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(出版者 / Publisher)

法政大学人間環境学会

(雑誌名 / Journal or Publication Title)

人間環境論集 / The Hosei Journal of Sustainability Studies

(巻 / Volume)

24

(号 / Number)

2

(開始ページ / Start Page)

77

(終了ページ / End Page)

88

(発行年 / Year)

2024-01-31

(URL)

<https://doi.org/10.15002/00030467>

The Social Drama *The Attic* and Spatial Connotations of ‘an attic’

Chieko Hiranoi

1. Who is Sakate Yoji?

Sakate Yoji is one of the representative and active playwrights and directors in contemporary Japan. He was born in 1962, and he started his theatrical career by founding the theater company *Rinkōgun* during his undergraduate education in 1983. The small theater movement in the 1980s including Sakate, Kōkami Shōji, Kawamura Tsuyoshi and Noda Hideki, attracted considerable attention. Throughout his career, he has been renowned as a writer who has strong interests in social and controversial issues today such as wars, violence, prejudice, LGBT, whaling, the emperor system, new cult religion, *hikikomori* (social withdrawal), and so on. Some of his works have repeatedly been performed overseas including *The Attic* and *Breathless*. (This essay does not discuss *Breathless*, which deals with a cult religion in the background of the ‘Bubble economy.’ The guru has a connotation of *King Lear*.)

He has also directed other playwrights’ works in his company, such as Betsuyaku Minoru and David Hare. Betsuyaku is a charismatic figure representing the genre of absurd drama during the 1960s in Japan: Sakate directed *The Elephant* and *The Little Match Girl* in 2003, both of which were first staged in the 1960s. On the other hand, he has a strong sympathy towards David Hare in dramaturgy, not only presenting documentary or verbatim theater, such as *The Permanent Way* (2003) and *Stuff Happens* (2004), but also

working on solid story development in other dramas like *Skylight* (1995) and *Amy's View* (1998). (* Each year with parentheses after drama titles indicates the year of its first performance.) In addition, in the summer of 2021, Sakate performed a drama reading, *Beat the Devil*, written by David Hare in 2020, which candidly describes what COVID-19 is from the perspective of a patient and criticizes the British government's policy and measures. It was shown in many cities in Japan from Hokkaido to Okinawa. Sakate explains his sympathy and respect for Hare in a talk with Kawai Shōichirō after the National Theater Live, *Straight Line Crazy* (2022) (Cultureville, 2022, 6: 08).

2. Social Episodes Reflected in *The Attic*

The Attic was first performed in 2002 and got a Yomiuri Prize for Literature and Yomiuri Theater Grand Prize for the best director. This work was originally intended for a small theater, Umegaoka Box, which is run by the limited company, Good Fellows, closely related to Sakate's theater company, Rinkōgun. After the first performance, *The Attic* has been shown not only in regional cities in Japan but also overseas, including the US, European countries, and Australia. We can read Sakate's essays on his directing experience in NIDA (National Institute of Dramatic Art) in Sydney, in one of the 59E59 Theaters in Off Broadway, and in ArKo & Daehakro Arts Theater in Seoul, written for the periodical, *Higeki Kigeki* (Tragedies and Comedies). *The Attic* consists of 23 scenes: some of them directly depict the social problem, *hikikomori*, and others tend to elicit attention and interest from audiences in the specific design of the stage signifying an attic and a variety of communication developed in it. Sakate is in charge of the set design, and he assumes the name of John Manjirō when engaged in set design.

The entire work assumes that 'attic kits' (intended for users to assemble) gradually become popular as a product on sale. For example, a young man

purchases an attic kit to set it in his personal room in a dormitory on campus. He does not appear on stage at first, because the play starts shortly after he commits suicide in the attic. The main character throughout the play is his elder brother, who visits the dormitory room and makes up his mind to investigate what has caused his brother's death by searching for the inventor of the attic kit as a merchandise. In the process, he turns into a counselor to talk to *hikikomori* people and their families. He notices that one of the *hikikomori* continues to confine a girl in his attic and urges the mother to do right thing to rescue her. This is the most serious episode based on an actual crime. On the other hand, his younger brother becomes a savior for *hikikomori*, called 'the attic hunter' (because his portrait drawn on the attic walls looks like a hunter), after death. He appears as 'a man wearing a hat.' The way to call him for help is to draw his whole figure on the attic wall, imitating and enlarging the picture that was originally drawn there. The confined girl comes to notice it and the attic hunter visits the attic to rescue her. The episode described in the two scenes is explicitly connected to the actual crime that had been committed from 1990 to 2000 in Niigata prefecture in Japan. In the end of the play, the elder brother finally discovers the attic factory and manages to meet his younger brother, the attic hunter. The brothers reunite in the end and talk about the hideout where they used to enjoy staying in their childhood. Throughout the play, the cause of the younger brother's *hikikomori* is not clarified but the audience can only imagine there might have been some traumatic experience for him in his social life from his elder brother's remark describing his younger brother's personality as very smart, honest, modest, and gentle.

Sakate also describes a typically distorted relationship between a *hikikomori* man and his mother in another episode. It seems that the scene reflects universal features of *hikikomori* such as a son's violence against his mother and the mother accepting her son's request like his slave. However,

their final dialogue sounds strange in that the overall atmosphere is relatively calm and even pleasant with jokes. Audiences come to notice that this is the last conversation between the mother and son, because the mother has been in hospital and passed away thirty minutes before. Sakate does not clearly describe the cause of her death, but such an episode suggests that *hikikomori* problems tend to be difficult to sort out or improve and consequently continue to get worse for years. Such an aspect inevitably leads to the 8050 issues, which has recently been focused on, that is, *hikikomori* people's life heavily depending on their elderly parents. Even though they can survive owing to their parents' pensions or savings in the meantime, they come to be left without any means of living after their parents' death. The fact also tortures such parents.

Sakate shows another *hikikomori* man with humor. The man has set the attic underneath his parents' house to retreat into it. He has spent days there watching videos and chatting on the internet with people he has never met. It seems that he has died because the attic window has been blocked with a heavy amount of mud and he cannot go out from there. His father appears in the scene, but he does not refer to any violence. The scene is depicted with humor. When the internet people visit his parents' house to look for him, he or the dead body speaks in response to them and his father, although they cannot hear him. The internet people call him Yamamoto-san, or by his handle name, 'White rabbit' (the dead body wears rabbit headgear) and they seem to be serious and worried about him. However, every utterance, including what his father says, is totally off the point and inconsistent. Their talk sounds like a piece of conversation from any absurd drama. It might be a caricature of communication loss for *hikikomori* people. Saito (2020) states that people are supposed to interact with their family and surrounding society and the lack of such interaction can cause a sense of failure or traumatic experience and consequently accumulates conflict in the human mind (Saito, 2020, pp. 116-120).

It is generally acknowledged that the number of *hikikomori* men is

significantly bigger than that of *hikikomori* women, and it has mainly been caused by high expectation for boys in a conservative Japanese family (Saito, 2020, p.73). However, Sakate fairly pays attention to woman/girl cases, and depicts a girl *hikikomori*, a junior high school student. She puts her attic on the verandah of her parents' house and stays there instead of going to school, where she is being bullied. Sakate depicts the girl, smart, calm and objective, in two scenes. In the first scene, a boy classmate comes to see her with a mission from other boys, bullies, and his own sexual interests. The mission is seducing her and recording any intimate interaction with a photo as a proof. The girl figures out the vulgar trap and drives him off from her attic. They have both been bullying targets in class, and they have been forced to be a couple in a pretend wedding. This could be a parody of a horrible incident in 1986. A junior high school student committed suicide in a public toilet. He had been bullied mentally and physically in class, which finally led to a pretend funeral for him, where even their teachers joined. Even after the incident, the teachers tried to conceal the fact of bullying against the boy to protect themselves. In the second scene the same girl appears, the teacher in charge of the class comes to see her. She also joined the pretend wedding and apologizes about it when she visits the girl, but she still tries to deny the intention of bullying in the pretend play among bullies, to avoid serious criticism against her in terms of a teacher's responsibility, mismanagement of class from the school principal and in the board of education. However, as she talks to the girl, she gradually reveals her own experience of being bullied by the school principal, as a victim of power harassment, unreasonable demands in regular duties at school. Finally, she confesses to the girl that she has tried to commit suicide many times and she would like to quit the job and withdraw from the society as well. The girl recommends her teacher to do as she wants, but the teacher says she would not like to be a loser. In the end of the scene, the girl encourages her teacher by sharing the quasi planetarium she has made in the attic. Sakate describes

the ironical situation with humor, and at the same time, suggests that human desire of bullying, or dominating others could be prevalently associated with potential cruelty and egoism in human beings.

3. Social Background and Other Plays

This section describes the social problem of *hikikomori* in Japan, starting with some vocabularies which can be connected to *hikikomori*, 'pū-tarō,' 'freeter,' and 'NEET.'

'Pū-tarō' sounds like a Japanese expression suggesting a wanderer. It is a colloquial expression that vaguely means unemployed youth, whether they are actively seeking a job or not. Some people use the word even for part-time workers pejoratively.

'Freeter' is a Japanese English word, which means 'freelance part-time worker (wrongly mixed with the German vocabulary, 'Arbeiter'). The Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (2012) defines 'freeter' as follows:

1. 15- to 34-year-old, men who have finished their final education and single women who have finished their final education and,
2. People who are currently part-time workers or,
3. Unemployed people looking for part-time jobs and fully prepared for starting to work or,
4. Unemployed people interested in part-time jobs but who cannot start work immediately after a job-offer, and who are not engaged in household chores or in education.

(My translation).

The final expression 'NEET' is the abbreviation of 'Not in Education, Employment or Training.' The OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation

and Development) definition originally includes unemployed youth, 15- to 29-year-old engaged in job-hunting (OECD, 2023). However, in Japan, the same expression excludes unemployed youth 15- to 34-year-old engaged in job-hunting and it means unemployed youth not engaged in school education, household chores or job-hunting (The Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, 2012). That is why 'NEET' has come to be the most pejorative expression among the three expressions in Japan.

To a greater or lesser degree, all three expressions tend to be associated with *hikikomori*. The situation of *hikikomori* came to be noticed due to the two horrible crimes revealed in the year of 2000 in Japan, a kidnapping and confinement case and a bus hijacking. This is because both criminals had been afflicted by their own *hikikomori*. The criminal of the confinement case kidnapped a nine-year-old girl when he was twenty-eight and continued to confine her for more than nine years in his room in his parents' house, where he lived with his mother. The bus hijack was committed by a seventeen-year-old boy, who could not adapt himself to a junior high school life because of bullies. He said that he had done it instead of attacking the school from which he graduated, killing some students there and committing suicide. Especially with the first crime, Sakate depicts a similar case in one of the episodes of *The Attic*.

Saito (1998) defined *hikikomori* as cases meeting the following conditions:

1. No social participation for longer than six months
2. No other mental diseases causing *hikikomori*
3. Coming to be problematic by the end of their 20s

(My translation).

However, Saito (2020) deleted the onset timing afterwards because he found out that *hikikomori* can start even much later than their 20s. It leads to

the 8050 issues, where old people are obliged to care for their middle-aged *hikikomori* sons and daughters. Other contemporary playwrights deal with the 8050 issues in their plays, such as Matsuo Suzuki's *Inochi Giga Nagasu* (Life is Uselessly Long!) (2019) and Akahori Masaaki's *Hakuchūmu* (Daydream) (2021). *Inochi Giga Nagasu* is a two-actor drama with Matsuo Suzuki and Andō Tamae in the original version. They play an alcoholic *hikikomori* son and his mother suffering from dementia. Andō also plays a female college student working on a documentary film about the family and Matsuo appears as her supervisor with sexual desire for her. *Hakuchūmu* depicts a *hikikomori* man in his forties, and his relationships with his father and elder brother. The story involves people from outside, support-group staff, an experienced middle-aged man, and an immature young woman who had also suffered from *hikikomori* till some years ago. In both plays, people from outside cannot get out of their own plight or at least are unsatisfied with their situation as well. Of course, eighty is a symbolic age of elderly parents and fifty is the one for their middle-aged children. Okada Toshiki's *Sōjiki* (The Vacuum Cleaner) was first shown in Munich in 2019 and highly acclaimed in Germany, which also depicts the 8050 issues from the viewpoint of the personified vacuum cleaner used for years in a family.

4. Connotations of an attic

The social issue of *hikikomori* is dominant in the entire play because of its intense topicality, but the play also explores the potential meaning of a limited and closed space like an attic. Sakate (2007) explicitly states that the topic of *hikikomori* tends to be emphasized too much and he would like to elicit attention on communication developed in the attic among audiences.

The old image of an attic has often been a storage place, or a miserable place to live for servants or poor people, as a remaining space between top

floor and roof, either in Japan or overseas. For example, in traditional Japanese style farmhouses built hundreds of years ago, attics or upper floors were designed for storage, servants' living space or raising silkworms. It is often said about such old-fashioned houses that sons and daughters except for the first son could not live on the ground floor. Maeda (1982) states that the second floor (the first floor in the UK) in traditional Japanese-style houses is closer to attics in European constructions rather than the second floor of European constructions in its hidden and solitary atmosphere.

On the other hand, an attic could be an extraordinary place which might include something interesting or mysterious, especially for children. For example, in a Greek movie, *A Touch of Spice*, the attic is described as a storage place for spices in the grocery store the protagonist's grandfather runs, and as his favorite place to stay, where his grandfather teaches him about spices and astronomy. Sugawara (2020) analyzes '*yaneura* (attic)' described in a variety of literary works in Europe, Russia and Japan, and sometimes regards attics as a space for poets enriching imagination. Nowadays, some Japanese people long for an attic in their houses as a special place for hobbies or study, because of its independent quality from the other spaces in a house, despite such inconvenience as poor air-conditioning, or steep and narrow staircase.

In Sakate's play, *hikikomori* people prefer their own attic to the outside world as their refuge or at least a comfortable place to protect privacy, adjacent to their original house or flat, and other episodes transform the attic into different imaginary places.

Apart from the scenes related to the serious social issue, Sakate describes several scenes showing his interest in the space. For example, he humorously describes two detectives watching a suspect. They assemble the attic kit on the street as their waiting space instead of a car or a room in another building, which is normally expected for a detective drama. In the following scene, the two detectives turn into samurai in a historical drama spying on their

enemy's residence above the ceiling (equivalent to attic in this play) to disclose betrayers. Both scenes treat the attic as a useful setting for an explicit purpose, to catch a target. In both scenes, endlessly continued coin-tossing between each pair might symbolize their unchosen solidarity in a closed space. An attic is also used as an air raid shelter in a war district. In the scene, two volunteers in mine clearing hide themselves in the simple shelter, the attic. They have lost their guide and sarcastically discuss in despair Japan's international status, contributing a great deal but often being neglected. In a different episode, an attic kit comes to be used as a mountain hut for climbers. The scene depicts some conversation between a climber and a ghost pretending to be a climber in furious snowstorm. During the conversation, another climber comes in and continues to be frightened. This is because she can only hear the climber's monologue and cannot see anyone but the climber. She remembers a superstition and implies that the climber should be an only survivor of his climbing party. In this episode, the mountain hut, a transformation of an attic, is the border place the dead wanders into.

The attic kit is finally transformed into a cardboard house made by homeless people. They reuse an abandoned attic for part of their residence on a riverbank. A messenger from the neighborhood association comes to persuade them to remove their cardboard house from there, but they don't follow the instruction. In fact, the messenger is the inventor of the attic kit. Shortly after he leaves, their house is attacked by violent children and thrown away into the river with them. The play was first performed in 2002, but this episode reminds Japanese people of a series of murders, committed by a group of minors in 1983 in Yokohama city. Unfortunately, there have been repeated assaults against homeless people from that time on by young people. (On the other hand, a middle-aged *hikikomori* man attacked and murdered an elderly homeless woman at a bus-stop in Tokyo, where she used to take a rest at night, in 2020. He declared to the neighborhood that he had been a *hikikomori* since in his

twenties, and he was notorious as a claimer because he was unusually sensitive for changes in his surroundings such as neighbors' renovations.)

Apart from visible connotations, the attic can be turned into Anne Frank's hideout in the *hikikomori* girl's association between Anne and herself, and a woman *hikikomori* with false pregnancy compares an attic to a womb, where a fetus stays until birth.

5. Conclusion

While Sakate depicts the social issue, *hikikomori* in *The Attic*, he also tries to present connotations of such limited and closed spaces as an attic in the scenes that are irrelevant to *hikikomori*. However, it is the feeling of entrapment and stagnation that raises intimacy or solidarity among people in it and at the same time increases solitude, a sense of alienation and finally antipathy against/from the outside world. A great variety of situations depicted in *The Attic* signify a microcosm of sad aspects of our society.

The protagonist, the elder brother, finally meets his younger brother, who has transformed himself into the attic hunter after his death, although the elder brother cannot recognize the attic hunter as his younger brother at first. Sakate (2006) states that he referred to *fukushiki mugen nō* for NIDA student-actors to understand the play, where a priest meets a protagonist's incarnation in the first act, and he reunites the protagonist in the second act. The author understands that *The Attic* depicts family-breakdowns, but its main plot or framework shows a family-reunion through the brotherhood in the end.

* *Yaneura* (The Attic) was published in 2007 by Hayakawa shobō, with *Mimizu* (The Earthworm) in a single volume.

* This article was written based on the paper, 'The Social Drama *the Attic* and its Spatial Meaning,' presented in the international hybrid conference, 'Japan, Pre-modern, Modern & Contemporary,' hosted by "Dimitrie Cantemir" Christian University, Bucharest, September 2-4, 2022.

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