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Toshio Mori

(1910–1980)

Japanese Hamlet

Born in Oakland, California, in 1910, Toshio Mori is one of the earliest Japanese American writers, best known for his short stories. This poignant story, apparently written in 1939 but not published until after the war, appeared in the August 17, 1946 issue of the *Pacific Citizen* (the leading paper of the Pacific Asian American community) under the title “The School Boy Hamlet.” It ran there alongside columns such as “Two-Thirds of the U. S. Citizens Believe False Reports of Espionage by U. S. Japanese.” Mori spent most of the war years imprisoned in Utah at the Topaz War Relocation Center before he was allowed to return to his home in California. The story, which so powerfully explores issues of identification and exclusion, was reprinted under the title “Japanese Hamlet” in Mori’s collection *The Chauvinist and Other Stories* in 1979.



HE used to come to the house and ask me to hear him recite. Each time he handed me a volume of *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*. He never forgot to do that. He wanted me to sit in front of him, open the book, and follow him as he recited his lines. I did willingly. There was little for me to do in the evenings so when Tom Fukunaga came over I was ready to help out almost any time. And as his love for Shakespeare’s plays grew with the years he did not want anything else in the world but to be a Shakespearean actor.

Tom Fukunaga was a schoolboy in a Piedmont home. He had been one since his freshman days in high school. When he was thirty-one he was still a schoolboy. Nobody knew his age but he and the relatives. Every time his relatives came to the city they put up a roar and said he was a good-for-nothing loafer and ought to be ashamed of himself for being a schoolboy at this age.

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"I am not loafing," he told his relatives. "I am studying very hard."

One of his uncles came often to the city to see him. He tried a number of times to persuade Tom to quit stage hopes and school-boy attitude. "Your parents have already disowned you. Come to your senses," he said. "You should go out and earn a man's salary. You are alone now. Pretty soon even your relatives will drop you."

"That's all right," Tom Fukunaga said. He kept shaking his head until his uncle went away.

When Tom Fukunaga came over to the house he used to tell me about his parents and relatives in the country. He told me in particular about the uncle who kept coming back to warn and persuade him. Tom said he really was sorry for Uncle Bill to take the trouble to see him.

"Why don't you work for someone in the daytime and study at night?" I said to Tom.

"I cannot be bothered with such a change at this time," he said. "Besides, I get five dollars a week plus room and board. That is enough for me. If I should go out and work for someone I would have to pay for room and board besides carfare so I would not be richer. And even if I should save a little more it would not help me become a better Shakespearean actor."

When we came down to the business of recitation there was no recess. Tom Fukunaga wanted none of it. He would place a cup of water before him and never touch it. "Tonight we'll begin with Hamlet," he said many times during the years. *Hamlet* was his favorite play. When he talked about Shakespeare to anyone he began by mentioning Hamlet. He played parts in other plays but always he came back to Hamlet. This was his special role, the role which would establish him in Shakespearean history.

There were moments when I was afraid that Tom's energy and time were wasted and I helped along to waste it. We were miles away from the stage world. Tom Fukunaga had not seen a backstage. He was just as far from the stagedoor in his thirties as he was in his high school days. Sometimes as I sat holding Shakespeare's

book and listening to Tom I must have looked worried and discouraged.

“Come on, come on!” he said. “Have you got the blues?”

One day I told him the truth: I was afraid we were not getting anywhere, that perhaps we were attempting the impossible. “If you could contact the stage people it might help,” I said. “Otherwise we are wasting our lives.”

“I don’t think so,” Tom said. “I am improving every day. That is what counts. Our time will come later.”

That night we took up *Macbeth*. He went through his parts smoothly. This made him feel good. “Some day I’ll be the ranking Shakespearean actor,” he said.

Sometimes I told him I liked best to hear him recite the sonnets. I thought he was better with the sonnets than in the parts of *Macbeth* or *Hamlet*.

“I’d much rather hear you recite his sonnets, Tom,” I said.

“Perhaps you like his sonnets best of all,” he said. “*Hamlet* is my forte. I know I am at my best playing *Hamlet*.”

For a year Tom Fukunaga did not miss a week coming to the house. Each time he brought a copy of Shakespeare’s complete works and asked me to hear him say the lines. For better or worse he was not a bit down-hearted. He still had no contact with the stage people. He did not talk about his uncle who kept coming back urging him to quit. I found out later that his uncle did not come to see him any more.

In the meantime Tom stayed at the Piedmont home as a schoolboy. He accepted his five dollars a week just as he had done years ago when he was a freshman at Piedmont High. This fact did not bother Tom at all when I mentioned it to him. “What are you worrying for?” he said. “I know I am taking chances. I went into this with my eyes open, so don’t worry.”

But I could not get over worrying about Tom Fukunaga’s chances. Every time he came over I felt bad for he was wasting his life and for the fact that I was mixed in it. Several times I told him to go somewhere and find a job. He laughed. He kept coming to the house and asked me to sit and hear him recite *Hamlet*.

The longer I came to know Tom the more I wished to see him well off in business or with a job. I got so I could not stand his coming to the house and asking me to sit while he recited. I began to dread his presence in the house as if his figure reminded me of my part in the mock play that his life was, and the prominence that my house and attention played.

One night I became desperate. "That book is destroying you, Tom. Why don't you give this up for a while?"

He looked at me curiously without a word. He recited several pages and left early that evening.

Tom did not come to the house again. I guess it got so that Tom could not stand me any more than his uncle and parents. When he quit coming I felt bad. I knew he would never abandon his ambition. I was equally sure that Tom would never rank with the great Shakespearean actors, but I could not forget his simple persistence.

One day, years later, I saw him on the Piedmont car at Fourteenth and Broadway. He was sitting with his head buried in a book and I was sure it was a copy of Shakespeare's. For a moment he looked up and stared at me as if I were a stranger. Then his face broke into a smile and he raised his hand. I waved back eagerly.

"How are you, Tom" I shouted.

He waved his hand politely again but did not get off, and the car started up Broadway.

(1939)