

A Brief Introduction to *A Small House and Five Gentlemen*

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Minoru Betsuyaku was born in 1937 in Japanese-occupied Manchuria. He grew up in a time of war and hardship, dominated by absolutism. In Japan, allegiance to the centralist emperor system persists to this day, and may well be one reason for Betsuyaku's attempts to awaken Japanese audience to the dangers of conformism and the illusory nature of dogma. In his plays dialogue is short, clear and humorous, but with sinister implications. His stage settings are bare minimum, often a telegraph pole. In *A Small House and Five Gentlemen*, it is a cardboard box, which turns into a house at the end of the play, gradually enveloped by a darkening sky. In discussing "the structural dynamics of Beckett's space", Betsuyaku has commented:

Contrary to the space of modern theatre which features three walls on stage, in Beckett's space, the object being placed in the centre tries to characterise the space by means of centrifugal force as well as its diffusing power. The object acts as a focal point, a symbol of the infinity of space. What is important is that the object corresponds to the wholeness of infinity, while at the same time being simply part of it.¹

First performed in 1979, *A Small House and Five Gentlemen* is an avant-garde play, which lends itself to more than one interpretation. The play is concerned with existential themes presented in an absurdist form. Everything that we regard as certain—common knowledge, possessions, existence itself—dissolves into illusion. The five gentlemen have the greatest difficulty in explaining even the simplest things to one another. They remain prisoners of their own perceptions, anaesthetised by the ordinariness of daily life. In successive sequences farce counterpoints violence. Towards the close of the play the attempt

by the five gentlemen to stop an act of cruelty results in an even greater horror, and then indifference. Surrounded by ambiguity and unable to break free from the isolation in which they find themselves, they set about creating an imaginary house—a small private space for someone to occupy. But they will only be able to look at it from a distance and imagine that they, too, are living there, “although the people in there know nothing about how we’re thinking”.

Notes

- 1 “The World of Betsuyaku Minoru, *Bessatsu Shinyo*, vol. 12, no. 4 (1980), p. 40.