

Showing the Quiet Profundity of Ordinary Life

By PAMELA RENNER

THOUGH his characters discuss their lives in tranquil and measured tones, the effect of the Japanese playwright Oriza Hirata's dialogue can be as transfixing as a glimpse of human tissue under a microscope.

In "Tokyo Notes," his first work to be seen in the United States, it is the year 2004 in Japan and a devastating war rages in Europe. But rather than fill his stage with stock images of wartime violence, Mr. Hirata depicts a society unconcerned, its members mired in self-absorption. As the characters drift through the visitors' lounge of a small museum in Tokyo, where a cache of Vermeer paintings has arrived for safekeeping, they search for the right thing to say or fall into teasing banter. Their voices are soft and their words ordinary, but the speakers unwittingly betray more of themselves than they intend.

"Tokyo Notes" will be presented in Japanese with English supertitles at the Japan Society beginning Thursday, for three performances. Directed by Mr. Hirata and performed by his Seinen-dan Theater Company, it will subsequently tour to Philadelphia, Pittsburgh and Victoria, Canada.

The playwright is known in his country for pioneering "quiet theater," the name critics gave to a style of naturalistic and analytic theater that forms the corner-

Oriza Hirata's 'Tokyo Notes' exemplifies the naturalistic, analytic theater movement that took root in Japan in the 90's.

stone of the most influential Japanese theater movement of the 1990's. A recipient of the 1995 Kishida Drama Award, Japan's highest laurel for new plays, "Tokyo Notes" became an instant classic at home.

Another playwright in the quiet theater movement is Ryo Iwamatsu, who has won praise for his portrayal of ordinary urban life in a trilogy of plays ("Tea and a Lecture," "Romance Is Banned" and "Futon and Daruma"). In an essay, "The Sense of Being Alive: Japanese Theater in the 1990's," the writer Hiroshi Hasebe quotes Mr. Iwamatsu's description of what he is aiming for: "From the sheer amount of detail, the sense of the extraordinary should paradoxically emerge within the illusion of the ordinary."

In his case, Mr. Hirata said, "I think my plays always count on individuals in the audience to build their own stories." During a recent telephone interview from Japan, speaking in Japanese and using an interpreter, he added, "Contemporary art should be something that forces audiences to confront themselves as they construct their own way of looking."

Rather than telling a single story, Mr. Hirata's plays offer a succession of glimpses into fragile lives. The artistic director of the Komaba Agora Theater in Tokyo, where Seinen-dan, which he founded in 1983, has its headquarters, Mr. Hirata has trained his company members to act with nuanced realism. Lines are purposely slurred and, at times, actors turn their backs to the house. In the beginning, audiences were surprised by the unconventional work and assumed the performances were improvised. But with two volumes of plays published and a growing public, Mr. Hirata's embrace of intense naturalism no longer seems like such an oddity.

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Photographs by Tsukasa Aoki

Above, a scene from a Seinen-dan Theater production of "Tokyo Notes." Left, Oriza Hirata, the author of the play, which is to be presented this week at the Japan Society.

the Japan Society, said: "I see a lot of theater in Japan, and Hirata was quite a departure. It's not at all futuristic or expressionistic, with people jumping and shouting their lines at you. It's a different style of acting; it is quiet, subtle and full of ideas."

Japanese critics tend to view Mr. Hirata's plays as a reaction to the hyperactive theatrical styles of the 1980's, characterized, for example, by the apocalyptic spectacles of the playwright and director Hideki Noda. Mr. Noda's popular works possess the raw energy of a garage rock band, while Mr. Hirata and his colleagues in the quiet theater movement are more like free jazz musicians. They strive to illuminate everyday existence through calm, contemplative theatrical language.

Akihiko Senda, the chief theater critic of Tokyo's major daily newspaper, Asahi Shimbun, said of Mr. Hirata: "In the 60's through the 80's, the experimental cutting-edge work in Japan was all dealing with a very different kind of stage time, a time of illusion. He was not doing that; in some sense he was going back to what preceded that — a more realistic handling of time."

Mr. Senda continued: "If we look at the work of two postwar Japanese film directors, Akira Kurosawa and Yasujiro Ozu, it is possible to say that the 60's and 70's theater artists were very much of the Kurosawa style.

They emphasized dramatic elements, highlighting non-daily life. These would be people like Juro Kara, Tadashi Suzuki and Yukio Ninagawa. Hirata and his antecedents, people like Minoru Betsuyaku and Kunio Kishida, would be more of the Ozu camp, in terms of how they deal with the material."

Ozu, creator of the 1953 classic film "Tokyo Story," favored a delicately wrought realism, communicating his close observations of an urban Japan through small touches. His style and themes have visibly influenced Mr. Hirata's work, including his play's title, "Tokyo Notes." In Ozu's "Tokyo Story," a pair of aging parents from the provinces make an annual visit to Tokyo to see their married children and grandchildren. Shunted from apartment to apartment, treated like a burden by all but the lovely young widow of their deceased son, the parents learn about the sadness of being forgotten by one's own flesh and blood.

In Mr. Hirata's "Tokyo Notes" Yumi, an unmarried woman in a simple dress, has been relegated to the margins of her more worldly siblings' lives. She is expected to care for her aging parents and spend her leisure time doing something invisible. If not for the sympathetic presence of her sister-in-law Yoshie, Yumi's annual visit to Tokyo would be lonely indeed. Her

brothers and sisters, preoccupied by work and children, have no time to spend on her emotional needs.

Other characters — a cross-section of Tokyo life — enter the scene: a college student and the former tutor with whom she had a troubled affair; a young heiress confused by the death of the father she barely knew; her lawyer, a scheming museum curator; and her lover, intent on enlisting in the European conflict. Moments later, a new array of personalities takes center stage

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