

An Overview 解説

A history of small theater movement leading up to the present.

— Eiko Tsuboike (Director of Institute for the Arts)

現代に繋がる小劇場演劇の流れ

— 坪池栄子 (文化科学研究所)

*Kabuki

The origin of the name kabuki is the verb *kabuku*, which means to exhibit strange behavior and appearance. Kabuki is said to have originated in the early Edo Period with an extravagant dance (*kabuki odori*) first performed in Kyoto by a woman named IZUMO no Okuni. Kabuki performance by women was then banned by the authorities as deleterious to public morals, and the *on'nagata* (male performer specializing in female roles) came into being. Kabuki consequently developed as an intensely formalistic drama. When the Shogunate government granted official permission to perform kabuki in Edo in 1714, the only authorized theaters were the Nakamura-za, the Ichimura-za, and the Morita-za, known as the "three theaters of Edo."

*Shingeki

The *shingeki* (New Drama, or Western-style theater) genre appeared as a reaction against kabuki and *Shinpa* theater and developed through reception of European modern drama. It originated with the Jiyu Gekijo(1909-1919), a theatrical troupe that was formed under the Meiji government movement to improve kabuki and for the purpose of performing translated plays. Initially *shingeki* was performed by kabuki players. Then the Tsukiji Shogekijo was built in 1924 as a permanent theater for the performance of European modern drama, and the theater sought to cultivate actors who could perform realistic drama. This laid the foundation for the *shingeki* of today. Representative troupes include the Haiyu-za (founded in 1944), the Bungakuza (1937), and the Mingei (1950).

*Shinpa

The *Shinpa* (New School) was a dramatic genre that developed in opposition to kabuki. *Shinpa* originated during the middle of the Meiji Period from a form known as *soshi shibai* (plays by young political activists), which was performed to publicize the democratic thought of the Human Rights Movement. This form gradually began to dramatize contemporary material found in the newspapers, and finally established itself as the *Shinpa* tragedy style toward the beginning of the Taishō™ Period with the appearance of the works *Konjiki Yasha* and *Hototogisu*.

Background to the Small Theater Movement

The Japanese theater was influenced by the trend toward rapid modernization and Westernization, as was Japanese society as a whole, during the Meiji Period and since.

*Shinpa** (New School) developed as a reaction to kabuki*, and then *shingeki** (New Drama, or Western-style theater) appeared as a reaction to kabuki and *shinpa* theater. *Shogekijo* (Small Theater) then came into being in reaction to *shingeki*. In this way, one aspect of Japanese theater is that it has undergone repeated reactions to existing forms of expression and created separate groups and forms of expression.

Because of this historical background, the term Japanese theater actually refers to a variety of genres that exist side by side, from classical to commercial theater, small theater, the high school theater that is carried on as an educational program, and so on. The connections between these different areas are relatively slight, and apart from some deliberately produced joint performances, there is almost no exchange among them at present. Of all these movements, the one that is the main moving force for contemporary theater is the small theater movement, which started in the 1960s and still continues to turn out new talent today.

The 1960s was a period during which people who wanted to perform in contemporary theater had no choice but to join one of the major *shingeki* companies and follow the realistic style. A series of small theater companies then appeared, created by young performers who were dissatisfied with the existing theater and dropped out of the major companies, and by the leaders of student theater clubs in the universities who possessed versatile talent and sought to find their own forms of expression and express their own thoughts within the context of the student activist movement. These companies were the origin of today's small theater.

With a few exceptions, small theater is basically an amateur activity. The company leaders in most cases are highly individualistic, talented people who take multiple roles as playwrights, directors, and lead actors. In those cases where the leaders are not also lead actors, there will inevitably be a distinctive, charismatic lead actor who personifies the company leader's views on drama.

The first generation of the small theater included such figures as the late TERAYAMA Shuji, SUZUKI Tadashi (presently general artistic director of the Shizuoka Performing Arts Center and director of SCOT), NINAGAWA Yukio (currently president of Toho Gakuen College of Drama and Music), KARA Juro (director of the Karagumi), SATO Makoto (presently a professor at Tokyo Gakugei University), OTA Shogo (presently a professor at Kyoto University of Art and Design), KUSHIDA Kazuyoshi (presently artistic director of the Matsumoto Performing Arts Centre and a professor at Nihon University College of Art), and so on. These prominent members of the small theater together made this movement a leading presence in world avant-garde drama.

Many of these figures have now retired from their activities as company leaders to work independently as directors or, alternatively, as artistic directors for public

An Overview

A history of small theater movement leading up to the present.

現代に繋がる小劇場演劇の流れ

theaters or leaders of universities. In doing so, they have taken on the great responsibility of pioneering new roles that working actors in Japan had never taken before. This first generation is therefore creating a new environment, and the question of how this environment will influence the next generation in the contemporary theatrical scene is a matter of great interest.

The first-generation of the small theater was strongly characterized by its intellectual and experimental nature as an anti-establishment, anti-*shingeki*, avant-garde movement, and its audiences were made up of like-minded people. The 1970s, however, saw the appearance of TSUKA Kohei (the second generation), which established a self-parodying comedic style that affirmed any human desire so long as it had some pride. This became very popular, and attracted young audiences who appreciated small theater as entertainment. This was a turning point for the small theater which then underwent a major shift in orientation and offered entertainment that would appeal to the sensibilities of the young people of that time.

Such leaders of the third generation as NODA Hideki and KOKAMI Shoji came on the scene from university student theater during the 1980s. Their unprecedented plots and strongly individualistic performance styles gained the support of young audiences, creating what the mass media referred to as a small theater boom. By the 1990s, small theater was reaching a dead end with its style, which until then had been characterized by emphasis on the strange and unusual. This led to the appearance of the fourth generation, a chamber theater movement that set its scenes in everyday life, as represented by the works of HIRATA Oriza.

Entertainment-oriented groups were also active, featuring such figures as NARUI Yutaka of Caramel Box, a theater company that made a success with a show business approach. The Gekidan Shinkansen (playwright NAKASHIMA Kazuki and director INOUE Hidenori) also extended its activities into commercial theater with period science-fiction and action plays performed theatrically with a picture story touch. Others were MITANI Koki, a creator of so called situation comedies, who achieved success as a professional playwright and was also active in writing for the commercial theater and television dramas, and NAGAI Ai, a creator of social comedies. The small theater is now reaching a period of maturity as the third-generation leaders disband their companies and the members shift their activities to more highly finished productions in commercial theater, or otherwise move out of the small theater world to become writers and directors for show business and movies, television actors, media personalities, and so on.

An Overview

A history of small theater movement leading up to the present.

現代に繋がる小劇場演劇の流れ

Appearance of the Fifth Generation and the Latest Trend

The fourth-generation leaders during the 1990s included two who had a significant influence on the following generation. These were Keralino Sandorovich (Japanese playwright and director) of Nylon 100°C, a troupe that adopted a wide range of materials to develop its comedy with a serious side, and MATSUO Suzuki (playwright, director, and actor) of Otona-keikaku company, who was the most highly rated talent since NODA Hideki.

The presently active leaders of the fifth-generation small theater scene include NAGATSUKA Keishi, KIDA Tsuyoshi, MURAKAMI Hiroki, MATSUMURA Takeshi, and CHIBA Masako. Born from the late 1960s to the 1970s, these talented people are often referred to as the 'Matsuo children' and 'Kera (short for Keralino) children'. One common factor in this fifth generation is that they have very little of the collective group quality that was a formative element in earlier small theater. Japanese small theater had been characterized by the exploration of distinctive styles within the group activities carried on by the various exclusive ways, and by their expansion of the possibilities of performing arts for the small theater as a whole. On the other hand, however, that collective group quality also meant that almost all of these companies, although with some exceptions, had no choice but to disband in order for their members to progress beyond the amateur level.

The times changed, however, and growing numbers of young companies appeared that did not depend on this kind of collective group quality and that were not differentiated by any major differences in performance style. In recent years, therefore, there have been many activities on the small theater scene that have not been restricted by the troupe framework, such as specially produced performances and ensemble activities by artists who feel compatible with each other.

One trend in the new generation that must be noted is the rise of regional theater. Where the small theater scene had been overwhelmingly concentrated in Tokyo, a shift started to take place from the late 1990s. A series of new playwrights emerged in Osaka and Kyoto and gave a fresh impact on theater scene.

Various background factors from the end of the 1980s and into the 1990s led to this happening. For example, many theaters that opened in the Tokyo metropolitan area organized programs of specially produced performances that highlighted the talented small theater members who were popular among young audiences.

Creators and producers of small theater who disbanded their companies also formed production companies that ended up being involved in producing many of the performances of this kind.

Major roles in this were played by the Ogimachi Museum Square (closed in 2003), a theater that served as a base for small theater in Osaka, and the Itami Ai Hall, a public theater established by Itami City in Hyogo Prefecture. Both of these theaters concentrated on supporting young artists, and the OMS Drama Award, established in 1994, encouraged the development of playwrights. Winners of this award include MATSUDA Masataka, SUZUE ToshirTM, IWASAKI Masahiro, and TSUCHIDA Hideo. MATSUDA and SUZUE went on almost immediately to win the Kishida Kunio Drama Award, which is the door to success for Japanese playwrights. The tendency for the regional theatrical scene to be energized was also stimulated by the construction of many public theaters throughout Japan during the 1990s. New talent has already emerged and achieved nationwide recognition, although the link with local regional theater has been maintained as a base for these activities.

Two other new movements in the small theater scene are the great rise in popularity of workshops and the appearance of open auditions in small theater. The workshop boom occurred in large part because new needs emerged that

An Overview

A history of small theater movement leading up to the present.

現代に繋がる小劇場演劇の流れ

Japanese society had not previously experienced. As a result, for instance, education programs were started at the public theaters constructed throughout Japan, and a movement began to put stage performance skills to use in children's education. Small theater directors were provided with a place to use their skills outside the creation of a theatrical performance, and this represents an enormous change that will no doubt influence the theater environment of the future. Small theater started holding open auditions because the fall in real estate prices due to the collapse of Japan's economic bubble resulted in a rapidly growing number of vacant buildings and other such unused facilities in city centers. Many small theaters that rent such spaces can today be found throughout cities, providing bases for amateur theatrical activity. It will be very interesting to see how the small theater movement will reflect these changes in the creative and performing environments ten years from now.