The Japanese Theatre
From Shamanistic Ritual to Contemporary Pluralism

REVISED EDITION

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CHAPTER IX

THE MODERN THEATRE: SHIMPA

Origins of the Shimpa Movement: Sudo Sadanori

The word shimpageki means "new school drama" and is used (mostly in its abbreviated form shimpa) to designate a specific form of theatre, the first to develop outside the kabuki world after the Meiji Restoration as an attempt to modernize and westernize Japan’s drama. The name began to appear in the newspapers starting from the very first years of our century to distinguish the drama of the "new school" from that of the "old school" (kyūha), that is, of kabuki.

It was unavoidable that the theatre would join the general movement of change that swept Japan after the opening of the country to western influence. The efforts of the kabuki and bunraku professionals to modernize their art produced only sporadic results of short duration, and certainly did not transform those genres into forms of westernized spoken theatre. They instead generated today's kabuki and bunraku, which present a change from the pre-Meiji outlook something like that accomplished in the performances of many operas in the West in which music, libretto, and basic acting style have remained much the same, while modern technical resources have been incorporated.

The lack of participation by professional actors in the creation of a modern theatre resulted in amateurism and low levels of acting skills in the courageous pioneers. Not much could be expected from the first groups that dared to present themselves to the public without acting training and without a clear idea of what a modern style should look like; this was largely because the only experience of theatrical performance
in Japan was that of the traditional performing arts, and direct experience of western theatre was not yet available to the young amateurs.

Despite the lack of professionalism and a model for modernization, one thing was very clear in the mind of Sudō Sadanori (1867-1907), who is considered the founder of shimpa: theatre was to be an instrument of political propaganda against the conservative regime.

The first expressions of this goal occurred in conjunction with a tense political situation. In 1884 the conservative government dissolved the major opposition force, the Liberal Party (Jiyūtō), of which Sudō was a militant member, and forbade all political rallies. A group mostly made up of young militants decided to continue the fight against the government with the means left at their disposal, such as lectures, newspaper articles, and, eventually, the theatre. These young people called themselves sōshi, a word that means both "courageous young man" and "political bully" or "henchman." Several sōshi were lawless ruffians, who did not shy away from violent revolutionary actions, and often got into trouble with the police. Their political aims of freedom were unfocused, and their unrest was expressed primarily as a manifestation of a sense of frustration with the conservative leadership, rather than as the execution of a clear and systematic plan of action.

A group of sōshi came together under Sadanori's leadership and formed the Dainippon Geigeki Kyōfūkai (Great Japan Society for the Reformation of the Theatre), one of the many "improvement societies" born in the middle eighties to promote the westernization of some aspect of life or culture, this time, however, with the aim of using theatre for the purpose of liberal political opposition against the conservative government. The first performance took place in Osaka in December 1888.

Rather than epoch-making events, this and similar performances were generally considered by contemporaries as a kind of a curiosity, an odd attempt by amateurs to present theatre outside the monopoly of the kabuki establishment. Many failed to recognize until much later the importance of a movement that broke the ice in the process of thrusting Japan into the stream of contemporary spoken drama, introduced new theatre customs such as darkened auditoriums and elaborate
Shimpa

stage lighting, added the new dramatic subject of social and political struggle, re-introduced women to the stage, and, above all, showed the possibility of surviving outside the traditional theatre monopoly.

The founder of shimpa, Sudō Sadanori—a Kyoto policeman turned journalist, a sōshi, and eventually a full time actor—spent twenty years of his short life mostly touring the provinces, but reaping only scattered success in the big cities where he could not last long in competition with both the professional kabuki theatre and the offspring of his own reform, such as the more aggressive and better organized troupe of Kawakami Otojirō. Sudō died at forty, in the dressing room of a Kobe theatre. On the memorial erected in his honor in 1937 in the cemetery of the Tennōji temple of Osaka an inscription describes him as the "father of the new theatre."

Kawakami Otojirō

If Sudō was the first to show the possibility of survival outside the kabuki world, Kawakami Otojirō (1864-1911) succeeded in proving much more: that stardom and financial reward independent from kabuki were possible even for a man of obscure origins without any family connections with the professional theatre world.

Kawakami's life reads like a fast-paced adventure novel, a sequence of continuous changes, failures, new enterprises, and a series of "firsts" in the Japanese theatre world. Though he never achieved greatness in the quality of his performances as an actor, his role as a catalyst in the process of forming Japan's new theatre was unique. Kawakami's family had served for generations as official purveyors under the feudal lords of Hakata in Kyūshū. He left home at fourteen and started a series of diverse experiences: among others, as an apprentice in a Buddhist temple, as a pupil of the famous scholar Fukuzawa Yūkichi at Keiō University, as a policeman, and as a political propagandist. In 1887, he was on stage with kabuki actors in Kyoto, his role being to improvise outside the curtain at those points where the text broke off. In 1888, he became the disciple of a famous Osaka rakugo storyteller, Katsura Bun'nosuke, and used his new skill to put together his original
Oppekepe bushi, a satirical ballad sung to a very popular tune composed by Katsura Tōbei, a storyteller of the same school. The ballad’s onomatopoeic name derived from the sound of the trumpet which opened its refrain. The ballad made Kawakami famous three years later, when he performed in Tokyo in 1891 with his new company formed in imitation of Sudō’s sōshi theatre. He appeared at the Nakamura-za in plays not worth remembering, gaining his success because of his entr’acte performance of the Okkepeke bushi, which he sang while dashing like a swashbuckler in front of a golden screen with a Japanese flag in his hand. His success was so great that even the major kabuki stars went to see him.

Kawakami is responsible for the introduction of such "sensations" from the West as the changing of scenery in darkness, the new system of lighting the stage while the orchestra is darkened, and the "authentic reportage" drama in which in a relatively realistic way he presented war episodes from the Chinese campaign of 1894/95. His war plays were enormously successful, gaining a better public reception than the corresponding war plays done by kabuki actors. To enhance the patriotic atmosphere he had soldiers and sailors fight in formal uniform, and instructed the audience to bow when the name of the Emperor was mentioned. He traveled to Korea to inspect the front-line and then produced his most successful play, Kawakami Otojirō senchi kembunki (Kawakami Otojirō Reporting from the Battle Field, 1894) in which he played himself in the role of a reporter at the front line witnessing the valiant deeds of the Japanese heroes. For the first time, shimpā won over kabuki, and for the first time the most important kabuki stage, Tokyo’s Kabuki-za, was at shimpā’s disposal.

Kawakami was also the first to present Japanese theatre abroad. He toured with his company to America, England, France, Germany, and Russia. As a consequence of his experiences abroad Kawakami introduced western-style tickets and shortened the duration of his shows. He pioneered childrens’ theatre in 1903. Also in 1903 he began the presentation of western masterpieces: he began by staging his adaptation of Othello, and followed it between 1903 and 1906 with Hamlet, The Merchant of Venice, and plays by Maeterlinck and Sardou.
Contemporary sources agree in judging rather harshly the quality of Kawakami’s performances. It is clear that his forte was sensationalism, not art. In his war plays the secret of his success was a rhetorical, sentimental appeal to patriotism, and an ostentatious, one-sided glorification of valiant Japanese heroes. Photographs of the time show cheap operetta-like sets and exaggerated, melodramatic gestures. In the play Itagaki-kun sōnan jikki (The True Story of Itagaki’s Misfortunes, 1891) during the scene of the attempted murder of the famous liberal politician, Itagaki Taisuke, he had actors in police uniforms suddenly appear on the hanamichi, so that the audience momentarily believed in a real intervention by the police. His presentation of western masterpieces could hardly give an idea of the originals; he often relied on western curiosities such as introducing Hamlet by having him make a sensational entrance on a bicycle.

It is doubtful whether the type of Japanese theatre shown by Kawakami abroad was a service to the cause of international exchange. The purpose of his foreign trip originally had been to study the western theatre, not to perform. An enterprising theatre manager in San Francisco, however, induced him to go on the stage with his fellow actors. Part of the mixed success was due to his wife, Kawakami Sadayakko (1872–1946), who was not an actress, but, before her marriage, had been a professionally trained, high class geisha. She was therefore capable of fascinating European audiences who had never seen the live performance of a geisha.³

It is clear that Kawakami was successful both in Japan and abroad as long as he could capitalize on spectacular or emotional elements which did not require real acting skills. Their very lack of acting skills, however, gave to the performances of his troupe a freshness unknown to the stereotyped traditional models. While most kabuki plays repeated themes that were becoming increasingly obsolete, Kawakami’s presentations exploited the hottest issues of the day. While the language of kabuki was sounding more and more like something from the past, Kawakami’s colloquialisms reflected the latest, rapidly changing expressions of "modernized" society. Kawakami did not abolish the convention of female impersonation in shimpa, but selectively used actresses for certain female roles, thereby initiating a new
tradition of female stars on the Japanese stage. In 1908 he established the first modern school for actresses, the Teikoku Joyū Yōseijo (Imperial Actresses School), which was headed by his wife Sadayakko. His last enterprise was the building of a new theatre, the Teikokuza, in Osaka, which he hoped would become the center for the "true theatre." Shortly after opening the new house in 1911 he died, aged forty-seven.

Seibikan and Other Companies

During Kawakami’s time, realization of the need to improve the quality of acting and the standards of the plays was at the root of efforts by several of the most serious theatre reformers. Several groups were formed, those especially worthy of mention being the Seibikan, the Seibidan, the Isami-engeki, and the Hongōza.

The Seibikan was short-lived; it performed only one program in Tokyo in 1891. It was the brainchild of Yoda Gakkai (1833–1909), a scholar and theatre critic who gave to the company the purpose of high artistic ideals exclusive of political concerns. It was the Seibikan who introduced young Ii Yōhō (1871–1932), an actor who was to become very famous as a shimpa star for decades; the troupe also was the first to break the ban on theatrical companies comprising both men and women.

The Seibidan also was a short-lived effort to stress quality over sensationalism. It was founded in 1896 by an ex-member of Kawakami’s troupe, Takada Minoru (1871–1916), who is credited, with such collaborators as Kitamura Rokurō (1871–1961) with having set the standards for the best achievements of shimpa. In 1898 the name Seibidan disappeared from the records, but Takada’s teaching about the importance of iki (breathing) and his exemplary dedication to the art of acting as a technique of realistic expression had great importance in the process of finding a serious new professionalism within shimpa. Takada died at forty-six, in 1915. Kitamura, an offshoot of the Seibidan, founded a school of acting which continued the same methods.

The Isami-engeki was formed in 1895 by the actors Ii Yōhō, Satō Toshizō (1869–1945), and Mizuno Yoshimi (1863–1928; the name I-Sa-Mi was formed with the initial syllable of
Shimpa

each actor's name). Li was the most popular among the shimpa actors. A very handsome and talented performer, Li is also remembered for his serious effort to rediscover for the new theatre treasures of traditional playwriting or new interpretations of Japanese legends as presented by important contemporary authors. Famous are his cycle of eight plays, Chikamatsu kenkyū-geki (Research Plays on Chikamatsu), and Tamakushige futari Urashima, novelist Mori Ogai’s philosophical adaptation of the Urashima Tarō legend. The contribution of such talented modern writers as Mori Ogai (1862–1922), and the dramatization of famous contemporary tragic novels such as Tokutomi Roka’s Hototogisu (The Cuckoo) and Ozaki Kōyō’s Konjiki yasha (A Demon of Gold) provided the shimpa stage with a new repertory representative of contemporary Japanese culture, quite different from whatever Kawakami had been dressing up to display his showmanship.

The Golden Age of Shimpa

The first decade of the twentieth century was a period of prosperity and busy activity for shimpa. The death of the two major kabuki stars Kikugorō and Danjūrō in 1903 had left a great vacuum in the Tokyo theatre. The beginning of the Russo-Japanese War in 1904 inspired shimpa to revive the genre of war plays which had been extremely well received at the time of the Sino-Japanese War. The success of war plays by different shimpa groups was such that an invitation was extended to kabuki actors to produce one of them jointly. The invitation was not accepted, but kabuki actors did themselves produce a shimpa war play—a sign of the new importance reached by shimpa on the Tokyo scene. Shimpa was taking a vigorous leadership in the professional theatre world not only by choosing timely themes for its plays (war plays and plays adapted from successful novels and newspaper serials), but also because of the input of serious and well trained actors such as Li and the female impersonator Kawai Takeo, son of a kabuki actor and therefore belonging by birth to the traditional theatre establishment. This "great age" of shimpa saw times in which shimpa plays were simultaneously presented at three
Japanese Theatre

different Tokyo theatres: a famous example is that of the three competing productions of *Hototogisu* running at the same time a few blocks away from each other.

In 1907 two hundred thirty *shimpa* actors formed a Grand Coalition of New Actors (*Shinhaiyū daidō danketsu*), which lasted only two months, but was a clear indication of the strength and diffusion reached by the *shimpa* movement in a period of two decades. Novelists whose work had been dramatized for *shimpa* use began to write original dramas. The most important among them was Mayama Seika (1878–1948). A number of successes of this period are still performed as "classics" of the *shimpa* repertory: an example is the play derived from Izumi Kyōka's novel, *Onnakeizu* (A Woman's Chronicle), a tragic love story with strong sentimental overtones, that opened in 1909.

The Decadence of Shimpa

The beginning of *shimpa*’s decadence coincides with the rise of *shingeki*. The function of *shimpa* as a catalyst of new theatrical energies seemed soon to be exhausted. Attempts to revive audience interest, such as Inoue Masao’s production of western plays with his new Shinjidaigeki Kyōkai (Association for the New Epoch Theatre, founded 1911), or Kawai Takeo’s production of such plays as Hofmannsthal’s *Elektra* with his Kōshū Gekidan (Public Theater Company, founded 1913), were unsuccessful.

*Shimpa* went through very difficult years during the Taishō period (1912–1926). Even the most popular stars such as Ii and Kawai could hardly survive; the famous female impersonator Hanayagi Shōtarō, however, scored some success with his *geisha* roles, which became and have remained very important in the *shimpa* repertory.

In 1929 the Shōchiku Company took the initiative of bringing together all *shimpa* performers and managing regular performances. *Shimpa* was slowly taking its place in the Tokyo theatre establishment, in a new position, well defined by Inoue Masao in 1937, of *chūkan engeki*, the "theatre in-between" *kabuki* and *shingeki*. 

240
Shimpa

Around this time the actress Mizutani Yaeko (born in 1905), whose long career saw her rise to legendary status, was already enriching shimpa with her great acting and introducing a repertory of sentimental dramas with melodramatic heroines against the backdrop of the demi-monde.

Shimpa from World War II

During World War II three shimpa companies were active, Engekidōjō (The Theatre Studio) directed by Inoue Masao; Geijutsuza (Art Theatre), directed by Mizutani Yaeko; and Honryū Shimpa (Main Stream Shimpa), directed by Kitamura Rokurō and Kawai Takeo. The revival of patriotic plays helped the fortunes of shimpa, but the end of the war opened a serious crisis of survival. The great post-war boom of shingeki attracted some of the best shimpa actors to the rival field, making the shimpa’s situation even more critical. Finally, in 1950 all remaining shimpa performers came together in a company called Gekidan Shimpa, which relied heavily on the fame of Mizutani Yaeko and Hanayagi Shōtarō for a hoped-for revival. The famous Kubota Mantarō, Kawaguchi Matsutarō, and Nakano Minoru wrote some successful plays for shimpa. Shimpa became a synonym for light, sentimental, old fashioned drama, geared above all to an audience made up primarily of housewives, and performed in a style in between the realism of shingeki and the traditional stylization of kabuki.

Shimpa was born in the Meiji period, during which time it reached the zenith of its success. There have been recent attempts to introduce shingeki-like plays and performance style into shimpa. In a true sense, however, shimpa still reflects the uncertain period of Japan’s early modernization, and embodies a nostalgia for what today is felt as the old-fashioned, strangely distant, mixed esthetic tastes of a period when Japan was being introduced to the culture of the West.
NOTES

1Komiya, ed. Japanese Music and Drama in the Meiji Era, 270.


3See an attempt to interpret the importance of Sadayakko's performances in Europe in Savarese, "La peripezia emblematica di Sada Yacco."