memory was opened in his birthplace Misawa in 1997.

Yet until now, little has been available in English by or about Terayama. Only a couple of his complete plays have been translated, both by Carol Sorgenfrei (Terayama, 1994; Terayama, 2003); there is also an excerpt of *Knock*, a script for street theatre which Terayama co-wrote with Kishida Rio (Terayama, 1992) and a slim anthology of his

poems (Terayama, 1998). A few other contemporary reviews of his productions in Europe, Iran and the United States can be found in back issues of *TDR*. The indefatigable Don Kenny has apparently been sitting on a pile of translations he has done of Terayama's work, but they remain unpublished and most of us would not know of their existence were it not for Sorgenfrei's book. So, why the relative neglect till now?

Sorgenfrei provides two important reasons for why it has taken so long for a full-length study on this artist to appear in English. For one, until her own death in 1991, Terayama's jealous and uncooperative mother Hatsu effectively prevented all but a couple translations or foreign productions of Terayama's work and blocked the publication in English of any concerted study of this artist. (21-22) (More on Hatsu later.) Sorgenfrei also takes David G. Goodman, the preeminent scholar on Japan's 'post-*shingeki*' experimental theatre in the 1960s and '70s, to task for snubbing Terayama in his writings on this period. Goodman has provided excellent account of the work of such playwrights as Kara Jûrô or Satoh Makoto, but gives short shrift to Terayama, accusing the latter of being the 'darling' of the international avant-garde, someone whose aesthetic ran counter to the essence of Japanese theatre during this time, its notoriety resting on little more than an aim to, as the French put it, *épatter les bourgeois*.

Sorgenfrei makes a good case that Goodman's view is 'highly idiosyncratic, emphasizing new-left politics and a kind of messianic spirituality' (22). It should be noted, too, that Terayama's constant experimentation and in-your-face style of theatre, which often staged violent encounters between actors and unwitting audiences, incited fierce criticism and after his untimely death to liver disease in 1983, he began to fade somewhat from public attention. By the 1980s in Japan, the phase of radical experimentation with theatrical expression morphed into the more accessible work of playwrights like Tsuka Kohei, Noda Hideki and Kokami Shôji; in the West, too, both artists and audiences tired of the self-indulgent excesses of 1960s and '70s theatrical anarchy. Even so, his contribution to modern Japanese theatre was huge, and he warrants more attention than he has got.

*Unspeakable Acts* is therefore a welcome, indeed long-awaited book. Certainly, no one is better placed to introduce readers to this seminal figure than Carol Sorgenfrei. A professor of theatre at UCLA, she knew Terayama personally. The study represents a considerable advance over previous work in English, indeed even on Sorgenfrei's own dissertation on Terayama, which she completed in 1978. Sorgenfrei does not attempt to cover the entire range of this protean artist's activities, but focuses on what is to be sure his greatest contribution to his generation's culture, his theatre.

Sorgenfrei's discussion focuses on four central themes in Terayama's work: women, outcasts, Japan's past, and America. She devotes a good two chapters, 'Masks and Mothers: Staging the Inner Self' and 'Outcasts and Others: Staging the Outer Self,' to unlocking the complex and paradoxical messages in Terayama's work, discussing his

ambivalence toward his mother, his fear of female sexuality, his fascination with alterity and transgression of taboos. Her methodology, largely taken from studies in Japanese psychology and sociology, is useful. Doi Takeo's concept of *amae*, or dependence, is given attention here, and such dyads as in- group and out-group (*uchi* and *soto*), tact and sincerity (*tatemae* and *honne*), and public and private (*omote* and *ura*) are employed to make sense of Terayama.

Terayama Shûji's extraordinary life was an allegory of Japan's ambivalence toward modernity and the world at large. His father, a member of Japan's notorious secret police before the war, died in the Celebes in 1945 and, in order to support their son, his mother worked on the US military base in Misawa; rumours spread that she prostituted herself to American soldiers. For a while Terayama lived with his mother in the red-light district of Misawa and, later, when Hatsu left to work on another American base in Kyushu, he bunked behind the projection room of a movie theatre run by relatives in Aomori City. A child prodigy as a poet, Terayama won a national prize for his classical-style thirty-one syllable *tanka* verse in 1954, the same year he was admitted to the prestigious Waseda University in Tokyo. Shortly thereafter, he succumbed to liver disease; hospitalised for three years, Terayama lived pretty much on borrowed time until his death at the age of 47 or 48 (he fudged the actual date of his birth). His protective mother would insist on looking after him for most of his remaining years and guarded his memory in death.

His first play, a work for radio, *Adult Hunting (Otona-gari)*, a mockumentary relating a violent revolt of children over their parents, was aired in 1960 while the demonstrations against the renewal of the US-Japan Security Treaty (Ampo) were still fresh in everyone's minds, and (like Orson Welles's *War of the Worlds*) many listeners believed what they heard. Terayama would later develop the play into an experimental film called *Emperor Tomato Ketchup*, which some critics have dismissed as kiddie porn. 'How are we to comprehend Terayama's intention in this paradoxical work?' Sorgenfrei asks:

Does it reflect Terayama's desire to create a new 'family' and to take up his role as an adult male in Japan, or is it an adolescent fantasy lashing out against parental control? Is it condemnation of Japanese participation in wartime atrocities and the alliance with Hitler, or is it a perverse celebration of the fact that at heart, all humans are amoral children capable of unspeakable acts? (123-4)

Sorgenfrei concludes that Terayama and the Japanese are comfortable with paradox, 'challenging and interrogating the easy 'either/or'' dichotomy of Western thought.'

Discussion of Terayama's work presents a field day from Freudians, and Sorgenfrei carefully untangles Terayama's twisted relationship with his mother, one that in some part reflected the role of women in postwar Japanese culture and was possibly the source for Terayama's extraordinary creativity. 'One might argue,' Sorgenfrei writes,

'that this family drama plays itself out for Terayama by constant rebellion against and symbolic murder of various 'father surrogates' as represented by phallogocentric institutions or symbols' (59). Leary of applying Western theory to Japanese society, Sorgenfrei presents an alternative to the Oedipus myth, one initially proposed by a Japanese student of Freud, Kosawa Heisaku: the story of Ajase, an Indian prince and his mother. Sorgenfrei sums up:

Terayama's life with his mother is an uncanny replication of the Ajase story. The key elements include an absent father, an eroticized mother's abandonment of her child (possibly perceived by both mother and child as a kind of attempted murder), the adolescent son's awareness of this act and his resentment and hatred of her, his disfiguring disease, the 'bad' mother's repentance and transformation into a 'good' mother who selflessly and ceaseless cares for her sick child, his gratitude to her, and their final mutual forgiveness and total interdependence (62).

Adolescent rebellion, often expressed in a young man's attempt to sever himself from an incestuous relationship with a domineering mother, would become a key theme in Terayama's work; it runs through such plays as *The Hunchback of Aomori*, *La Marie-Vison* (both are translated here), and *Shintokumarū: Poison Boy*. [1] In his experimental film *Cache-Cache Pastoral (Den'en ni shisu)*, Terayama notes: 'I want to show that in order for a man to get on a train for the first time, his mother's dead body is a necessary prerequisite' (98). Sometimes the mother is slain, but as often as not it is the son who dies.

Indeed, making sense of Terayama's dark vision is a risky business. Terayama loved deception, parody and pastiche: he was a master at assembling disparate elements and styles (poetry, traditional Japanese music and narrative forms, rock and jazz, folklore and Hollywood movies) to spin complex psychodramas in which personal sorrow was a metonym for public evil. Because of its polysemic nature, there is a tendency to read much into his work, but ultimately Terayama's chameleonic, trickster character defies our quest for definitive meaning. There was something distinctly Japanese, but also decidedly postmodern, about the quest for identity in Terayama's work. Emblematic of his compatriots' search for self, it was one that seemed to end, often tragically, in a fun-house hall of mirrors. The obscene is shown and what is private made public, but by the same token the 'truth' of interiority is presented as yet another opaque and misleading surface.

At the same time, Sorgenfrei's analysis of aspects of modern Japanese culture may strike some as a trifle schematic. Her aim, as she notes in her introduction, is two-fold:

A study of Terayama's theatre not only offers glimpses into the aesthetic practices of avant-garde performance during the turbulent period of the late 1960s through to the early 1980s, but it may also help to illuminate

the shadowy spirit that lurks beneath the sunny mask of Japanese imperturbability (3).

She warns rightly against the notion of Japanese exceptionalism—that its culture is fundamentally different from all others and ultimately unknowable—but her analysis, couched in terms of ‘shadowy spirits’ lurking ‘beneath the sunny mask of Japanese imperturbability’ at times seems overwrought and orientalist. [2] By the same token, Sorgenfrei is sometimes too uncritical of Terayama’s antics while being overly judgemental about the culture that informed them.

The chief value of this book, for this reviewer at least, lies in what it has to say about Terayama’s contribution to international theatre culture and the extent to which he was able to transform both Japanese and Western (particularly French) artistic influences into something new and strange. His debt to Bataille, Genet and Lautréamont was considerable, but, from the mid-1960s, he was an ardent devotee of Antonin Artaud. Though Sorgenfrei claims that ‘Terayama was playing to western expectations when he told the press that Artaud was the most important influence on his work’ (157), many have argued that he was the most Artaudian of all modern theatre artists. He really came into his own as a stage artist in 1967 with the founding of Tenjô Sajiki, a company created ‘to explore the limits of theatrical experience’ (35). Thereafter until his death in 1983, the playwright embarked on radical experiments in performance, moving away from the lyrical, text-based drama he had staked his reputation upon, toward an interrogation of the relationships of actor, script, audience and the place of performance. If the attempt to psychologise his characters sometimes leads, as in a labyrinth, to dead ends, Terayama’s dramaturgy stressed that ‘the sphere of theatre is physical not psychological’ (Courdy, 2000: 262). His program, to create sometimes violent encounters between actors and audience that questioned the nature of art and reality, may have been, as Sorgenfrei notes, in part inspired by traditional kabuki’s aesthetic of cruel beauty (*zankoku no bi*), but its revolutionary aim was closer to Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty. ‘Our drama is based on the self-evident truth that the function of theatre is not to struggle with the script, but to struggle with reality,’ Terayama claims (301).

A ‘terrorist of the imagination’ (‘Hitler was better,’ claimed *Der Spiegel* after a production in Berlin), Terayama’s rebellious spirit caught the romantic tone of the times, one that for all the stillborn possibilities of his protagonists, was still paradoxically optimistic. For Terayama ‘the only real revolution was in the imagination. Only art ... could transform the world’ (31). His essentially apolitical views alienated him from many important figures in the cultural wars of 1960s Japan, however. Terayama happily assumed the role of gadfly to both left and right, and his vision was intensely personal, aesthetic, anarchic. Undoubtedly it was his resistance to a political or social vision that was so objectionable to critics and theatre historians like David Goodman, but this may underestimate the political significance of what appear to be purely ‘aesthetic’ concerns.

Terayama's writings and theatrical experiments articulated, to a degree few others did, the artistic *zeitgeist* of post-1960s culture, but, Sorgenfrei claims, 'what most audiences continue to crave is precisely what Terayama had all but abandoned—that is, strongly poetic, visually stunning, nostalgic, folkloric, autobiographical plays and poetry layered with a passion for parody' (170). In focusing on what makes Terayama so 'Japanese,' Sorgenfrei presents a more nuanced portrait of this most international of all Japanese theatre artists. Her book presents valuable translations of three of Terayama's earlier, more conventionally text-based dramas and extensive excerpts from one of his key theoretical works, *The Labyrinth and the Dead Sea: My Theatre*. This is an important study; one which, it is hoped will pave the way for more work that will explore Terayama's other contributions to modern Japanese culture. [3]

### Notes

[1] The translation of *La Marie-Vison* presented here, by Don Kenny, was a revised version of the play for an English-language production at La Mama, New York. Sorgenfrei translated an earlier version of the play for Japan Playwrights Association, eds. (2003).

[2] On pages 66 and 67, for example, she cites Ann Allison's account of mothers who had sex with their sons in order to help relieve their sons' stress from cramming for university entrance exams. While Sorgenfrei admits that 'the number of actual cases is not as important as the perception that they are real,' no real evidence for this shocking factoid is provided. Feminist Ueno Chizuko, one of the first to bring this phenomenon to public attention in Japan, later admitted that it had the quality of an urban myth.

There are also some factual errors. For example, Sakabe Megumi is referred to as a male on page 55 and 114. On page 114, Sorgenfrei notes that Michael Marra incorrectly spelled the ethnologist Origuchi Shinobu's name as Orikuchi. In fact, both are acceptable, but the ethnologist preferred to spell his own name as Orikuchi. On page 149, she claims that the Buddhist sermon ballad (*sekkyōbushi*) *Aigo no waka* was the source for Terayama's play *Shintokumarū*, but it is in fact based on another *sekkyōbushi* called *Shintokumarū*. Sorgenfrei is also vague in her chronology. Dates for plays by Terayama, for example, generally refer not to first performances or publications but to the nine-volume edition of his collected plays, *Terayama Shūjino gikyoku*, 1969-1972.

[3] *Gogatsu no Shi: Poems of May*, a collection of Terayama's poetry translated by David A. Schmidt and Fusae Ekida (1998), is a flawed work that provides little introduction to his poetic oeuvre. It is hoped that Steven Clark's excellent PhD dissertation on Terayama's work will be revised for publication by an academic press.

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### Editorial Note

*Performance Paradigm* issues 1 to 9 were reformatted and repaginated as part of the journal's upgrade in 2018. Earlier versions are viewable via Wayback Machine:  
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