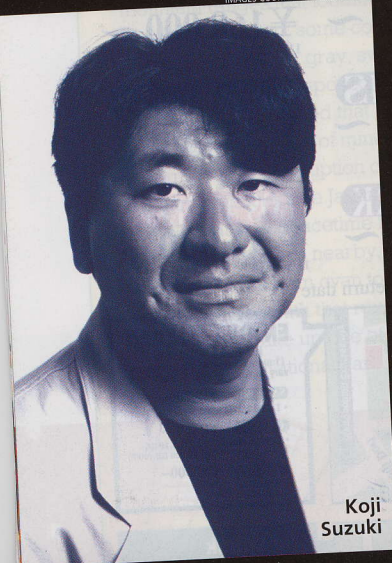


WATERCOLORS

THE HORROR WRITER OF *RINGU* FAME PAINTS A RIVETING TALE OF OPENING NIGHT WITH A TOKYO THEATRE TROUPE

BY KOJI SUZUKI

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Koji Suzuki

Early in the evening on a late summer day, the bridge over Shibaura Canal was swaying in the wind. On either side of the canal, old buildings rubbed shoulders with new ones in a higgledy-piggledy array, and strong gusts of wind blew in through the spaces between them. Looking south from mid-bridge, the third building was stained black with what looked like streaks of soot on its rear and side walls. Whether the black streaks were grime accumulated over many long years or an artificial design was hard to say. Until two summers ago, the building housed a discotheque called Mephisto on its third, fourth, and fifth floors. Each floor had a separate entrance, and customers could enter the disco through their entrance of choice, depending on how the spirit moved them at the time. The higher the floor, the more

extreme the music, fashion, and interior design. Dancers on the fifth floor were mostly half-naked women clad in black bondage gear.

Women clad in what amounted to nothing more than underwear vanished with the bursting of Japan's "bubble economy." Just where did they all go? The whereabouts of at least one of these women is known. Her name is Noriko Kikuchi and she has drifted back to this neighborhood. Her frenetic dancing experience at Mephisto had taught her the joys of self-expression. She thus became an actress with a small theatrical troupe, and it was in such a guise that she returned to the same building that once dominated the times.

Tokyo is home to countless small theatrical troupes. Many of these small troupes are nothing more than groups of like-minded individuals who get together now and then to offer performances to small audiences of less than three hundred per run. Yet some will on occasion make it to such venerable venues as Kinokuniya Hall and the Honda Theater. The provisional goal of people involved in these groups is to perform at such noted playhouses.

The theatrical company that Noriko belonged to appeared set to attain

that goal. Called Kairin Maru, which made it sound like a fishing boat, the troupe was on its way up, having attracted an audience of more than 1,500 to its last production. Mustering an audience of over 2,000 on their next run, they believed, was their ticket to Kinokuniya Hall. Members of the troupe had all pinned their hopes on Manager-Director Kenzo Kiyohara, a man of superhuman energy. If the troupe managed to get bigger, it would catch the eye of the mass media, making it more likely that the actors would get the kind of break they sought. The future of the troupe members thus lay in the capable hands of Kiyohara.

The playhouse that Kiyohara had chosen for the performance of their next play was that building wedged between the Shibaura Canal and the First Metropolitan Expressway—the building that had been the home of Mephisto until the year before last. After the disco had gone out of business, the owner of the building had been hard-pressed even to rent the premises out as a venue for local community events. It had never hosted anything like a full-scale drama production. The decision to stage that particular play must have involved a fair amount of risk; some leading members of the troupe had vigorously opposed the choice. Yet their misgivings transformed into fervent enthusiasm upon seeing the script. They appreciated the multi-layered composition of the play, the way the stage settings would use the building's structure to impressive effect. As every member of the troupe agreed, difficult though it would be to pull off, it was a challenge well worth taking on.

The third floor of the building was roughly parallel to the Metropolitan Expressway. Every time a truck drove past, the building would vibrate. The roar of traffic did penetrate the building and could be heard by the audience, but not enough to distract attention from the performance. As director, Kiyohara always sat among the audience, scrutinizing the stage from their perspective. He would mercilessly point out any mistakes he noted in the performance to cast members once the curtain came down. Accused cast members would have to rethink their roles and make proper adjustments by the next day. Thus, their theatrical production underwent a transformation even after opening night, right through to the final performance. A play honed to perfection over two months of rehearsal would often be turned upside down after the first performance. It was Kiyohara's practice to use feedback from the audience to refine the production.

As he briefly scanned the audience gathered to watch the first performance, he noticed that there were no empty seats in the house. If the audience continued to pour in as they were doing on this opening night, the troupe should easily exceed their target of 2,000 over the 15 scheduled performances. Kiyohara drew a long breath of relief. A telephone was ringing onstage. The young woman played by Noriko Kikuchi reached to answer it. She wore a running outfit with a scarf wrapped around her head, the kind of look she'd never have permitted herself back in her disco days. Before her outstretched hand could lift the receiver, she heard a man's voice behind her and started to turn around. That very instant, Kiyohara noticed something that had definitely not been there in rehearsal. Noriko and the actor behind her seemed to lose their concentration. Noriko brought her hand up to her cheek, and glanced up toward some point on the ceiling. Reacting to this, the actor behind her also looked up at the ceiling. Kiyohara, shocked, almost stood up from his seat. Water was dripping from the ceiling.

anxiety and hope. Kamiya was fascinated by the delicate nuance of her motions. She was a petite woman with a pale complexion and coquettish features. The running outfit she was wearing now concealed the contours of her body, but in the past she'd played roles that required her to undress onstage and reveal her splendidly proportioned physique.

Kiyohara had honed Noriko for that opening night's performance, and now she was showing the audience the result. It hadn't escaped the notice of Kamiya, either, that Noriko's expression had frozen for an instant. From the elevated position of the sound effects booth, the ceiling directly above the stage was not visible. Nonetheless, Noriko's gestures told Kamiya what was going on. He knew that water was dripping from the ceiling and that some drops had landed on her cheek.

Kamiya immediately caught sight of Kiyohara's hefty frame as he

THAT VERY INSTANT, KIYOHARA NOTICED SOMETHING THAT HAD DEFINITELY NOT BEEN THERE IN REHEARSAL.

Drops of water were dripping down, wetting Noriko's cheek. This accident had diverted the actors' concentration from their roles.

Yuichi Kamiya in the sound effects booth was pissed off. Having voiced to Kiyohara a difference of opinion, he'd been replaced at the last minute. He was still unhappy about being relegated to the non-acting staff. On the face of it, he had voluntarily stepped down from the role and the part was given to a junior actor who'd been his understudy. But that was only the story put forth to

cover his dismissal. Everyone in the troupe knew the truth. Kamiya was simply the latest proof that going against Kiyohara, autocratic director-manager, meant losing your part.

Kamiya gazed lethargically out from the booth, which was up behind where the audience sat. Set higher than the surroundings, sound effects commanded a good view of the stage and the audience. He could thus see Kiyohara's back as he sat there in the audience. Well over six feet tall and with the broad chest of a wrestler, Kiyohara had long, bleached hair that he tied back at the nape of his neck. Even in the dim stage lighting, Kamiya had been able to pick out Kiyohara instantly. As he looked down at the man, Kamiya's gaze began to radiate hatred—hatred for the man who'd snatched away his part, who'd left his self-respect in tatters. Yet Kamiya was unlikely to break away from the man's spell.

Reacting to an instruction from the mixing engineer sitting beside him, Kamiya pressed a switch in front of him. The telephone onstage began ringing. In response to the ringing, Noriko stopped what she was doing and went to answer the phone. She succeeded in conveying through her expression and gestures her character's mixed feelings of

stooped up from his seat. Kiyohara cast a furtive glance behind him towards the sound effects booth. Despite the distance, Kamiya and Kiyohara's eyes met through the booth's glass partition. Unnoticed by other members of the audience, Kiyohara managed to communicate to Kamiya through deft gestures of his hand and facial expressions that something was wrong with the stage ceiling or thereabouts. Having noticed the problem already, Kamiya immediately understood what Kiyohara was trying to tell him and pointed to the ceiling. Seeing Kamiya's gesture, Kiyohara gave a big nod and slowly turned his face back toward the stage, still looking quite irritated. Kamiya was confident that he had correctly interpreted Kiyohara's gestured instruction.

There was not a moment to lose. Wiring for the lights, though not visible to the audience, ran all about the stage. Should one of the connector sections become wet with water, everything on that circuit would short out. They could even be unlucky enough to have the whole stage plunge into darkness, wreaking havoc with the production. Kamiya quickly exited the sound effects booth, only to stop dead in his tracks once out of the door. He didn't know how to reach the next floor. They had entered the building two days ago to prepare the stage sets, put up seating for the audience, and wire the lighting and acoustics. Although Kamiya had assisted in all of these operations, it had never once been necessary to go up to the next floor.

The nearest door led to the outside of the building, with one passage leading to a fire escape. Kamiya opened the heavy iron door and ventured out onto one of the stairway landings. The moment he opened the door, he felt a blast of wind from the trucks driving nearby down the Metropolitan Expressway. It was like a different dimension.

Kamiya was amazed at how close the headlights streamed past. It seemed like he could reach out and actually touch the traffic. He'd been steeped in that alien dimension again, the one called the stage.

Kamiya rushed up the fire escape to the next floor, where he tried the doorknob. Unlocked, the door yielded easily to his hand. It was pitch dark inside. The feeble light that came through the open door allowed him to just make out the vague contours of a corridor. Yet, to make his way along this corridor, he had to release the hand that was propping the door open. No sooner had he begun to move forward than he heard a heavy thud from behind as the door slammed shut, throwing him into complete darkness. He extended his hands and felt his way along the wall, nervously putting one foot in front of the other. There was little fear in his heart, however, so intent was he on getting the job done for his colleagues.

His hand felt something projecting from the wall, something that felt →

DARK WATER
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→ like plastic. Convinced that it was a light switch, Kamiya flicked it. There was a momentary pause before fluorescent lighting filled the corridor. At the end of the long corridor, he could see an entrance that resembled a cave. He somehow remembered having seen something very much like it before. He was about to attribute this sensation to déjà vu when he realized that he had completely forgotten that this place had once been a disco. He muttered audibly as if to chastise himself for his foolishness. This was Mephisto, the disco he'd frequented, the one where he'd first met Noriko Kikuchi. No wonder he remembered seeing the entrance. What looked like the opening of a cave was in fact the entrance to a disco.

Where Kamiya was now standing had once been the cloakroom. He walked as far as the entrance and flicked another switch. This turned on the fluorescent lights inside the disco. The scene that confronted Kamiya was difficult to describe. The interior of a spaceship, a cavern, a fin de siècle underground arcade... There were extreme bumps on the walls, which were done in brilliant colors, unfaded in the least. The gaudy interior had looked so fantastic back then thanks to the colored lighting. In the white fluorescent glare, it suddenly looked inane.

Suspended from the slightly domed ceiling was a mirrored ball. The box seats in the corners were covered in dust. The small raised dancing platforms remained in the same configuration, but the room now lay in total silence. Kamiya only needed to close his eyes to recall the tumultuous uproar. Behind his eyelids, he could see Noriko as she danced frenetically there on the platform, her half-naked form pulsating to the beat of the music. Noriko never came with friends. She came to dance all by herself. He thought of the way she was then, and now, as she performed right there below him. Kamiya shook himself out of his reverie. This was no time to wallow in sentiment. He reminded himself that he was here to find the source of the leak that scored a direct hit on Noriko.

The only places he could think of where water was likely to be used on this floor were the kitchen and the restrooms. Kamiya pictured to himself the layout of the floor below in an effort to work out what would be directly above the stage. He remembered the location of the restrooms opposite the dancing platforms. The restrooms were directly above the stage.

He quickly scanned where the kitchen had once been. Confirming that there were no leaks there, he made for the restrooms. Kamiya assumed that a toilet was the source of the trouble even before opening the door; he could faintly hear water running somewhere in there. As he began to open the door, he felt a squelching sensation underfoot as water oozed out of the carpet. He was sure that the entire floor of the restroom was waterlogged, and he braced for what would greet his eyes upon opening the door.

It therefore came as no surprise that a pool of water a few inches deep covered the floor. Tiny ripples ran over the surface. Water was overflowing from a sink. The ripples were issuing from a point under the sink where water was dripping down.

Unconcerned that his shoes would get soaked, Kamiya made his way to the leaking sink. It was not of the washbasin type, but one of

those deeper troughs provided to wash brushes and mops.

Kamiya bent over the sink, lowering his face to scrutinize it. The base of the tap was loose, and water spurted from the gap between the loose fixture and pipe. That alone could not have caused the problem; the sink would have drained the water away before it could collect and cause a leak. The problem was that the drainage pipe from the sink was clogged.

Kamiya wondered how he might reduce the volume of water flowing down from the sink. He wasn't sure if it would be more effective to fix the tap first and then unclog the drainage pipe, or the other way around. He tried pushing the tap down with his hand and twisting it back into place. Forcing it in this way was the worst thing he could have done, for the gap between the loose tap and pipe only widened. Unable to withstand the increased thrust of water, the tap was forced clean off.

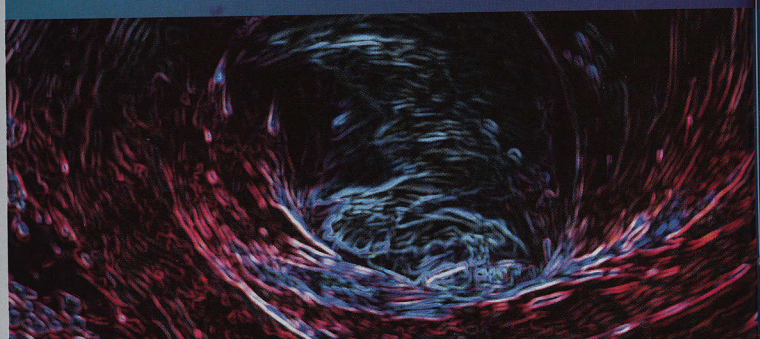
"Shit!" Now, instead of having a mere leak to deal with, Kamiya was faced with the prospect of a flood. A column of water as thick as the pipe struck the surface of water in the sink with a tremendous splashing sound, bringing water cascading onto the floor. On the spur of the moment, he thrust his finger into the mouth of the gushing pipe. The water pressure was too powerful; jets of water gushed out from between his finger and the side of the pipe, splashing his face and drenching the walls of the restroom.

"Damn!" Kamiya abused the tap as if it were some defiant creature. The rent gaped wider and wider. The very thought of the damage this was wreaking on the stage made Kamiya freeze from head to foot in utter horror. He felt like running away and just leaving everything to take care of itself.

With the finger of one hand still stuffed in the pipe, Kamiya started groping for the drainpipe with his other hand. The only way he could resolve the situation was to remove whatever was clogging the drainage. He pushed his finger into the pipe and extracted the dirt that was jammed inside. Long, bleached strands of hair came out on his finger. So the culprit was hair! Hair washed into the pipe had clogged it, and prevented the water from draining away. Kamiya vigorously shook his hand to get rid of the hairy debris on his finger. Yet no matter how hard he shook his hand, he could not dislodge the strands. They clung to his finger and felt strangely alive. Unconcerned, he continued inserting his finger into the drainpipe and extracting the clogged hair.

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No matter how many times he repeated the procedure, the water trapped in the sink showed no signs of going down. He paused to rest his hand. As he did so, he happened to turn and look down at his feet. He almost jumped with surprise. Covering the entire area of the floor, the hair removed from the pipe undulated in the water like so much seaweed floating in the sea. There was so much hair in the water that he couldn't see the color of the floor beneath. What amazed him was not only the sheer volume of hair, but also its color. The tangled mass was an indescribable mixture of hues: black, white, brown, red, pink, all merging to form a faintly disgusting blend. The overall effect was unpleasant enough that Kamiya tried to keep the hair off his feet by alternately standing on one leg and then the other. →



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→ In the end, he found it better to sit sideways on the edge of the sink, although the seat of his pants would get drenched. In this position he continued his efforts to unclog the drainpipe.

Despite having lost his part at the last moment, Kamiya was fond enough of the company to not want to see it suffer a disaster. He simply had to do whatever he could to minimize any damage that this leak might cause to the troupe. Had his efforts been rewarded? He suddenly heard a gurgling sound, accompanied by bubbles appearing in the middle of the sink, where a small vortex began to form. The water was draining through. Although he felt that he was making some progress, he did not relent. If anything, he redoubled his efforts to unclog the pipe. The tiny trickle of water that was now getting through was not likely to stop the leak.

Having finally unclogged the drainpipe completely, he turned his attention to repairing the tap. He first paused to think how best to go about it. The water pressure was too great for him to effectively plug up the pipe. It occurred to him that his best bet would be to insert the tap into the pipe and bind it in place with wire or something of that sort. He scanned the restroom for a suitable piece of rope or wire, and realized that he was in the ladies' room. Until now, he hadn't noticed that there was no row of urinals. The women's restroom was a realm he'd seldom penetrated, but this was no time for idle fantasizing. He opened the door of a broom cupboard at his side.

He got down and crawled around in the cramped cupboard in search of some string. Beside the stacked buckets lay a coil of green tubing, which turned out to be a hose. It seemed a bit too thick and unwieldy for securing the tap. When he pulled the hose, however, it felt much more elastic than expected. He decided that it might just prove sufficient for tying down the tap after all. He hauled the hose out of the broom cupboard.

The tap had sunk to the bottom of the water in the sink. He fished it out with his hand. It resembled the severed head of a dragon, with its mouth gaping. Opening the disattached tap, he pressed it into the mouth of the pipe and wrapped the hose around it several times, concluding with a tight knot. Checking to make sure that it was secured firmly in place, he slowly turned the tap off. The gush of water came to a halt. Not a single drop of water leaked from anywhere. The flow had been staunched. Kamiya breathed a deep sigh of relief. Although it was hardly a creative achievement, he nonetheless felt a surge of accomplishment.

"If this were a performance..." He wondered just how he'd express this relief onstage. It'd be too silly and obvious to jump gleefully with joy. But a smile wouldn't do, either. If he looked in the mirror now, he'd probably see a man with a vacant expression. If anything, he'd still look agonized. In fact, he ought to look in the mirror to see how his current state of mind was reflected on his face. He'd learn the most natural expression for a situation like this.

As he used two mops to soak the water off the floor, Kamiya made his way to the mirror. He looked closely into it, and a chill ran down his spine. He was momentarily unable to tell what was provoking the reaction. It was not so much his reasoning as his senses that had detected something unnatural. There couldn't

possibly be anyone else in the women's restroom, here in the shell of a disco that had gone out of business two years ago. Yet something felt weird, didn't quite make sense.

He wondered how he failed to notice it until now. No doubt his mind had been so preoccupied that he'd seen but not registered it. Once he'd finished dealing with the leak, it must have started to rise to the fore of his consciousness. In the mirror he saw the stall doors to five toilets. The doors of the two stalls to the left and the two to the right were open. Only the door of the stall in the middle was closed. The doors were designed to remain closed only when a stall was occupied.

...In other words.

Kamiya turned around and took a long hard look at the closed stall door. It seemed inconceivable that anyone could be in there. All the lights were out when he'd reached this floor. The restroom had also been in complete darkness. Kamiya had had to turn the lights on. He was torn as to what he should do next. He didn't want to get involved in anything unusual. He'd already completed what he'd come here to do. He heard a voice telling him to return to his post on the double. All the while, his curiosity was becoming harder to resist. After all, inquisitiveness was a highly desirable quality in an actor. Wasn't Kiyohara always telling them that? Kamiya moved a little closer and gave the door a poke with the end of the mop handle.

The door refused to yield.

He then tried giving the door a push with his hand. But the door wasn't stuck. It was locked from inside. He was about to ask whether anyone was in, but thought better of it. It seemed such a silly question, and if someone actually replied, he'd die of shock. Reining in his curiosity, Kamiya gradually backed away from the door. He told himself that it was high time to get back to the sound effects booth.

Every time he moved his feet, the hair that he'd pulled from the drainpipe got tangled on his heels. He hadn't realized until now that the water flooding the restroom floor was forming a current. The water began to flow towards the closed stall door and into the space beyond. The noise of a toilet being flushed came from the stall. As if drawn to the sound, the water covering the floor rushed into the stall, gurgling under the locked door.

Kamiya steadied himself, his frame now rigid from head to toe. Whoever it was inside the stall had just finished. Kamiya heard the metallic sound of the door being unlatched, and it began to open. Through the crack, he saw something black squirm—not just one, but innumerable black forms, squirming.

There was a tense hush. A sharp scream had brought Kamiya's consciousness back to reality somewhat. He'd been so deeply immersed in his acting that he'd forgotten why the collective gaze of an audience was upon him. He'd been breathing the very atmosphere of his own performance.

"Watercolors" is adapted from *Dark Water*, a collection of short stories by Koji Suzuki published earlier this month by Vertical Inc. An American remake of the movie based on the title story is due to be released next year. See www.vertical-inc.com for more information. 