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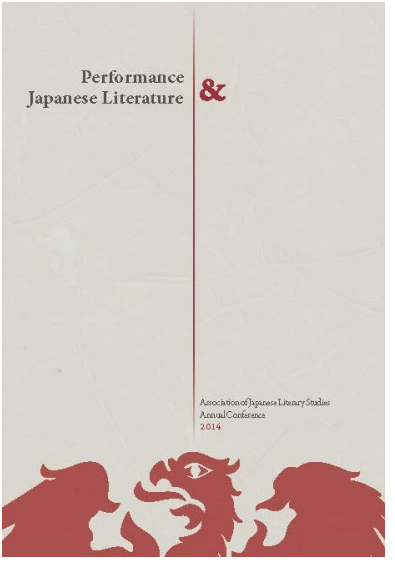

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Re-Inventing The Audience: Towards An Aesthetics Of The Spectator In Meiji Japan

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When Meiji emperor abolished feudalism in 1869, the consequences for nō and kyōgen actors were devastating; they lost their work and all the privileges of the samurai status. It was the nō actor Umewaka Minoru (1828-1909), who began the process of bringing nō to the public by charging admission to performances in his private home.[1]

The politician Iwakura Tomomi (1825-1883) found in nō Japan's equivalent to the European opera after returning from his study trip to Europe and the US, where he had watched opera almost every day.[2] Former president Ulysses S. Grant, visiting Japan, praised nō and urged that it be preserved. Gradually nō occupied an elite position in the new society. After a short period of government support, including imperial command performances, public support solidified and new audiences could be attracted.

As kabuki and bunraku were both considered genres of contemporary theatre,[3] they did not have to face the same destiny as nō during the early Meiji period and were mostly able to keep their audiences. However, in the process of the Meiji period a large fraction of the old audiences lost interest in kabuki and gravitated towards the emerging *taishū engeki* (lit. theatre for/of the masses).

The modernizing of the Japanese theatre can be divided into three separate movements: (1) the Kabuki reform movement (1872-1890), (2) the *Bungei kyōkai* movement (1906-1913) and (3) the *Jiyū Gekijō* movement (1909-1919). These three stages are linked to a huge variety of different people, politicians, theoreticians, playwrights and actors.

The Kabuki reform movement (1872-1890)

It all began in 1872, when officials informed kabuki playwrights and actors of the emperor's 'command' that they must present only material suitable for family groups, noblemen or foreign spectators. Plays which followed a clear moral structure were favored and they should refrain from illogical made-up stories (*kyōgen kigo*).

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[1] For a detailed study on the nō drama in the Meiji era see: Stanca Scholz-Cionca, *Studien zum Nō der Meiji-Zeit* (= *Nachrichten der Gesellschaft für Natur- und Völkerkunde Ostasiens (NOAG) 177-178,* Hamburg, 2005), 179–278.

[2] Harue Tsutsumi, "Kabuki Encounters the West: Iwakura Embassy and Hyōryū Kitan Seiyō Kabuki," *Proceedings of the Association for Japanese Literary Studies (PAJLS)*, Vol. 8, (2007), pp. 222-230.

[3] For example, the Bunraku-za opened in Osaka in 1872 and the Shintomi-za opened in Tokyo in 1878.

In 1883 the Sinologist and playwright Yoda Gakkai (1834-1909) founded together with Fukuchi Ōchi (1841-1906) among others the *Kyūkokai* (The Society in Research of Antiquity). This was the first of many groups aiming for a modernization of kabuki. It was a somewhat academic approach suggesting that plays should be written in a way faithful to historical facts, to ancient customs using the correct language of the respective time and class. The members of the *Kyūkokai* despised most of the past *jidai-mono* plays for their nonsensical plots, crude structures and somewhat sloppy usage of language and grammar.

The kabuki impresario Morita Kan'ya (1846-1897) and the kabuki actor Ichikawa Danjūrō IX (1838-1903) joined forces with the *Kyūkokai* in supporting this new approach for historical accuracy (*jidai kōshō*).[4] Playwright Kawatake Mokuami (1816-1893) was then asked to write new plays in accordance with these new concepts and the term *katsureki* for these historical plays was employed and received favorably among some intellectuals. But the traditional kabuki audience, which was sticking to the old conventions, didn't approve these ideas and the movement never achieved public acclaim.

In 1886, under Itō Hirobumi's first cabinet, the politician Suematsu Kenchō (1855-1920), who was married to Itō's daughter, industrialist Shibusawa Eiichi (1840-1931) and philosopher and educator Toyama Shōichi (or Masakazu) (1848-1900) among others founded a new group, the *Engeki kairyō kai* (Society for Theater Reform) to further a different approach in order to modernize kabuki. The Society had together 46 members, celebrities representing the political, industrial and academic fields of the time, including also Itō Hirobumi, the prime minister himself. Their goal was to establish a new theatre that was also appropriate for an audience consisting of the upper classes of the civilized countries (*bunmeikoku*), in other words: Europe and the United States.

The main ideas of the Society for Theatre Reform were laid out in a manifesto-like founding document with the title *Engeki kairyō kai shuigaki* (Prospectus of the Society for Theater Reform):

> 1. to put an end to the evil customs of the theatre and foster the development of a better theatre;
> 2. to make the writing of plays an honored profession; and
> 3. to construct a theatre building suited to the performance of drama and other stage arts.[5]

[4] Zoë Kincaid, *Kabuki, the Popular Stage of Japan* (London: MacMillian, 1925)

[5] Engeki kairyō kai (Society for Theater Reform), *Engeki kairyō kai shuigaki* (Prospectus for the Society for Theater Reform), in *Sekai engekiron jiten*, edited. by Andō Shinya, Tsutomu Ōshima, and Bunzō Torigoe, 218-219. Tokyo: Hyōronsha, 1979.

In both, form and wording, these articles are reminiscent of the imperial Charter Oath of 1868 (*Gokajō no goseimon*), especially of article 4: "Evil customs of the past shall be broken off and everything based upon the just laws of Nature."

In 1886 three members of the *Engeki kairyōkai* published their ideas in direct succession: Suematsu Kenchō, who was the Society's central figure, published a speech on his ideas entitled *Engeki kairyō iken* (Views on the Reform of Drama), and Toyama Shōichi published *Engeki kairyōron Shikō* (Private Views on the Reform of Drama), followed by Muichian Muni's *Engeki kairyōron bakugi* (Responding to the Reform of Drama).[6]

Suematsu argued that important kabuki features such as the *onnagata* (male actor for female roles) or the *hanamichi* (runway) and *chobo* (the *shamisen* accompaniment from puppet theatre) should be abandoned and that the theatre buildings should be improved. His models were the prestigious Théâtre Française and the Théâtre de l'Opéra and he recommended that they should be built of stone instead of wood.

Toyama pointed out that stage assistants such as *kōken* or *kurogo* should also be abolished. And regarding the writing of a play, the reformers stressed that in Japan there was no dramaturgical distinction of a tragedy from a comedy, and insisted that the content should be refined and moralistic. Suematsu argued:

> By mastering what is beautiful, we can ultimately influence our morality, for by upholding the beautiful, we shall refrain from seeking subject matter that involves violence, injustice, disloyalty or irrationality, because such elements do not truly satisfy our hearts: thus without trying we can naturally arrive at the morality of *kanzen chōaku* (the encouragement of virtue and the chastisement of vice).[7]

Notwithstanding that these opinions are in a way remarkable, they miss the point in disregarding the essence of kabuki. For that reason these rather bureaucratic and theoretical approaches would later meet the fierce opposition of authors such as Tsubouchi Shōyo (1859-1935), who argued that: "Art must not become a slave of morality"[8] and later Mori Ōgai.

It is clear that this movement had the political purpose to build a national theatre that would be on a par with the European theatrical genres, especially the opera. In this sense, they were a perfect representation of the *Rokumeikan* elite, which favored a strict Europeanization.

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[6] The first text was published as a full book: Suematsu Kenchō, *Engeki kairyō iken* (Tokyo: Bungakusha, 1886). For more accessible reprints see *Sekai engekiron jiten*, edited. by Andō Shinya, Tsutomu Ōshima, and Bunzō Torigoe, Tokyo: Hyōronsha, 1979.

[7] Suematsu Kenchō, *Engeki kairyō iken* (Tokyo: Bungakusha, 1886), 48-49.

[8] Tsubouchi Shōyō (1886), "*Engeki kairyō kai no sōritsu o kiite hiken o nobu*" (My Opinions as to the Establishment of the Society for Dramatic Reform).

In doing so Japan's international image and position was supposed to be improved. But in the end this movement had little influence upon the theatrical world in spite of its spectacular demonstrations. The accomplishments of the *Engeki kairyō kai* are mainly the improved position of kabuki as a genre as the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Inoue Kaoru (1836-1915), organized in 1887 a four-day-long kabuki performance from the 26th to the 29th of September in his private residence where the Imperial family and some distinguished foreign and Japanese guests were invited. This was the first time that kabuki was performed before the emperor. Taking into account that only two decades earlier kabuki actors were still considered beggars from dry river beds (*kawara kojiki*) this was a pivotal moment in Japanese theatre history.

Interestingly, the program did not include any domestic play focusing on the life of commoners (*sewa-mono*). The performance showcased only dance pieces and historical plays (*jidai-mono*) such as *Teragoya*, *Kanjinchō* and *Chūshingura* with a clear focus on ideas of loyalty and self-sacrifice.

Furthermore, copyrights were established and led to a better position for playwrights. But when Itō's first cabinet ended the Society dissolved in 1888 less than two years after its foundation. Another indirect and later result of the Society's efforts was the foundation of the Imperial Theatre (*Teikoku gekijō*) in 1911.

In 1888, the same year the *Engeki kairyō kai* disappeared, a new society for the modernization of kabuki was inaugurated, the *Engei kyōfū kai* (Society for the Betterment of Entertainment), led by Tanabe Taiichi (1831-1915), who was a member of the Iwakura mission and would later become Minister of Foreign Affairs. Among its illustrious members were people such as Okakura Tenshin, Aeba Kōson, Tsubouchi Shōyo, Yoda Gakkai and Fukuchi Ōchi. This group was reorganized as *Nihon Engei Kyōkai* (Japan Entertainment Association) in August 1889 and was led by Count Hijikata Hisamoto (1833-1918) The members of its literary committee included Tsubouchi Shōyō, Mori Ōgai (1862-1922), who had just come back from Germany, Ozaki Kōyō, Kawatake Mokuami and Aeba Kōson. Members of the performance committee were Danjūrō, Kikugōrō and Sadanji. Ōgai, who joined the group only two months earlier articulated in the October edition of the magazine *Shiragami zōshi* his harsh criticism towards this new reform group:

> In our own country, a group calling itself "The Society for the Betterment of Entertainment" issued a manifesto that began with this statement: 'This group aims to correct and improve theatrical representation, raising it to a higher, more elegant plane, so that it can become a truly perfect form of art.'
>
> This noble aim persists, but is has gone astray. This ideal of performance has degenerated into a set of rules for promoting familiar ways of thinking and doing—rules that

> do not clarify the society's ultimate goals. Haven't these would-be reformers fallen prey to the bad habit of groping in the dark for their high ideals? They have forsaken the genuine spirit of old.[9]

Even though the focus now was directed less on the audience or the performance itself but more on the improvement of national drama and the production of good plays, this society also dissolved before its goals were attained.

The *Bungei kyōkai* movement (1906-1913)

After the different previous experiences that didn't prove successful, Tsubouchi Shōyō and Shimamura Hōgetsu (1871-1918), who had just come back from a stay in Great Britain and Germany, together founded the Literary Arts Society (*Bungei Kyōkai*) in 1906 to make a fresh start. In the following years Tsubouchi and his company became the center of a new genre called *shingeki*: new theatre.

Tsubouchi still believed that kabuki was clearly inappropriate as a national theatre (*kokugeki*) and was aiming with this new movement to: "advance a new theatre suitable for the new age which overcomes the ills of the traditional theatre and which indirectly, through providing aesthetic experiences, works to enlighten society."[10]

In this new attempt the education of a new generation of *shingeki* actors was the pivotal element and Tsubouchi, interestingly enough, included traditional genres such as nō singing, jōruri recital and the study of kabuki movements as acting techniques for a future theatrical generation. With his new students he staged mostly his own Shakespeare translations like *The Merchant of Venice* (1906), *Hamlet* (1907, 1911) and *Julius Caesar* (1913) but also tried his hand at writing new plays.

Although the *Bungei kyōkai* did not survive very long and was dissolved in 1913, Tsubouchi believed that theatre would provide an ideal means in enlightening society and in doing so he made a clear statement towards the role of theatre audience and society.

The *Jiyū Gekijō* movement (1909-1919)

Only three years after the foundation of the Bungei Kyōkai, Osanai Kaoru (1881-1928) and kabuki actor Ichikawa Sadanji founded the Free Theatre (*Jiyū Gekijō*), named after Antoine's Théâtre Libre (1887) in Paris and Otto Brahm's Freie Bühne (1889) in Berlin. In 1906 Osanai had founded the Ibsen-kai, a study group that was working on the dramas of the Norwegian playwright

[9] Mori Ōgai, "Surprised by the prejudice of Theater Reformers", in: Thomas J. Rimer, *Not a Song Like Any Other: An Anthology of Writings by Mori Ōgai*. (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), p. 147.

[10] Tsubouchi Shōyō, *Shōyō senshū,* Vol. 12, (Tokyo: Daiichi shobo, 1977) p. 612.

who died in that year. About two decades younger than Tsubouchi, Osanai became an avid fan of Ibsen, who was considered something like an ideal model for the new generation of theatre people. They found in Ibsen's realism and the social implications of his contemporary works a shining example for the type of theatre they were aiming for. When the Free Theater started its activities the company made its debut with Ibsen's *John Gabriel Borkmann*.

In contrast to *Bungei kyōkai* Osanai's *Jiyū gekijō* mainly focused on contemporary European plays of authors such as Wedekind, Gorkiy and Hauptmann. This genre in Japanese theatre is usually referred to as *honyaku geki* (translated theatre). However, Osanai also supported many young playwrights by having their works staged by his company. But these attempts were mostly overlooked by audiences, which were more attracted by the appeal of the foreign pieces.

As Osanai was able to continue his attempts to create a new genre of Japanese theatre in the *Tsukiji shōgekijō* from 1924-1928, when he gravitated even more fully to Western authors such as Edward Gordon Craig, Konstantin Stanislawski and William Archer, his achievements far exceed those of Tsubouchi's *Bungei kyōkai*.

I have tried in this paper to tackle some of the problems related to the modernization of Japanese theatre in some of the decisive turns of modern Japanese theater history from the angle of the audience.