Counter-Narrativity and Corporeality
in Kishida Rio’s *Ito Jigoku*

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Kishida Rio (1946-2003), a playwright, director and screenwriter, first worked in 1974 for the experimental theatre laboratory Tenjo Sajiki (Peanut Gallery), headed by Terayama Shūji (1935-1983), one of the charismatic male leaders of Japan’s *angura* (underground) theatre groups in the 1960s and 1970s. While working closely with Terayama, Kishida also developed independent theatre projects with other theatre companies beginning in 1977, and founded her own theatre company in 1984. The play *Ito Jigoku* [*Thread Hell*], which depicts working women living in darkness and silence as Japan establishes itself as a modern nation state through exploiting them, was awarded the prestigious Kishida Kunio Drama Prize in 1985. In *Ito Jigoku*, the possibilities of performativity in terms of the construction of female subjectivity are intensively explored. This exploration was made possible through countering and problematizing the dominant canons and discourses of modernity surrounding sexuality and the construction of female subjectivity and corporeality.

**Introduction**

Kishida Rio (1946-2003) wrote plays for Terayama Shūji’s avant-garde theatre group Tenjō Sajiki (The Peanut Gallery) from 1974 onwards, allowing her to gain valuable experience from working closely with him. Though she became involved in her own theatre projects beginning in 1977, while continuing her work with Tenjō Sajiki, Kishida’s growth as a playwright can, in large part, be attributed to the time spent in collaboration with Terayama. She had great respect for Terayama and his influence on her work is immeasurable. Kishida herself acknowledges this when she talks about never being able to step out of his immense shadow. In theatrical circles and in the media generally, she was seen as Terayama’s disciple, and was even described as “the female Terayama,” an intended compliment.

In this essay, I seek to verify the extent of Kishida Rio’s contribution “as a woman” to the creation of new theatre under one of the most intensely individualistic male leaders of *angura*, or underground, theatre. I will examine one of Kishida’s own dramatic texts, *Ito Jigoku* (*Woven Hell*, 1984), which was written after Terayama’s death and received the prestigious 29th Kishida Kunio Drama Award in 1985, and I particularly want to focus on the dramatic world that Kishida was able to create for herself.

Kishida actually revised one of her collaborative works with Terayama, *Shintokumaru*, in the early 1990s. As theatre scholar Tanigawa
Michiko points out, however, the difficulty here lies in not being able to distinguish clearly between their respective contributions:

During Kishida’s final years with Terayama, collaborative works such as Shintoku-maru: Poison Boy, The Audience Seats, and Lemmings were born; in these works, it is not clear how much of the writing is Terayama’s and how much is Kishida’s. Sharing Terayama’s ability to devise striking alienation methods, she adopted a multi-dimensional, resilient pose. At the same time, beginning in the late 1970s, she commenced to work independently from but parallel to the Peanut Gallery. As Kishida put it, “I obtained Terayama’s permission to write (for myself) by saying I wanted to write about women.” (167, emphasis added)

While Kishida never referred to herself as a feminist, she sought to problematize the dominant canons and discourses surrounding sexuality and the construction of female subjectivity when she aspired to “write about women.” Her work intersected with the 1970s women’s liberation movement in Japan and the subsequent expansion of feminism in the 1980s to produce unique theatrical expression. Kishida utilized her theatrical apprenticeship with Tenjō Sajiki during the 1970s to devise her own theatrical motifs and expression, which then blossomed in the 1980s after she started writing about motifs dealing with women and the history of Japanese Modernism in the latter half of the 1970s.

In a panel discussion entitled, “How does Theatre Perceive the ‘Imperial System’?,” Kishida points out that for her personally the “imperial system” is inseparable from women’s history, though she also notes the lack of interest in the “imperial system” shown by women playwrights after Akimoto Matsuyo (1911-2001):

When I look at today's topic (of discussion), “the imperial system and theatre,” I can’t help thinking about the imperial system in terms of women’s history. After Akimoto Matsuyo, women playwrights have shown far too little interest in the imperial system, and, personally, I don’t know why that is. I’ve been dealing with the issue of women in Japanese history versus the imperial system since the 70s, so I find this vacuum (of interest) intriguing. For instance, there are five of us here today, and it’s always like this, but I’m the only woman (laughs). (Kishida 18, my trans.)

In a sense, it is perhaps inevitable that Kishida would feel her work to be different from the work of other women playwrights due to her problematization of the imperial system from the historical viewpoint of women’s