

# Wong Ping

## on Shūji Terayama



SHUJI TERAYAMA, *Throw Away Your Books, Rally in the Streets*, 1971, still image of film: 137 min. Copyright and courtesy terayama world.

Traces of Shūji Terayama have appeared throughout different moments of my life. As a student, I stumbled across his experimental shorts, bewildered and not entirely sure what I was watching. Years later, working, I finally watched his films. Only recently, when new translations appeared, did I begin reading his poetry. Since Terayama spent his 20s primarily as a poet, I have essentially been moving through his life backward, encountering him in reverse. Born in 1930s Japan and having lived through World War II, “home” became one of the inescapable themes that haunted him throughout his life. He lied compulsively, publicly, insisting he was born on a train, a child without origins, without anywhere to return to.

He made his name early through poetry. Then came the cultural and political essays, the lyrics, the scripts, and the novels. He also showed up on television frequently as a commentator on horse racing and boxing. By the mid-60s, he moved into making installations, experimental shorts, underground theater, feature films, and photography books. He was probably the most radical figure of his generation. When asked to describe his profession, he simply said: “My profession is Shūji Terayama.”

In 1967, he founded Tenjō Sajiki, an avant-garde theater troupe. The recruitment notice gives you a sense of what he was after: “Eccentrics,

the disabled, dwarfs, runaway youth, people living on the margins, cross-dressers, etc.” He advocated bringing theater to the streets, treating the city itself as a stage. Just as his habitual lying connected fiction with reality, he believed art should infiltrate everyday life: “Street movements aren’t enough, we must launch a revolution from within daily life.” The work that followed dismantled what Japanese theater had been. For example, *Knock* (1975), a 30-hour street performance unfolded across different times and locations within a single neighborhood. Drama erupted suddenly among unsuspecting customers in a public bathhouse; a manhole cover would fly open and someone would crawl out running in a frenzy; audiences were packed into wooden crates and shipped to unknown locations; a man bandaged head-to-toe like a mummy, seated in a wheelchair, led spectators door-to-door through the neighborhood, knocking and striking up conversations with whoever answered. In what was then a deeply conservative society, this created chaos as well as fascination, and eventually, Terayama was arrested. Tenjō Sajiki toured internationally, performing Terayama’s work around the world while preparing to shoot films back home. His first feature, *Throw Away Your Books, Rally in the Streets* (1971), paints a portrait of restlessness

at the society’s margins: youngsters building makeshift human-powered flying machines to escape reality, men confessing their sexual desires directly to camera, female high school students stripping off their uniforms while loudly singing “If I Were a Whore,” or candid footage of troupe members on the street wielding phallic-shaped sandbags to provoke passersby. The film triggered a wave of young people running away from home and taking to the streets. The cult director Sion Sono was one of them.

In the early seventies, a character died in the popular manga *Ashita no Joe*. Rikishi Tōru, the protagonist’s rival, was knocked out in the ring after cutting too much weight. The story captured something about underclass rage and the desire to strike back at a harsh world. Terayama proposed holding an actual funeral for this fictional character. It became the first real-life memorial service in manga history. More than 700 people skipped work and school to pay their respects.

“Can words / shoot down / a seagull? / Can words / arrest / the setting sun?”

Terayama died at 47. It seems impossible that one person could have ranged so far from where he started and influenced so many artists. As his poem insists, we should believe in the power of language and imagination to provoke the world.