

An Original Play

Original plays do not generally fare well in the Japanese Kyogen repertoire. Most of those that manage to reach the stage disappear after two or three performances at the most. Since the beginning of the seventeenth century, upward of one hundred have been written. The creators range from playwrights to actor and politicians, with one by the great Shogun Ieyasu Tokugawa. But the only two survivors that readily come to mind are Junji Kinoshita's "The Tale of Hikoichi" (*Hikoichi-Banashi*—based on a northern Japan folktale), and Tadasu Iizawa's "Rinse River" (*Susugigawa*—based on a medieval French farce). The former has been done by a number of groups, but most frequently by the Nomura family, while the latter is the exclusive property of the Shigeyama family and has been adopted into their regular repertoire.

This phenomenon can perhaps be attributed to the fact that most basic human situations are quite thoroughly explored in the 257 plays of the present classical repertoire, making any fresh attempt seem redundant at best and imitative rather than innovative for the most part.

However, while we have a definite preference for the classical pieces in our work with Kyogen in English, we have found that audiences seem to relate more readily to the traditional works when they are presented side by side with Western-oriented original pieces.

Our first innovative attempt was the performance of "The Water-Throwing Son-in-Law" (*Mizu-Kake Muko*) in jeans. It elicited particularly enthusiastic response when we toured California during the drought in the late 1970s, as it is about farmers quarreling over water rights during a dry season. William Butler Yeats' "The Cat and the Moon" was our first Occidental play. We do it in formal Japanese attire (*montsuki-hakama*) and in strict Kyogen

style dialogue delivery, songs, and movement. Subsequently, three plays were written expressly for us—"Meeting, Parting, and a Paper Dog" (*Ronin Sakazuki*) by Masaki Domoto; "*Gaijin Toroku Sho*" (Alien Registration Certificate) and "Demons All" (*Oni-Doshi*) by Donald Richie. All of these enjoyed enthusiastic response and we have done them a number of times.

"A Slight Flaw" is my first foray into the field of playwrighting. It represents something of an amalgamation of our fifteen years of work with Kyogen in English and a new starting point toward a broadening of creative horizons for me.

The plot is based upon the "Death Deity" (*Shinigami*) of Rakugo and a play of the same title by a Noh flautist, while the personality of my Deputy Death Deity was inspired by the Taoist hermit in Barry Hughart's novel *Bridge of Birds*.

In its direction, I have consciously borrowed bits (or more technically "lazzi"—the term used for set capsules of often repeated stage business in the Italian *commedia dell'arte*) from the classical repertoire throughout. Also the mask (carved by Rebecca Teele) and all the costumes are variations on their classical counterparts.

I have introduced rather more songs and dances than is normally the case, resulting in a sort of "musical comedy" Kyogen (also intentional, as I have a particular fondness for Broadway musicals).

"A Slight Flaw" was previewed on May 20, 1988, at Rinsen Temple (our studio in Myogadani, Tokyo). Subsequently, we presented it at the Ginza Noh Theatre on May 21 and 28. Then we toured the U.S. military installations—Yokota, Yokosuka, Zama, and New Sanno Hotel—and closed the season back at Rinsen Temple on July 15. The cast was Arturo Galster as the Man, Denise Drouin as the Wife, Shichiro Ogawa as her Sick Husband, and myself as the Deputy Death Deity.

A Slight Flaw
or,
The Deputy Death Deity
by Don Kenny

Cast of Characters

Man	(First Shite)
Deputy Death Deity	(Second Shite)
Woman	(Ado)
Sick Husband	(Koado)

MAN: I am a resident of this neighborhood. Recently I have fallen upon particularly bad times. My debts have piled up higher and higher, and I have borrowed so much from one to pay off another that I no longer know whether I am coming or going. Also my wife nags at me constantly to make more money. Just this morning, she even threatened to break my skull with her skillet if I don't bring some cash home tonight. But since I have no work and no one will lend me any more, I wonder what I should do. Oh, I know, I will just commit suicide, and that will teach my wife a lesson she will not soon forget. I must hurry on my way. Truly, no matter how bad off a man may be, if only he can make a clear decision, he can accomplish anything he may wish. Now that I made up my mind, my burdens seem suddenly lighter, and I am filled with joy and vigor. Well, here I am already, at Suicide Plateau. Oh, I must say, what a busy place this is today. As I have never committed suicide before, I thought I would find someone to show me how, but it seems all those here have finished and can no

longer help me. If only I had come a little earlier, I would have had all the help I need. I wish I could find some assistance.

DDD: (*Entering.*) And here I am, at your service.

MAN: And who, Sir, might you be?

DDD: I am a Deputy Death Deity, with a slight flaw in my character. I have been appointed as your counsellor on all matters concerning your passage from this world to the next.

MAN: I am most happy to meet you, for I am in need of advice and assistance.

DDD: What might your problem be?

MAN: I have decided to commit suicide, but I have no idea how to go about it.

DDD: Taking poison is one easy way.

MAN: But I always choke when I try to swallow medicine.

DDD: Jumping off a roof or some high place might do.

MAN: But high places make me dizzy.

DDD: Drowning in a river, a lake, or the sea is always popular.

MAN: But water scares me and I cannot swim.

DDD: Hanging by the neck from a tree or a skyhook might suit your purpose.

MAN: But I have an awful coughing fit even when I wrap a scarf around my neck.

DDD: Cutting the stomach open with a dagger was once a favored sport that enjoyed a recent revival.

MAN: But I faint at the slightest pain and vomit at the sight of blood.

DDD: Well, I must say, you do have a problem. But as you have plenty of time, I am sure we will find some method to suit your taste by the time your time comes around.

MAN: But my time is already up, as I intend to die right here and now.

DDD: (*Laughing.*) What a hasty fellow you are.

MAN: Why do you laugh and call me hasty? I am in debt up to my ears, my wife threatens to break my skull, my friends have all abandoned me, and I have no work. There is no way I can go on living.

DDD: As I told you before, you have plenty of time no matter

what you do or say, for the length of life on earth of everyone is set by my boss the Chief Death Deity Emma, and yours is 80 years. So no matter how hard you may try to come join us in Deathland, you still have 00 (*Saying the number of years left until the actor playing MAN will reach 80.*) years to go here. If you take poison it will go through you with no effect; if you jump from a high place, you will land on something soft; if you hang yourself, the rope will break; and if you try to cut your stomach open, your knife will be too dull. I will always be near to see you safely through.

MAN: But what am I to do?

DDD: On an official level, there is nothing I can do except come for you when your time has come. It is only due to the flaw in my character that I appeared to you when you called. And the same flaw has made me take a liking to you, so I will see what I can do to help you prosper and enjoy the remainder of your life here.

MAN: But, as I told you before, my wife hates me, I have no friends, and there is no way for me to make a living.

DDD: You shall become a doctor!

MAN: But I know nothing of medicine.

DDD: Medicine is a thing that only makes people think they feel better. The fact of the matter is, whenever somebody in this neighborhood falls ill, it is my job to keep vigil at their bedside. When it is their time to go, I sit near their pillow, but if I sit at their feet, no matter how hopeless the case may appear, they will pull through and go on living. So in the latter type of case, all you need do is give them something that looks like medicine. They will recover quickly, and you will be handsomely paid.

MAN: But I have never seen you at anybody's bedside.

DDD: Now that I have appeared to you, you will be able to see me from now on.

MAN: If that is the case, it sounds like something I can do. I humbly thank you for your kind assistance.

DDD: Wait right there for a minute.

MAN: With all my heart.

DDD: (*Bringing hat and cloak.*) Dress yourself in these, and you will look just like a proper doctor.

MAN: As you say, Sir. (*Dresses.*) How do I look?

DDD: Most doctor-like.

MAN: I must be on my way.

DDD: Wait just a minute. There is one more matter we must discuss before you begin your new work.

MAN: What might that thing be?

DDD: Another manifestation of the slight flaw in my character is a bad habit of dozing during my vigils, and I do sleep soundly. This makes the patient suffer longer than he should, for as long as I am present, he will remain ill. So while I realize it is a great bother, you must awaken me and lead me away to effect the final cure.

MAN: With all my heart.

DDD: There is a special song and dance that never fails to awaken me, for I do love good music. I will teach it to you.

MAN: Please teach it to me.

DDD: (*Singing and dancing.*)

Wake up now and come with me,

My one and only Deputy Death Deity.

Abraca-dabra, dabra, dabra,

Abraca-dabra, dab, dab, dab.

MAN: I think I've got it. Is this the way? (*Sings and dances above song.*)

DDD: Well done, well done!

MAN: (*Laughing.*) I was most awkward.

DDD: Let us sing and dance it together as we go on our way.

MAN: With all my heart.

(MAN and DDD sing and dance once on main stage, stop to laugh together, and then exit singing and dancing.)

(Woman comes on leading SICK HUSBAND and helps him lie down. DDD comes on and sits at head of SICK HUSBAND.)

WOMAN: I am the dearly beloved wife of the richest resident in all this neighborhood. My darling husband has taken seriously ill,

and the old doctors have given up on him. But recently I heard there is a new doctor whose skill is unsurpassed. I will go ask him to come and cure my darling husband. I say, I say! Is anybody home?!

MAN: (*Entering.*) Who is there, who is there?

WOMAN: My darling husband is ill and dying. Please come and cure him, and I will pay you a very handsome fee.

MAN: I am at your service.

WOMAN: Come with me.

MAN: With all my heart.

WOMAN: Here is my husband.

MAN: I will look him over.

(MAN sees DDD sitting at head of SICK HUSBAND and is surprised.)

MAN: (*Aside.*) What is this? He is sitting near the pillow! Since I met my Deputy Death Deity, my fortunes have improved and I have grown wealthy indeed. But recently he insists on sitting near the head of nearly all my patients. Money is a funny thing that makes one want more the more one has got. I wonder how I can manage to get for myself the very handsome fee this wealthy woman offered me? Oh, I know what I'll do. He said he has a weakness for music, and he often dozes on the job and sleeps most soundly. I'll just see what I can do to put him into a particularly deep sleep. (*To WOMAN.*) I say, I say! I have a matter to discuss with you. Please come over here.

WOMAN: As you say, Sir.

MAN: Your husband requires music to cure him of his ailment. You must help me sing and dance for him.

WOMAN: With all my heart.

MAN & WOMAN: (*Singing and dancing.*)

Close your eyes and just relax,

All your cares will go

And you will find joy and peace.

DDD: Oh, I must say, what lovely music. How sleepy it makes me! I think I'll just take a little nap. (*Lies down facing off right.*) Oh, how sleepy, how sleepy I am!

(MAN and WOMAN stop singing and dancing. MAN goes to check on DDD, smiles, and nods.)

MAN: (*To WOMAN*) Come over here for a minute.

WOMAN: With all my heart.

MAN: He is responding well, but his head is facing a most inauspicious direction. We must turn him around to complete the cure. You take his feet and help me.

WOMAN: With all my heart.

(MAN takes head and WOMAN takes feet of SICK HUSBAND and turn him around making his feet lie toward DDD)

MAN: Now you must sing another song to help him come to.

WOMAN: As you say, Sir. (*Singing and dancing.*)

Wake up now and come with me,

My one and only, my dearest darling husband.

SICK HUSBAND: (*Opening his eyes and getting to his feet while singing.*)

I wake up now and go with you,

My one and only, my dearly beloved wife.

WOMAN: (*During SICK HUSBAND's song.*) Oh, how happy, how happy I am! (*Opens fan and goes to MAN.*) Here is your very handsome fee. Zara, zara, zara.

MAN: (*Opens fan and receives fee.*) I gladly accept it, and thank you with all my heart.

WOMAN: (*To SICK HUSBAND.*) Oh, darling! Come along with me!

WOMAN: (*Exits, followed by SICK HUSBAND, repeating following until off stage.*) Come with me, oh, come with me!

SICK HUSBAND: With all my heart, with all my heart!

MAN: (*Watches WOMAN and SICK HUSBAND go, then sneaks away singing and dancing softly.*)

Wake up now and come with me,

My one and only Deputy Death Deity.

Abraca-dabra, dabra, dabra,

Abraca-dabra, dab, dab, dab.

DDD: (*Wakes, begins to sing with MAN while getting to this feet. They come together by end of song, return to original posi-*

tions, laughing. But when DDD looks where SICK HUSBAND should be, he stops laughing and stamps his right foot and shouts.) Hey, hey! Hey, you rascally Quack!

MAN: (*Facing DDD.*) Huh?

DDD: Where is the sick man I am to take away today?!

MAN: Why, he got well and went off with his wife.

DDD: (*Laughing.*) What a clever rascal you are! So you took advantage of my character flaw to trick me. By curing him this way, your former wish comes true, for it means you gave your remaining years to him and your time is all used up. Now you must come with me to fill my quota for today.

MAN: But now I want to live some more.

DDD: What's this? You say you want to live some more?

MAN: Most certainly!

DDD: But I thought you planned it this way.

MAN: No, no! I only wanted more money to make my long life more enjoyable.

DDD: Well, I must say, what a changeable rascal you are! But no matter what you say or do, you gave your time away and now you have no more.

MAN: (*Bowing.*) Oh, woe is me! Please let me live some more!

DDD: (*Chasing MAN off.*) You rascally Quack, your time is all gone!

MAN: Please let me live!

DDD: Your time is gone, your time is gone!

MAN: Let me live, oh, let me live!

DDD: Your time is gone, your time is gone!

MAN: Let me live, oh, let me live!

DDD: Your time is gone, your time is gone!