Betsuyaku Minoru and the theatre of 1960s Japan

Betsuyaku Minoru is one of Japan’s leading postwar playwrights. His work blends modernist aesthetics and absurdist forms in order to create a “fusion theatre” where he explores themes of alienation, isolation and identity in the confusing post-war Japanese landscape.

Using the famous essay “Watashi wa Dare Deshō? (Who am I?)” as a starting point I propose to explore how Betsuyaku engages in and develops themes of nationalism and national identity in his plays, especially the works Zō (The Elephant) and Machiuri no shōjo (The Little Match Girl). These plays present the audience with a bleak, unfamiliar and yet often humorous view of the postwar landscape, challenging views of Japan as a “victim nation” and criticizing the idea of the “Japanese miracle.” Betsuyaku’s plays are rife with an ambivalence towards nationhood and force his audience to confront the cultural confusion of postwar Japan. His plays explore the tropes associated with both nationalist and counter-nationalist discourse, presenting the audience with an entertaining and thoughtful beginning on the many meanings of the term “nation.”

The results of this study will shed new light on the ideas of how the Japanese avant-garde saw the role of the identity and nationhood at a time of national chaos and confusion, and the way in which symbolism, aesthetic decisions, and artistic choices can aid in the construction or complication of national identity tropes in the theatre. With Betsuyaku’s work little known outside of his home country, it will also bring the master craftsmanship of the extremely popular and successful playwright to a wider audience and greater recognition.