

Prologue to the Face of Jizo

Inoue Hisashi with introduction/translation by Roger Pulvers

The Mainichi is holding an international essay contest on the theme of Inoue Hisashi's play, "The Face of Jizo," for young people. To commemorate this contest, we have asked the play's translator and long-time friend of the late playwright to write about him. We publish that here, together with Inoue's prologue, the first part of the play and profiles of both playwright and translator.

Details of the essay contest and information for participants may be seen [here](#).

A Work of Great Universal Value

Roger Pulvers

More than eight years have now passed since the death of my dear and wonderful friend, Inoue Hisashi. We who love his literature and theatre often ask ourselves what he would have said and written about events that have taken place in the interim.

Hisashi was a writer totally committed to the social dialogue. Like the two foreign writers he admired most, Charles Dickens and Bertolt Brecht, his stories and plays, whether on historical or contemporary themes, never strayed far from what we commonly call "issues."

This does not imply that he was a political writer. Particularly in Japan the term "political" – often incorrectly, in the cultural context, mistranslated *seijiteki* – connotes meanings

akin to "ideological," "tendentious" and "polemical." Hisashi took sides; but he was careful to depict the "bad guys" with understanding and compassion. He was not a writer in the tradition of the Western left. Oe Kenzaburo is much more in that mould.

In fact, both writers took up the issue of Hiroshima. But Hisashi's approach is purely character-driven.

In June I saw a production of "The Face of Jizo" at the Haiyuza Theatre in Roppongi (where, back in 1984 I directed Kishida Kyoko in Strindberg's "Miss Julie"). This production, directed by Uyama Hitoshi, who has been associated with the play since its premiere, and performed by Yamazaki Hajime and Ise Kayo, was absolutely wonderful.

Mitsue in the play is just 23 years old; and Ise is 37. Yet she sheds years and the trappings of sophistication to present the most moving interpretation of the heroine that I have seen. Despite years of familiarity with this play, I wept at the end ... for the first time. This production brought home the fact that "The Face of Jizo" essentially tells a story about a father-daughter relationship. Their being together in Hiroshima when the bomb drops adds a tragic context; but it is Takezo's dire wish for his daughter to find happiness in the wake of tragic circumstances that drives the narrative.



Takezo and Mitsue from *The Face of Jizo*

Literally translated, the title of the play would be “Were I to Live with Father” or “If I Lived with my Father.” Needless to say, these don’t work as titles in English. Unfortunately, the title “Life with Father,” which would have been a good one, had already been taken up by the soppy American soap of the early 1950s.

But this is what the play focuses on: the everyday highs and lows of a sweet and innocent daughter living with a difficult and cantankerous father who dies ... and comes back to life to help her find happiness.

The play is written in Hiroshima dialect, a dialect quite linguistically far from Hisashi’s native one in Yamagata. The use of dialect gives the dialogue between Takezo and Mitsue authenticity in time and place.

Hisashi was one writer in Japan for whom dialects play a major role in their work. Naturally, the dialects of Tohoku predominated, for it was these that he knew best and had the most intimate relationship of childhood with. But it wasn’t always Tohoku.

NHK broadcasted his drama “Kokugo Gannen” (The First Year of the National Language) in 1985. A year later he morphed it into one of his

most successful plays.

Set in the seventh year of Meiji, 1874, the drama features the story of a bureaucrat in the Education Ministry who is a Choshu native, the modern Yamaguchi Prefecture. He and others speak their *okuni kotoba*, or native dialect, making it hard, if not impossible for them in some cases, to follow the gist of the conversation. The effect is humorous; but the message, dead serious. The Japanese elites at the time deemed it necessary to unite Japan under an almighty emperor and the sun radiating on the national flag. They also began to require everyone in Japan to standardize their speech, to abandon their *okuni kotoba* for the national discourse. This meant no dialect usage in schools, offices and every sort of public institution. (In this Japan was no different from the countries of Europe that had created modern nation-states in the 19th century. The Japanese were merely emulating their model.)

Hisashi stressed that the new Meiji elites’ goal was not only to unite the populace behind national symbols, but also to equate the nation’s aspirations with its ever more powerful military. Nothing could be more standard than the language of the military. Hisashi’s obsession – and it was just that, a healthy obsession – with dialect is a representative element of his message of subverting oppressive authority.

To my mind, Hisashi was Japan’s leading postwar advocate of social diversity. His wish was that people in every region of Japan be allowed to express their identity through the use of their *okuni kotoba* (*local dialect*). In his later years he turned his attention to Okinawa. Had he lived longer he would surely have created narratives set there. He told me as much when we had our last encounters in 2009, the year before he died.

“The Face of Jizo,” though set in Hiroshima and written in dialect, is a work of great universal

value. It has now been translated into several languages, including Russian, German and Italian. The film, directed by Kuroki Kazuo, is marvellous too. Kuroki follows the play faithfully, adding the appearance of Mitsue's love-interest, Kinoshita, who exists in the play solely in the dialogue of father and daughter.

Hisashi was, as I said, not an ideologue or a polemicist. He believed implicitly that Japan could be a nation that celebrated diversity. Though steeped in local cultures, he was never parochial. He was unlike so many "literati" in Japan, who stand for one sort or another of ethnic exclusivity: the "we Japanese" of silent hate speech.

That his dramatic masterpiece is now inspiring young people around the world to express their personal feelings about the relationship and its tragic context is something that Hisashi would have definitely delighted in.

Prologue to *The Face of Jizo*

Hiroshima. Nagasaki. When these two words are mentioned, the following opinion is increasingly heard. "It's wrong to keep acting as if the Japanese were the victims. The Japanese were the victimizers at the time in what they did in Asia." The second sentence is certainly on the mark. The Japanese were the perpetrators of wrong throughout Asia.

As for the first sentence, however, I remain adamant that this is not the case. This is because I believe that those two atomic bombs were dropped not only on the Japanese but on all humankind.

The people exposed to those bombs, scorched as they were with the fires of hell, represent all people around the world in the second half of the 20th century. We are all unable to escape the presence of nuclear weapons.

For this reason it is not out of a victim's mentality that I write about this. Feigning ignorance of the human catastrophe that occurred in those cities would constitute, for me as one person among the more than six billion on Earth, the immoral choice.

In all likelihood my life will be over when I have finished writing about Hiroshima and about Nagasaki.

The Face of Jizo

A PLAY BY INOUE HISASHI

Translated by Roger Pulvers

The Place: Hiroshima

The Time: July 1948

The Characters: MITSUE (age 23), TAKEZO (her father)

Music plays as the house lights fade and, after some time we hear the rumble of tympani and see flashes of lightning coming from somewhere far away, and these flashes reveal a simple house--no more than a glorified shack. The time is 5:30 pm on the last Tuesday of July, 1948.

The house, located on the east side of Hijiyama in Hiroshima, belongs to Mitsue Fukuyoshi, and consists of a kitchen adjacent to the entryway, a six-mat sitting room with a folding table and a few other pieces of furniture, and an eight-mat bedroom with a bookshelf, writing desk and closet. Mitsue, age 23, wearing wooden clogs, dressed in an old-fashioned white blouse and a renovated mottle-patterned pair of traditional work pants hurriedly rushes into the house. For a handbag she carries a cloth shopping bag with wooden trim. Lightning flashes again when she steps into the sitting room, and she stumbles to the floor, clutching her bag to her chest, and puts her hands over her eyes and

ears.

MITSUE: Daddy, I'm scared!

The door of the closet slides open and we see Takezo, her father, wearing a white open-collar shirt, perched on its shelf. He is holding a large square cushion over his head so as not to hear the thunder.

TAKEZO: This way, over here, Mitsue, quick. Get in. (tossing a cushion to Mitsue) What's the matter with you?! Get the cushion on your head and get yourself in under here.

MITSUE: (somewhat shocked, yet glad to see him) Daddy, so that's where you've been.

TAKEZO: Where in the hell did you think I was, eh? You tell me where and when to go and that's where you'll find me. Where else would I be, eh?

MITSUE: But it's ridiculous, I mean, preposterous...I...you...

TAKEZO: Quit babbling and get the hell in here, will ya! (a flash of lightning) See, there it is again.

MITSUE: (crawling into the closet below the shelf) Daddy!

Takezo sits on the shelf above his daughter as the storm subsides.

TAKEZO: You've got three things going for you now, okay? Me, the closet and the cushion. No flashes or booms are gonna hurt you now.

MITSUE: But, daddy, I'm 23. A bit of thunder shouldn't scare the living daylights out of someone my age. It's downright embarrassing, daddy, and besides, it really gets to me.

TAKEZO: (firmly) Don't blame yourself, Mitsue.

MITSUE: ...Oh, I dunno.

TAKEZO: Look, it wasn't so long ago you were the tomboy of the athletics club at your girls' school, doing laps with the best of them, right? A bit of thunder didn't stop you then.

MITSUE: (nodding) There were only three of us altogether in the club, so I ended up having to run everything from the sprint to long distance stuff. Who had time to worry about thunder?

TAKEZO: That's my spunky little girl. So what happened to turn you into such a little scaredy-cat, eh?

MITSUE: I dunno, I just am. I'm scared to death.

TAKEZO: Since when?

MITSUE: Since about three years ago, I guess.

TAKEZO: Ah, the bomb.

MITSUE: I guess.

TAKEZO: Hey, remember Nobu from the Tomita Photo Shop?

MITSUE: He took a lot of pictures of all of us, yeah.

TAKEZO: He was one of the top photographers in Hiroshima. Took great pictures.

MITSUE: Yeah, if you call those racy pictures great.

TAKEZO: Racy?

MITSUE: You let those army officers use our home, the Fukuyoshi Inn, as a clubhouse, and you got your hands on a lot of goods that way, I remember.

TAKEZO: Ah, so I did. We had rice and sake pourin' outta the closets, and canned salmon and corned beef, cigarettes, caramels, yeah. Mummy died when you were a tiny little baby an' even if you were starved for a mother's love

I didn't want you to be without the things you needed, so as long as I had the breath of life in me...

ITSUE: ...you would lure as many women as you could with cigarettes and rice and take them to some hot springs resort and that's when Nobu took those secret photos of them that he showed to those officers and then you...

AKEZO: (interrupting) That very same Nobu now sells little jellies that he gets from God knows where.

ITSUE: I know.

AKEZO: Such talent as a photographer and he wastes it peddling black-market jellies!

ITSUE: Serves him right for taking nude pictures in the hot springs!

AKEZO: You gonna listen to me or not, eh?

ITSUE: Sorry, daddy.

AKEZO: What happened was, he says, every time one of his magnesium bulbs popped he couldn't get the flash of the bomb out of his head, like it was a photo in real sharp focus. It scared the daylights out of him, and so, he says, he gave up photography. So that's why you and he go to pieces, 'cause the flashes and the booming remind you of the bomb.

ITSUE: I dunno...

AKEZO: Well, you gotta know. You got your reasons to be scared and you shouldn't be ashamed of it. Nobody blames a victim of the bomb for gettin' shook up over somethin' that flashes, even if it's just an innocent little firefly. You got a right to be scared.

ITSUE: Is there a right for being scared?

AKEZO: If there isn't, there should be. Any bomb victim who says he's not afraid of thunder is a phony victim.

ITSUE: I wouldn't go that far.

AKEZO: Well, maybe...okay.

Takezo exits the closet and crawls onto the narrow verandah by the sitting room.

AKEZO: Oh, gee, the sun's come out.

ITSUE: (crawling out a bit) Yeah, the sun!

AKEZO: Thunder seems to have moved on out to sea at Ujina.

ITSUE: That's a relief.

Mitsue, relieved, stands, goes to the kitchen and returns with a little earthen-ware teapot and two cups.

ITSUE: I've got some barley tea I made before going to the library this morning. Want some?

AKEZO: Just what the doctor ordered.

Mitsue pours two cups and gulps hers down right away. Takezo lifts his cup to his lips but puts it down without drinking.

AKEZO: Can't drink it.

ITSUE: Yeah, guess so.

Mitsue gulps down her father's tea as he watches her.

AKEZO: Oh my God.

ITSUE: What is it, daddy?

AKEZO: The sweet bean jam bun! The one Mr. Kinoshita gave you at the library today. What if it's been squished!

ITSUE: Oh no!

Mitsue grabs the bag that she was clutching so tightly and takes out a bun wrapped in newspaper. The bun somehow has retained its

shape.

TAKEZO: It's still all plump and round!

ITSUE: He got it at a stall by the station.

TAKEZO: You don't see bean jam buns like this these days.

ITSUE: Mr. Kinoshita says he was stopped dead in his tracks when he caught sight of them, I mean, they just kind of shot out at him, so he bought one but then his legs kinda turned to lead and he had to buy another before he could finally get away.

TAKEZO: Gee, this is one hell of a bean jam bun, that's all I can say.

ITSUE: I was sitting at the library checkout desk and he walks up to me and says, "Here, two's too much for me, you take one." (She divides the bun in two) Let's eat it now.

TAKEZO: Yeah, well, except that I can't, you know.

ITSUE: Yeah, I forgot.

Mitsue, chewing, wraps the other half in the newspaper.

TAKEZO: (swallowing his saliva) Kinoshita, the young fellow who gave you the bun, told you he was teaching at the University of Arts and Sciences, didn't he.

ITSUE: Yeah, he's attached to the physics department, he says, from this September.

TAKEZO: What do you mean "attached"?

ITSUE: I mean, you know, a kind of tutor.

TAKEZO: He wears glasses thicker than two milk bottle bottoms and totes around that huge briefcase wherever he goes and speaks real calm and soft, no, he's one hell of an intellectual, that fellow, if you ask me.

ITSUE: He was lecturing at the Navy Arsenal's institute at Kure till the bomb dropped, he was a technical officer, a lieutenant there.

TAKEZO: A bit rough around the edges for a navy man in my book.

ITSUE: Not all men in the navy are like you think, daddy. Anyway, he went to his old school at Tohoku Imperial University as a graduate student for two years after the war ended and came back here in early July, this month, and he says that just after the bomb dropped here in Hiroshima all he did all day was wander around what was left of the red burnt-out city.

TAKEZO: 'Bout how old is he...30 maybe?

ITSUE: Twenty-six. That's what it says on his library card.

TAKEZO: An' you're 23, so it's a perfect match.

ITSUE: (at first smiling, then in anger) What's wrong with you, daddy! He's just somebody who goes to the library.

TAKEZO: Somebody who just goes to the library doesn't go around giving away bean jam buns!

ITSUE: Ridiculous. I'm not going on with this. Look, it's time for dinner. You going to stay, daddy?

TAKEZO: Up to you.

ITSUE: Okay, give me a hand, then, with the cleaning up.

Mitsue dons an apron, goes to the kitchen and washes a wooden bento box. Takezo also puts on an apron and picks up a duster, but his heart isn't in cleaning.

TAKEZO: About that young fellow Kinoshita, you know, he wouldn't give you a bun if he hadn't taken a shine to you. You oughta get

that straight, you know.

MITSUE: You see too much in a little bun, daddy.

TAKEZO: Even a bun can carry a lotta weight. It's you who should have the courage to look into it a bit more deeply.

MITSUE: Mr. Kinoshita gave it to me to thank me, that's all.

TAKEZO: More than just thanks in my book.

MITSUE: Oh, daddy! (entering the sitting room) Now, please come here and sit down. Four days ago, on Friday last week, a man came up to the desk at the library just after noon and said, "Do you have objects related to the atom bomb? I was told at City Hall to enquire at the library." It was Mr. Kinoshita. We normally tell people that there are no such materials there, but something about the way he asked was so sincere that I explained to him, "The occupation forces keep a very close eye on anything to do with gathering information on the bomb. They forbid going public in any way, assuming that we would be allowed to obtain things in the first place. Besides, as an atomic victim myself it takes everything out of me just to forget it. Nothing about what happened that day in August will make a story or anything like a picture or a poem or a novel or, for that matter, a subject to be studied. One instant pulverized people's whole world, and that's why we do not collect things on it. Not only that. If there were such things, we'd destroy them for good. I have burnt absolutely everything that would remind me of my father." So you see, daddy, the bun was only to thank me for that, nothing more than that.

TAKEZO: You got two little checkout desks next to each other at the library, right, with one girl at each.

MITSUE: That's right, Miss Takagaki and me. So?

TAKEZO: Ever since the bomb you've not been yourself. You keep everything to yourself and keep people at arms' length, mopin' around with a scowl on your face till you get home. While Miss Takagaki always looks on the bright side of things, right?

MITSUE: Yeah, so? What are getting at, daddy?

TAKEZO: I mean, what makes a fellow like Kinoshita go for a Miss Grumpyguts like you instead of someone, well, more approachable like Miss Takagaki, eh? That's the crux of it. Anybody'd think he'd go for her first.

MITSUE: It's his privilege.

TAKEZO: That's what I'm sayin'. That fellow Kinoshita has one hell of a head on his shoulders. And as for you, you always had a nice disposition and knew what was what, I mean, you graduated second in your class, didn't you. Kinoshita saw the real you and took notice. That's what's behind that sweet bun of yours, take my word for it.

MITSUE: I can't stop you if you make up preposterous things like that. (entering the kitchen) Just sit there for as long as you like with your little stories. They've nothing to do with me.

TAKEZO: There's another hidden meaning in that bun, I'm convinced of it.

MITSUE: Will you please stop bringing up that bun!

TAKEZO: Look, this thing is crucial for you, Mitsue, and I'm not going to rest until I get to the bottom of that bun.

MITSUE: You come here out of the blue and go on and on about some stupid bun, I tell you, I can't think straight anymore, my head...

TAKEZO: You can't think straight because you fancy that fellow Kinoshita too. It's love at first sight, for the both of ya, and it won't be long

before you won't have eyes for anybody else. Hard as a rock on the outside but drippin' with sweetness on the inside. Your heart is just one big sweet bean jam bun.

MITSUE: (screaming) Not on your life! I don't let myself get keen on anybody and that's that.

TAKEZO: If you weren't keen on that fellow you would've pushed that bun right back in his face then and there.

MITSUE: Quiet! Absolute quiet. That's the main rule at our library. "Thanks for your help. Here, have a bun." "No, I couldn't possibly." "No, please, I insist." "It's against the rules to accept a bun from library visitors." You think we can just blabber away like that at the library desk? The head librarian and the deputy head librarian, not to mention Miss Takagaki right beside me eavesdrop on everything that happens. It was all I could do to take the bun without making a peep.

TAKEZO: But you made a date with him for tomorrow, didn't you, to meet during your lunch break at Sennenmatsu near the library.

MITSUE: I wanted to say no but...

TAKEZO: But you can't just blabber away at the library desk, eh?

MITSUE: ...so, well, I just nodded okay.

TAKEZO: So that means...

MITSUE: You watch me tomorrow, daddy. Watch me tell Mr. Kinoshita in no uncertain terms never to speak to me again.

TAKEZO: Why do you always turn everything around, eh? There's no harm in fancyin' the fellow. You're keen on him an' he's keen on you. Get yourselves together and live happily ever after. That's what's really at the bottom of that bun he gave you.

MITSUE: I can't be happy, so just stop talking,

daddy.

TAKEZO: I'm head of your fan club, you know, an' I won't let go of you.

MITSUE: Head of my fan club?

TAKEZO: Yep. Think about it. I started showin' up last Friday, right, when your heart started throbbin' for the first time in a long time when you caught sight of that Kinoshita fellow comin' into the library. My torso was born out of that throbbing. Then when he started to approach the checkout desk a soft little sigh slipped from your lips. Isn't that right? My arms and legs grew out of that sigh. Then you made a silent wish, didn't you, that he would choose your desk to come up to. My heart came to life out of that wish.

MITSUE: Is that why you've been hanging and milling around, to get me to fall in love? (Takezo beams) Love is out of the question. I can't fall in love. Stop pestering me about it, okay?

TAKEZO: If you don't stop suppressing your feelings like that, you'll end up living a life dull as ditchwater, you know.

MITSUE: Keep your nose outta my business, will you, daddy? I've got things to do. I've got a dinner to make, and a lot of things to prepare for tomorrow. We've got a Children's Summer Storytelling Club where for 10 days the library staff tell stories to kids. Every day about 30 or 40 children get together in a little pine forest at Hijiyama where there's a cool breeze. They love our voices mingled with the sound of the breeze that blows through the pine branches. They look forward to it every day and I've got to be absolutely prepared.

Mitsue starts chopping cabbage with great gusto. Takezo watches her for a while, then dusts his way to the entryway. Mitsue now chops the cabbage with even greater vigor. Fade to blackout.

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"The Face of Jizo" has been translated into English, Chinese, Russian, French, German and Italian. These translated works can be purchased from the Komatsu-za theater

company founded and managed by Inoue Hisashi. Each edition is sold for 952 yen. Please note the Russian version is currently unavailable. You can place an order or ask for information either in Japanese or English via email at online@komatsuza.co.jp.

Roger Pulvers, author, playwright, theatre and film director, translator and journalist, has published more than fifty books in Japanese and English, including novels such as *The Death of Urashima Taro*, *General Yamashita's Treasure*, *Star Sand*, *Liv*, *Peaceful Circumstances* and *The Dream of Lafcadio Hearn*. In 2017 the feature film of *Star Sand*, written and directed by him, had wide release throughout Japan. He is also the author of two memoirs: *Japan: a Cultural Memoir* and *The Unmaking of an American*.

Roger has worked extensively in film and television. He was assistant to director Oshima Nagisa on the film *Merry Christmas*, *Mr. Lawrence*. He also co-wrote the script for the Japanese film *Ashita e no Yuigon* (Best Wishes for Tomorrow), for which he won the Crystal Simorgh Prize for Best Script at the 27th Fajr International Film Festival in Tehran.

Roger received the prestigious Miyazawa Kenji Prize in 2008 and the Noma Award for the Translation of Japanese Literature in 2013; in 2018, Japan's highest honor, the Order of the Rising Sun; and in 2019, the Order of Australia. Over the past fifty years he has translated prose, drama and poetry from Japanese, Russian and Polish. His plays have been widely performed in Australia, Japan and the United States.

More information about him is available on [English Wikipedia](#).

Inoue Hisashi was born in 1934 in Yamagata Prefecture and educated at Sophia University in Tokyo. He worked as a scriptwriter and stage manager at the France Theater, a vaudeville theater in downtown Asakusa before becoming a writer for radio and television. For five years he wrote scripts for the popular puppet show "Hyokkori Hyotan Island." He debuted in the theater with "The Belly Button of the Japanese," following it with many highly successful plays such as "The Adventures of Dogen," "The Blind Master Yabuhara," "Makeup" and a series of plays about Japanese authors, Ichiyo Higuchi, Soseki Natsume and Osamu Dazai among them.

Inoue also wrote dozens of novels and books of collected essays and won many prizes, including the Naoki Prize and the prestigious Asahi Prize. In 1984 he founded Komatsuza, a theater troupe dedicated to the production of his work. He donated his private library of some 70,000 books to his hometown, where the "Writer's Block Library" was established. Kawanishi-machi Friendly Plaza is the location of the library and the "Citizens' School" founded under the auspices of Komatsuza with Inoue as principal.

He was chairman of the Japan Pen Club and artistic director of Komatsuza. Inoue Hisashi



passed away on April 9, 2010, aged 75.