

# Project & Conference

## Drama and the Hokuriku University ESS Club

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### **Abstract**

*For several years I served as advisor to the English Speaking Society (ESS) club at Hokuriku University (HU). During that time, beginning in 2002 or 2003 and continuing until 2009, the ESS club took part in a drama contest held in December every year. The purpose of this article is to describe the process the club went through to prepare for the contest and my role in helping them prepare. The plays are summarized for the benefit of those who might have interest in them. Finally, a few students give their comments about what being in the drama contest meant to them.*

### **Introduction**

**O**n December 27, 2009 the 20<sup>th</sup> and last Hokuriku English Speaking Society Association (HESSA) drama contest to date was held in Niigata. HESSA is a group of university ESS clubs in the Hokuriku region located in Fukui, Ishikawa, Toyama and Niigata Prefectures. What follows is a summary of the HU ESS club participation in that event. All student names given are pseudonyms in order to protect student privacy.

### **The Process**

The process during the eight years or so that the HU ESS club took part in the HESSA drama contest was fairly constant. Every year the students would choose a play in Japanese, something they found on the internet.

They would then pool their talents and translate the play into English. They did not choose already published plays in English, as other ESS clubs I was associated with did. Usually I would get the play script in early October and then it became my job to correct and polish the English so that it became comprehensible. I didn't always make dialogue sound like native English; sometimes I left the lines pretty much as the students had translated them. I didn't want students to get the feeling that too much was being changed, so I often accepted dialogue that was not exactly the way native English speakers would phrase it but could be understood.

Once we had a completed script, students themselves chose roles. I never got involved in that even though I didn't always agree that the best person had been selected for a particular part. They also chose a director and technicians to work on lighting, sound effects, set design and costumes. In the early going, practice would be held two or three times a week and I tried to come at least once. During practice, my main role was to correct English pronunciation and intonation. However, I also helped with stage directions, blocking and improving dramatic impact by the way they said their lines. Sometimes the students would ask me to record their part so they would have a model. As the date for the contest got closer, the number of practices per week increased and I tried to come as often as I could. Unfortunately, I was never able to see any of the presentations at the HESSA drama contest because I always had other responsibilities on weekends when the contest would take place.

### **2005: The Ghost of Suzuno-so**

Actually, the first year the HU ESS club took part in the HESSA drama contest was either 2002 or 2003. As I don't have any records and my memory is unclear, I can't write much about what happened in those first two or three years.

The play the HU ESS club chose in 2005, "The Ghost of Suzuno-so," is about a girl who runs away from home and goes to Tokyo so she can be independent. However, there is a ghost in the room the girl rents. After an initial scare, the girl and the ghost form a relationship and she gets help dealing with her father, who wants her to return home. The play, which is a mix of comedy and drama, has some good comic interludes, especially in scenes between the father and the landlady and between the father and the ghost, who he mistakes as his daughter.

The 2005 group was very talented and did a great job of translation. Many lines were written in perfect English that needed no change at all. Although I had high hopes for this group because of their very good English ability, the play failed to garner any awards, acting or otherwise. Though the play has comic elements, it is not really a comedy and doesn't totally succeed as a drama either. Also when the students decided to change the ending to have the group sing "Happy Birthday" to the ghost, whose birthday it happened to be, the play was further weakened as the rewritten ending lacked much dramatic impact.

### **2006: Murder at the Tachibana Wedding Hall**

"Murder at the Tachibana Wedding Hall," the entry for 2006, is a murder mystery of sorts. On the day of her wedding, a bride collapses. It is not known if she is alive or dead or who might want her dead. The groom, the bride's sister, and the two wedding hall owners are joined by the groom's mysterious friend, who asks a lot of questions in an effort to get at the truth.

The mystery to me is why the ESS club chose this play, which is rather gloomy and morbid. It involves an on-stage murder scene in which the victim gets bashed over the head by two very petite and demure young Japanese ladies, and no prize was forthcoming. However this was the beginning of a long association with three students, all Pharmacy majors. They included Keiko Ohara, one of the Tachibana sisters, Ryo Ikeda, the groom's friend who turns out to be a police inspector, and Shota Ichino, who never acted but took care of lighting and sound effects for this play as well as the next three (all names are pseudonyms). In spite of an inauspicious start, better things were in store for them.

## 2007: The Sawada Rangers

The 2007 play, “The Sawada Rangers,” takes place at a high school just before the school festival, which is being organized by four student council members. The irresponsible and mischievous president, Daisuke Sawada, dreams up a play about the Sawada Rangers, a group of heroes who save the world. He wants the student council members to play it with him. Two of the council members are easily persuaded to take part, but things get sticky with Nozomi, a more serious girl. When Daisuke makes a mistake by putting a microphone in the student council room and Nozomi finds out her private conversation has been broadcast to the whole school, he finds himself in big trouble with a very angry Nozomi.

At last the ESS club found a play worthy of their talent, full of witty dialogue and comic action. The staging, lighting, set design and timing all worked well. The students themselves thought up some nice touches to add dramatic appeal, for example having someone ride a bicycle across the stage with the moon in the background, reminiscent of a scene from the movie E.T. The result was a first prize award for best play. Keiko Ohara picked up the best actress award as Nozomi and Ryo Ichikawa, who played one of the student council members, was chosen best actor. The Hokuriku University ESS Club could finally celebrate their success.

## 2008: The Super Butler Audition

In 2008’s play, entitled “The Super Butler Audition”, the mistress of the Ninomiya Mansion has kicked out all the staff of the house except for the head butler and a maid. They decide to hold a super butler audition to find a new helper. The three applicants include an ugly boy by the name of Tetsuya from a poor family, a gay bar owner, and an elderly foreigner. After the winner is declared, the mistress finds herself in great peril, but homely Tetsuya comes to the rescue. Ryo took the part of a former butler of the house, who is in fact masquerading as the old foreigner. HU combined with the Kanazawa University (KU) ESS club so the cast included members of both clubs. A Chinese student played the mistress of the house, making it an international cast for the first time.

Unfortunately, the HU ESS club could not replicate their success from the year before and they did not get any major awards. The play, a mixture of comedy and drama, was not very strong and more problems developed when one of the cast members did not show up regularly for practice. Some casting and staging problems surfaced as well. Keiko, though she is far from homely, played poor ugly Tetsuya. In addition, the club members decided to put the gay bar owner in a dress in an effort to enhance the comic effect, but that just made things more strange than funny.

## 2009: The Melancholy of Café Meguresu

2009 marked the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the HESSA drama contest. The title of this year’s production was “The Melancholy of Café Meguresu.” This café attracts some strange customers. On this day, employees of the shop have to deal with a crazy girlfriend, who wants to kill her wayward boyfriend when she finds he has been cheating on her, and a reluctant robber who gets caught up in the fray. The result is hilarious mayhem.

Another joint effort of the HU and KU ESS clubs, this was an extremely fun and successful production, claiming three major awards, including best play. One student of KU got the best actor prize



“Die, you cheater!” shouts the girlfriend as she threatens her wayward boyfriend with her knife. The reluctant robber looks on at left.

playing the robber, and a Chinese exchange student at HU nailed down the best actress award as the crazy girlfriend. She was not so impressive in practice but really came into her own during a performance at HU for students and faculty, which I was able to see.

## **2010: Caramel Flavored Love But No Contest**

Unfortunately, some universities left HESSA after 2008, so there were only two plays in the 2009 drama contest, the one from HU and KU collaboration and another from the Niigata University ESS club. As a result, no contest was held the following year. The HU club had given me some short plays they had translated. I took one of them entitled “Caramel Flavored Love,” and expanded it in the hope in they might be able to use it sometime in the future. However, the drama contest was not revived in 2011, so the one in 2009 may have been the last. The play is about a candy maker who finds love in a coffee shop while drinking caramel lattes with a girl he meets there. The situation becomes complicated because the girl’s sister is in love with the same guy and he has plans to study for a year in France, a fact he doesn’t want to tell her.

### **Student Comments**

Here are comments from a few students. Keiko Ohara said she gained a lot of things, how to work in a team, how to get people to laugh, and how to identify with the heroine. She also said memorizing English sentences helped boost her confidence in English and added, “Drama was a very nice experience.” Ryo Ishikawa said that at first he felt uneasy not having good English or experience in the theater, but in spite of the difficulty, he felt a sense of accomplishment when it was all finished. Other students had similar impressions.

Memorizing lines in another language is no easy task, but there are definite rewards to taking part in English drama contests, including a sense of accomplishment, English improvement and, last, but certainly not least, enjoyment.

### **Concluding Remarks**

From these comments, two things are clear; memorizing lines in another language is no easy task, but there are definite rewards to taking part in English drama contests, including a sense of accomplishment, English improvement and, last, but certainly not least, enjoyment. It is unfortunate that the HESSA drama contest came to an end. Hopefully it can be revived some time in the future.

As for the plays described above, they are available to anyone who has interest and can be had by sending an e-mail to the author. It is his hope that they will be put on the SD&D web page. It would be nice to have a library of plays there for the benefit of the members of this SIG whenever they need something to put on a show.