

“Masking” and “Unmasking” Korean Adoptees—On Rick Shiomi’s *Mask Dance*

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Abstract

Rick Shiomi’s *Mask Dance* marked the beginning of Theater Mu, an Asian-American theater company established in Minneapolis in 1992. Shiomi had been searching for his identity as a dramatist of Asian descent, and as such much valued explorations of Asian-American issues in Minneapolis, a city with a relatively small Asian-American population. *Mask Dance* commemorates the birth of Theater Mu.

Reportedly, Minnesota has more than 1,000 Korean adoptees, and Shiomi portrays their complicated feelings for their white adoptive parents and their own identity crises, employing the form of a traditional Korean mask dance, “*Pongsan Talch’um*.” These Korean mask plays are colored with down-to-earth aspects, which often satirize the privileged class. Likewise, Shiomi’s mask drama, despite its serious topic, contains many satirical features. This paper, consequently, aims to explore how Shiomi portrays the problems of the Korean adoptees by employing this particular comedic style.

The use of masks is also quite pioneering in *Mask Dance*;

the play presents Spirit, wearing a mask, as its narrator. Spirit's role is innovative in the sense that it not only "masks" the consciousness of the Korean children, but also "unmasks" their buried feelings. While Shiomi's use of masks is set apart from their use in Greek theater, it follows the same fundamental nature. That is, it follows Peter Hall's extended definition of a mask, which posits that Greek theater, itself, is a "mask" in the way in which it keeps "all fundamental or violent action off stage." By outwardly cloaking and distancing the main characters' agony through the use of masks, Shiomi maintains an objective viewpoint and brings substantiality to this Asian-American performance. This play, consequently, can be marked as a revolutionary step in American theater as it established common ground among Asian-American issues, Korean traditional mask drama, and the classical use of masks on stage.

Key Words: Korean mask drama, Korean adoptees, masks on stage, Theater Mu, Asian-American Theater