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Four Major Plays Of Chikamatsu



Synopsis

Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653-1725) wrote some 130 plays, chiefly for the puppet theater, many of which are still performed today by puppet operators and Kabuki actors. Chikamatsu is thought to have written the first major tragedies about the common man. This edition of four of his most important plays includes three popular domestic dramas and one history play. Chikamatsu's domestic dramas are accurate reflections of Japanese society at the time: his characters are samurai, farmers, merchants, and prostitutes who speak colloquially, and who people the shops, streets, teahouses, and brothels that constituted their daily environment. The heroes and heroines of these plays gain their tragic stature from their conflict with society. "The Love Suicides at Sonezaki" and "The Love Suicides at Amijima" became so popular that they initiated a vogue for love suicides, both in life and onstage. Donald Keene's translation of the original text is presented here with an introduction and a new preface to aid readers in their comprehension and enjoyment of the plays.

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Customer Reviews

This book is perfect for anyone with an interest in theatre. It's a great introduction to the works of Chikamatsu, and provides four of his best works. The translating is excellent (Donald Keene is undisputedly *the* expert on Japanese translation) and the works are accessible. I was skeptical before I read it, but now I'm a big fan of Chikamatsu. Give it a try!

As Keene points out in his introduction, Chikamatsu is no Shakespeare. There is a lack of grand themes and grand people here. Instead, these are (mostly) tiny tragedies, the misfortunes of the common man. Think instead of Arthur Miller. Also: don't be too quick to judge the puppet theatre (jojuri) an inherently second-rate. The use of puppets allowed the playwright a scope of action and violence that would have been impossible, unbelievable or just plain disgusting if performed by live actors. Chikamatsu takes full advantage of the structure of puppet theatre which involved voicing the characters and a narrator—a kind of first, second and third person telling of the drama all at once. These plays are good short introductions to a kind of performance that grew up in isolation from the rest of the world and without any references or debts to Western cultural traditions. Lynn Hoffman, author of the novel *bang BANG*

A representative selection of the plays of Chikamatsu Monzaemon, the foremost Japanese playwright, translated by the great Japan scholar Donald Keene. This is interesting reading but it's probably impossible for modern readers to even approximate the experience of these plays. They were written originally for puppet theater and from Keene's note, contain a lot of wordplay and allusions that would be difficult to appreciate, particularly in translation. They are probably of limited accessibility to Japanese audiences because the puppet theater technology has changed since the 18th century and some of the allusions involve classical Japanese literature. These plays include Chikamatsu's most popular play, the historical drama *The Battles of Coxinga*, a fantasized account of the career of the Sino-Japanese warlord Zheng Chonggeng, what might be called a domestic comedy involving the pleasure quarter of Osaka, and 2 love suicide plays. These plays involve melodramatic and often highly contrived plots and at least in these translations, some affecting language. In the pleasure quarter and love suicide plays, Chikamatsu portrays relatively ordinary people quite in substantial social and personal dilemmas that must have appealed to the urbanized and diverse audiences of 18th century Japan.

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