

The Passing of 3 Entertainers

By Masakazu HOSODA

Three big-name entertainers who had been at the forefront of show business in postwar Japan passed away in succession last autumn. The three men had risen to stardom in music, *rakugo* (comic storytelling) and cinema/theater as well as on television. They died in different ways: pop idol Kazuhiko Kato committed suicide, *rakugo* master Sanyutei Enraku succumbed to cancer and stage big gun Hisaya Morishige died peacefully of old age. But from what they had achieved, we can clearly read a vicissitude of Japanese showbiz in the past half century.

Kato, 62, was found dead at a hotel in the mountain resort of Karuizawa, central Japan, on October 17. He hanged himself after leaving a note apparently meant to be his will, which led police to believe that he committed suicide from unknown motives.

Kato was the real leader of Japan's pop music that developed on the crest of a big wave of counterculture in Europe and America. In contrast to other folk singers of his generation who favored political songs in admiration of Bob Dylan, Kato was in a way a born musician who adored John Lennon and Donovan, putting Japanese-language lyrics on the rhythm of folk rock by fully utilizing his outstanding sense of composition and arrangement. *The Sadistic Mika Band* he led was perhaps the greatest Japanese rock band that succeeded abroad.

Enraku, who died at age 76 in late October, started his career from the Japanese-style small vaudeville theater called *yose* and greatly contributed to making *rakugo* a big hit in the new media of television. Before retiring in 2005 due to illness, he served for more than 20 years as the host of the long-running popular TV talk show "*Shoten*" (literally "point of laughter") featuring a small number of popular *rakugo* artists that aired every Sunday evening. Enraku was a superb performer at the *yose* theater, where *rakugo* connoisseurs listen to the art of sit-down solo comic storytelling in a sedate atmosphere. On the other hand, he made the "*Shoten*" talk show a popular TV program and familiarized viewers with *rakugo*,

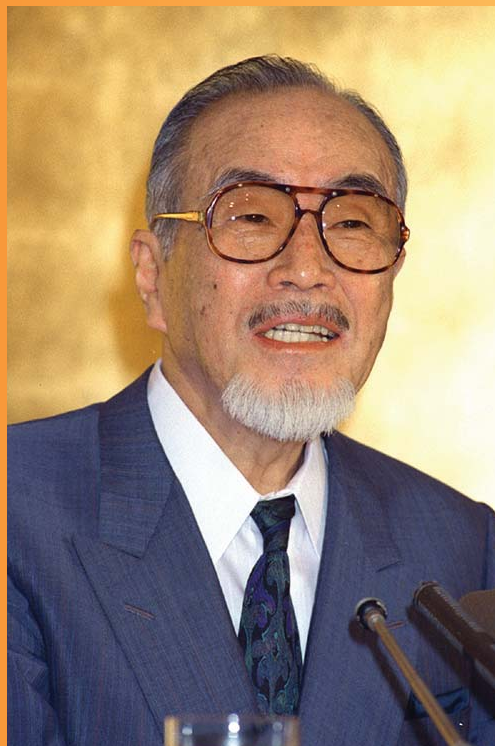


Photo: Kyodo News

Cinematstage king Hisaya Morishige expresses his joy after being nominated the showbiz world's first winner of the prestigious Order of Culture in October 1991.

many of whom may have previously found it uninteresting. He liked to crack self-deprecating jokes about his handsome looks, calling himself "Le Petit Prince."

Morishige, who died at 96 in early November, was indeed the king of showbiz and dominated all areas of entertainment in postwar Japan. He was a unique person in the showbiz world in that he started out as a comedian despite his intellectual background.

He shot to stardom in 1955 by starring in the movie "*Meoto Zenzai*," a human drama in which he played with a poetic touch a spoiled son from a rich merchant family in Osaka. He also appeared in the "*Shacho*" (company president) series, which caricatured Japan's corporate culture and moved the general public to laughter by depicting the meanness that permeated Japanese society during the period of rapid economic growth around the 1960s.

Morishige then suddenly transformed himself into a serious stage actor, appearing in the musical "*Fiddler on the Roof*" by taking advantage of his characteristic singing technique. He set a performance record of playing the role of protagonist Tevye 900 times since 1967.

His activities were not limited to the stage and screen. He played key roles in TV home dramas, recited stories on the radio, composed and sang songs, and wrote essays. He did a first-rate job in every area of entertainment.

Japanese people made a remarkable comeback after their defeat in World War II in 1945, rebuilt their country from ruins under the strong influence of America and developed a mass-consumption society through high economic growth. They then experienced the economic bubble era, surviving the post-bubble recession and enjoying the benefits of the IT revolution. The three entertainers' deaths remind us of the fact that the richness of Japan's pop culture upheld the sensitivities of generations of Japanese people who helped rebuild the country. **JS**

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