

J. THOMAS RIMER

# Toward a Modern Japanese Theatre

*Kishida Kunio*



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JAPANESE THEATRE



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Kishida Kuno

BY J. THOMAS RIMER

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*For Laurence*

A nation which does not help and encourage its theatre is, if not dead, dying; just as the theatre which does not feel the social pulse, the historical pulse, the drama of its people, and catch the genuine color of its landscape and of its spirit with laughter or with tears, has no right to call itself a theatre, but is an amusement hall, or a place for doing that dreadful thing known as "killing time."

*Federico Garcia Lorca*

1934

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J. Thomas Rimer

St. Louis, Missouri  
July 1973

### NOTE

THE 1954 edition of *Kenkyusha's New Japanese-English Dictionary* has served as the authority for romanizing Japa-

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nese terms. Macrons have been used to indicate long vowels in all words except the most ordinary proper nouns. Japanese names are given in the customary Japanese manner, with the family name preceding the given name.

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TOWARD A MODERN  
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## CHAPTER I

### Introduction

THE phenomenon of *shingeki*, or, literally, New Theatre, in Japan can be said to correspond roughly with the modern theatre in Europe and the United States. Sixty-odd years of New Theatre activity have attracted little attention outside the country, despite the fact that a considerable body of drama of generally high literary quality has been produced, actors trained, theatres built, and a generous amount of information compiled in modern Japanese literary histories on the movement and its playwrights.

The word "new" suggests an opposition to something "old," and many different styles of drama are currently performed in Japan, ranging from the traditional *nō* and *kabuki* through several hybrid forms which use traditional themes and some modern acting techniques. The New Theatre, however, represents a Japanese version of the same kind of serious modern theatre available in Paris, London, or New York.

The New Theatre movement grew up among a variety of conflicting artistic forces and was influenced not only by them but by the general political and cultural phases through which Japan passed since 1900. Eric Bentley has written that "even more than the other arts—or more crudely—the drama is a chronicle and brief abstract of the time, revealing not only the surface but the whole material and spiritual structure of an epoch."<sup>1</sup> The New Theatre movement provides such a chronicle for Japan, and every confusion of the modern period is mirrored in its activities.

The definition of the New Theatre movement given in

<sup>1</sup> Eric Bentley, *The Playwright as Thinker* (New York, 1946), p. 77.

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the authoritative *Engeki Hyakkajiten* (*Encyclopedia of the Theatre*) suggests some of the complexities involved.

Until 1910, the works seen on the Japanese stage did not reflect the changes which had overtaken the country. As a result, a desire was felt for a new kind of theatre movement. This movement developed into *shingeki*.

First of all, the New Theatre movement placed itself in opposition to the pre-modern elements remaining in the older theatrical forms. However, as there were other similar movements in Japan at that time trying to add modern elements to the traditional theatre, and since they could not be disregarded, their styles became mixed with those of the New Theatre movement itself.

Moreover, the Proletarian Theatre movement, which had tried to oppose the New Theatre movement and to take the lead itself in developing new techniques was in the end also incorporated into the New Theatre movement.

The intermingling of these varying elements gives the New Theatre movement in Japan its special characteristics.<sup>2</sup>

Many of the points touched on here will later be expanded upon, but even from these short paragraphs, it is clear that the writers participating in the establishment of a modern theatre in Japan faced crucial and complex problems. Much of what they did was a groping in the dark; the general course that the movement took seems clear now only by hindsight.

The history of this movement can best be examined through the career of a representative playwright. For this purpose I have chosen Kishida Kunio (1890-1954), the finest playwright in Japan before the Second World War. Kishida studied in France with the famous director Jacques Copeau in 1921 and 1922, and after returning to Japan did much to

<sup>2</sup> Waseda University Theatre Society, *Engeki Hyakkajiten* (Tokyo, 1963), III, p. 250.

promote the growth of a theatre dedicated to literary and humanistic ideals. In a larger context, however, through the work of Kishida and others, the prewar New Theatre movement did make a crucial contribution towards creating a modern dramatic literature in Japan. The study of this process has social and cultural implications beyond purely literary ones. Concerning this last point, the critic Etō Jun has written with considerable insight concerning the importation into Japan of western literary forms.

If one observes [the history of modern Japanese literature] from a viewpoint that would differentiate "modernization" from "westernization," he will wonder at this paradoxical process that has induced Japanese literature to *modernize* since the beginning of the Meiji period without necessarily *westernizing*. . . . I am almost tempted to say that the time may come when Japanese writers can express themselves more freely and confidently and achieve their real self-identification only when they are able to realize more clearly the fundamental differences, however subtle, between "modernization" and "westernization."<sup>3</sup>

The question as to whether the "modernization" of Japan also requires its "westernization," and indeed the question concerning the extent to which the two terms may or may not be synonymous, has been an important intellectual and spiritual issue in Japan since shortly after the Meiji Restoration in 1868. Of all literary forms the drama, as exemplified by the New Theatre movement, went furthest in incorporating western elements and abandoning the heritage of Japanese tradition. Thus a study of the activities of the movement may shed light on the means by which one culture can absorb ideas and techniques without losing its own identity, or, rather, can absorb them in the very process of trying to find a new and changing identity. Some

<sup>3</sup> Etō Jun, "An Undercurrent in Modern Japanese Literature," *Journal of Asian Studies*, xxiii, May 1964, pp. 433-445.

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tentative conclusions to these complicated questions will be suggested later. Before any discussion of Kishida's work can be presented, however, we must have some background on the early history of the New Theatre movement, in order to show the setting for the "chronicle and brief abstract of the time."

## CHAPTER II

### Modernization or Westernization: The Movement for a Modern Theatre in Japan before 1925

WHAT was the nature of the movement for a modern theatre in Japan? By 1925, Japan had several thoroughly professional playwrights who wrote works of considerable literary interest, dealing with concerns that would have seemed no less important to a European or an American audience than to a Japanese one. Yet the manner in which Japanese writers first came to take an interest in the theatre, and the problems they faced, suggest that their difficulties were more complex than any their European counterparts had encountered a generation or two before. A brief description of the early attempts made in Japan to alter the nature of the traditional theatre and elevate the function of the playwright will serve to indicate just how difficult these problems were.

In the development of the modern theatre in Europe, the playwrights appeared first. Producing organizations grew up in response to the literary and theatrical challenges thrown down by the authors. It is true that these theatre companies, in turn, stimulated the development of still newer writers, but the fact remains that Ibsen, Strindberg, Shaw, and many others had written many of their plays, usually unproduced and often unpublished, before the advent of the theatre companies that put them on the stage.

In Japan, however, the situation was quite different. The new theatrical organizations there were created in response to a desire on the part of many intellectuals for a new and a meaningful theatre in their country. The organizations

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were created before any Japanese playwrights of stature appeared. This reversal gave a very different emphasis to the New Theatre movement in Japan and presented it with a different set of problems.

In 1866, when the Emperor Meiji began his reign and Japan opened its doors to the western nations, the contemporary Japanese theatre was best represented by the *kabuki*, one of the great forms of stage art which, although perhaps in a period of decline of the quality of plays then being written, was still a powerful force in popular culture and the dominant form of theatrical entertainment. Any extended discussion of the art of *kabuki* would be out of place here, but the following points should be kept in mind.

The plays in the *kabuki* theatre were stylized to a far greater extent than in the traditional European theatre. It is true, of course, that the *jidaimono* (historical plays) were often based on famous historical incidents, and that the *sewamono* (domestic dramas) were dramatizations of recent incidents; but the manner in which the materials were ordered within the plays shows that the major effect aimed at was a theatricalization of emotion and action rather than any psychological analysis. Of course, if we say that the *kabuki* is an actor's theatre, then we must recognize that Shakespeare's theatre might be described in the same terms. But unlike Shakespeare's, the *kabuki* plays were constructed so as to provide a series of emotional and scenic climaxes, designed as ends in themselves, that do not necessarily represent the inevitable results of the interactions of character and plot. Such a theatre is artistically effective on its own terms, but the principles of dramaturgy involved are far removed from those that stimulated the movement for a modern theatre in Europe. Indeed the better works of even the early nineteenth-century European stage, albeit within a framework of convention, or even of cliché, do pay a certain amount of attention to psychological logic.

Kinoshita Junji, one of the foremost of modern dramatists, has written on the differences between *kabuki* and the traditional European theatre in a precise and informative fashion.

There is a great difference in the density of writing in the two forms. In the case of European drama, the speeches are usually written with an ample thread of logical psychology running through them. But in the case of *kabuki*, there are a great many leaps of a psychological and logical nature within the speeches. It is the art of the actor which creates a theatre where such leaps can give satisfaction. And any art that finds such elements essential will naturally be filled with the unexplainable and the surprising.<sup>1</sup>

For Kinoshita, there is a logic in Shakespeare which guides even the passages of greatest bravura, but in *kabuki* the spectator takes his pleasure in seeing a brilliant actor bridge the gaps. Indeed, *kabuki* is a theatre primarily for actors. The companies were often managed by actors, plays were written to suit their talents, then changed to suit their whims. (It should also be noted that the word "actor" should be strictly understood, since men played the women's roles, just as they did in Elizabethan England.)

The function of the playwright under such circumstances was that of a craftsman, admittedly of the highest sort, who knew his company, his actors, and his audience. He would construct elaborate and exciting dramas to exploit all the prodigious resources available to the *kabuki* theatre. The last of the great traditional playwrights, Kawatake Mokuami (1816-1893), was active in 1868, but with him the great tradition of playwriting came to an end. The playwright's view of his own work and its significance within the total ensemble was totally different from that of the mod-

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Shimomura Masao, *Shingeki* (Tokyo, 1956), pp. 24-25.

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ern literary playwright, or even of nineteenth-century European playwrights like Scribe or Dumas who, for all their use of conventions, were very conscious of their important position in the triangle of author-director-actor.<sup>2</sup>

The following brief description of the organization of the writers in a traditional *kabuki* company will serve to explain the differences.

There were four grades in the writing groups, with apprentices doing the odd jobs, to learn the theatre system. After this the apprentices were advanced to helping in the actual performance, prompting, moving properties, and helping actors. Next they were permitted to help with the writing, and did stage-management. The chief writer, having been given the plan for the new play by the actor-manager and the promoter, worked out the plot and wrote the main parts, while the assistants filled in the rest, which was edited by the chief writer.

At the first rehearsal, it was the chief writer's duty to read the play to the entire company, and it was necessary for him to give as highly effective a reading as possible, so as to make sure that all understood his ideas. After this the cue-scripts were given to the actors, and rehearsals began, while the stage plans were given to the set constructors by the writer. The design of the programs, posters, signboards was also his responsibility.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> This is not to suggest that vehicles for actors were not an important part of the western theatre. Take for example the following experience that Eugene O'Neill had as a student.

Augustus Thomas, then the dean of American playwrights and the personification of all that was successful, admired—and hackneyed—on the Broadway stage, took over the class [at Harvard] for a guest lecture. Thomas, with lightning inventiveness and a glibness that revolted O'Neill, proceeded to define the method for writing a sure-fire Broadway success.

"Suggest the name of the star," Thomas invited the class. (Arthur and Barbara Gelb, *O'Neill* [New York, 1962], pp. 270-271.)

<sup>3</sup> Japanese National Commission for UNESCO, *Theatre in Japan* (Tokyo, 1963), p. 61.

No modern playwright could conceive of working under such restrictions. True, the results might be as rich as a canvas of the school of Rubens (created by groups in the same way) but it should be no surprise that the results tended toward the pictorial and the decorative rather than the psychological or the spiritual.

The audience for these plays in 1868 was predominantly a city audience, of the merchant class. Others (*samurai*, and sometimes even the nobility) came out of curiosity, but the *kabuki* theatre, like the class that created and patronized it, had a rather bad name.<sup>4</sup> Tanaka Chikao writes that for the elaborate New Year *kabuki* productions, "busy people saved their money to be able to go at least once. But such people were normally sufficiently troubled in their own lives by human and social problems that they surely wanted to avoid any representation of life as they lived it directly on the stage. A play was to represent a world, a beautiful world not of this one. In this sense, *kabuki* can be called a type of fantasy."<sup>5</sup>

With the opening of Japan to the west, the pressures of conflicting civilizations were felt almost immediately, and the theatre began to reflect them. Beginning in about 1870,

<sup>4</sup> These attitudes on the part of the *samurai* and the nobility carried on into the Meiji period. For example, a leading educator wrote in 1882 that *jōruri* puppet plays, also performed in the *kabuki* repertory "were truly the extreme in lewdness and obscenity . . . among *samurai*, such books were extremely despised, and a *samurai* of good conduct would no more pick up such a book than he would a pile of rubbish." (Quoted in Donald Shively, "Nishimura Shigeki: A Confucian View of Modernization," in Marius Jansen, ed., *Changing Japanese Attitudes toward Modernization* [Princeton, 1965], pp. 228-229.) In the novels of Natsume Sōseki and other respected authors of the Meiji period, characters represented as having good "modern" educations often disdained the traditional theatre as vulgar and spiritually empty. Such views were less common by World War I, but were typical twenty years before and indeed were reinforced by the fact that the growing intelligentsia which grew up towards the end of the nineteenth century in Japan associated *kabuki* with the "feudal" ways of the old regime.

<sup>5</sup> Tanaka Chikao, ed., *Gekibungaku* (Tokyo, 1959), p. 13.

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a variety of attempts were made to reform the theatre in order to make it more responsive to the social and spiritual realities of the time. First were those that strove to modernize the Japanese theatre by making it more contemporary, either in psychology or in subject matter. Second were those that, abandoning the traditional Japanese dramatic forms (specifically *kabuki*) altogether, made use of western dramaturgy to westernize the theatre and to create a new and contemporary Japanese drama.

Modernization involved four distinct experiments between 1868 and 1925.

### THE MODERNIZATION OF KABUKI: HISTORY AS EDUCATION

By the 1870s *kabuki* had ceased to be a contemporary theatre. Attempts had been made to incorporate foreign elements, even foreign actors, into the new plays, but the whole mechanism of the female impersonator and the special world of the thief, prostitute, and *petit-bourgeois* that gave the early nineteenth-century plays their special and very real flavor made the new concerns of the Meiji period too difficult to deal with.

*Kabuki* actors and managers now began consciously to look back and seek out classic plays of the tradition written in periods of greatness. In a famous ceremony at the opening of a new theatre in 1872, Ichikawa Danjūrō IX (1838-1903), the greatest of the Meiji actors, made a speech dressed in white tie and tails rather than in traditional costume. "The theatre of recent years," he stated, "has drunk up filth and smelled of the coarse and the mean. It has disregarded the beautiful principle of rewarding good and chastizing evil. It has fallen into mannerisms and distortions and has been steadily flowing downhill. . . . I am deeply grieved by this fact and in consultation with my colleagues I have resolved to clean away the decay."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Komiya Toyotaka, *Japanese Music and Drama in the Meiji Era* (Tokyo, 1956), pp. 191-192.

Danjūrō and his manager Morita Kan'ya proceeded to do so and they gave *kabuki* a new role: education and morality for a new Japan.

Danjūrō's reforms, such as they were, were centered on the so-called *katsureki* or living-history plays. In practice these plays represented only slight revisions of older texts. Until the Meiji period the *kabuki* theatre, always under the eye of the censor, had changed the dates and historical personages in the plays so as to avoid any overt suggestion of social criticism. Thus the traditional history plays were in one sense fantasies in historical settings. Danjūrō decided to reverse course. He studied old prints and drawings and had consultants who tried to help him represent famous historical incidents on the stage in as literal and accurate a manner as possible. Costumes, properties, and scenery were made to look authentic, and history plays were assigned to their proper eras.<sup>7</sup>

In addition, within restricted limits, Danjūrō tried to introduce a freer method of performance than had heretofore been permitted. He accomplished with a look what other actors had indicated with gestures. In one play he caused a sensation by closing the curtain as the two characters on stage merely nodded at each other, rather than showing the traditional final scene of bravura histrionics.

Danjūrō considered himself a realist, but the kind of changes he proposed, no matter how revolutionary, made no real change in the nature of the drama he was perform-

<sup>7</sup> Komiya reports an amusing incident that shows the sharpness of the public's reaction to Danjūrō's (to them) untoward changes in their favorite plays.

"Danjūrō sometimes suffered for his realism. Often the whole troupe was dissatisfied with him. When in June 1881 he appeared at the *Shintomiza* in the revenge story of the Soga brothers, he played the younger brother to Sōjūrō's elder brother. Danjūrō was dressed in full armor, while Sōjūrō was dressed in the traditional hitched-up trousers and was barefoot. A critic reported that 'the younger brother was prepared for a fire, the elder for a flood.' Sōjūrō pleaded illness and appeared in only one performance." (Komiya, *Meiji Drama*, p. 202.)

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ing. Indeed, his new emphasis on realism could only be detrimental to a theatre like *kabuki*, founded as it was on fantasy, illusion, and spectacle.

His idea to make drama a vehicle for morality and education was perhaps useful insofar as it stressed the fact that the drama could be a serious art form, for this conception would have to precede the development of any new drama of significance in Japan. Yet as Danjūrō learned, when he stressed the older virtues inherent in the plays he only made them seem more remote from a rapidly changing society. The experiment did not please his public, nor was it successful in artistic terms. He had moved too far away from his old audience and he had not been able to find a new one to appreciate his intentions.

## SHIMPA: NEW THEMES, OLD TREATMENT

It was becoming clear that *kabuki*, because of both its old-fashioned Tokugawa morality and its stylization was not the suitable vessel into which to pour all the new and conflicting ideas and life styles of the Meiji period. In particular, *kabuki*, because of the censors, had been especially weak in its representation on the stage of the subject which most interested the Japanese in the 1870s and the 1880s, politics. Political theatre has seldom, at least before the advent of Brecht, produced an artistically satisfying style of play, and the political propaganda skits or plays (*sōshi no shibai*) being presented at this time in Japan were without literary pretensions.

The development of *shimpa* (literally, "new-style" drama, as opposed to "old-style" drama, or *kabuki*) is closely connected with the career of the playwright and producer Kawakami Otojirō (1864-1911), a curious and rather ingenious man who had a diverse career. Kawakami had acted in some of the earlier political plays; he then took the style and changed it by dressing up his plays with realistic battle scenes, especially during the Sino-Japanese war. Fired by

this success, in 1901 he made a voyage to Europe, Russia, and the United States with his wife Sadako, one of the first women to appear professionally on the stage in Japan, and eighteen others, introducing to the unsuspecting world plays with dubious titles such as *The Warrior and the Geisha*. Komiya indicated that the tour was "something of a national disgrace," but Kawakami viewed it as a great success.<sup>8</sup> After his return, Kawakami was convinced that he must find some artistic means to deal with life in contemporary Japan and that he must use actresses rather than female impersonators for the purpose.

Kawakami and the others who then proceeded to develop the *shimpa* like the *kabuki sewamono* used sensationalist level stories of contemporary life and dramatized them. The plays lost the political pretensions of the earlier *sōshi no shibai*. Actresses were used, but female impersonators were retained as well. Kawakami and his colleagues claimed that the style of *shimpa* was more realistic than that of *kabuki*, but Shimomura dismisses this aspect of the new drama as merely "the realism of train whistles."<sup>9</sup> The emotional attitudes in the plays are not far removed from those in nineteenth-century *kabuki*, and the effect produced, despite an evolved acting style, was a cloying sentimentality. If *kabuki* can be said to have stopped being a contemporary theatre,

<sup>8</sup> Many Japanese at the time were very critical of Kawakami, since they felt that he and his wife were misrepresenting Japanese theatrical traditions. After all, there were at the time no professional actresses in Japan. Sadako had been a *geisha* and knew how to dance, but she could hardly be expected to represent in any fashion the art of *kabuki*. Nevertheless, the trip had an extraordinary impact in Europe. For the reaction there, see the lively account in Leonard Pronko, *Theatre East and West* (Berkeley, 1967), pp. 120-124. For Max Beerbohm's enthusiastic praise of Sadako, whom he puts before Sarah Bernhardt, see his essay "Incomparables Compared" in *Around Theatres* (New York, 1954), pp. 159-160. The only dissenting voice on the question of her talents was, oddly enough, that of Jacques Copeau, who told Kishida Kunio that "her way of doing things was all wrong." (See *Kishida Kunio zenshū*, ix, p. 55.)

<sup>9</sup> Shimomura, *Shingeki*, p. 28.

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emotionally speaking, in 1870, then *shimpa* might be said to have suffered the same fate by 1910. *Shimpa* troupes still exist today, and when occasionally a fine playwright creates a work for them, the results can be professionally satisfying. But from the point of view of modernizing the theatre, this second experiment was not a success.

## SHINKOKUGEKI: EXCITEMENT FOR THE GENERAL PUBLIC

*Shinkokugeki*, or New National Theatre, was largely the creation of one man, Sawada Shōjirō (1892-1929). The name of the theatrical company was coined in 1917 and represents a later stage of experimentation than *shimpa*. Sawada himself was an actor of some note who had made a considerable reputation with his performance as Iokanaan in Oscar Wilde's *Salome*. Through his participation in this and other productions, Sawada became convinced that the mass of contemporary Japanese audiences were being left behind, and he was determined to "lead from among his public, rather than remain ahead of it."<sup>10</sup> He set out to perform dramas, many of which he commissioned himself, designed to bridge the gap between *kabuki* and modern theatre, but in order to gain the favor of a large audience, he diluted his new plays with sword fights and spectacles; the playwrights who served him were subsidiary to the acrobats. After his death in 1929, the company attempted to add more modern pieces to the repertory, but the results remained close to *shimpa* in mentality. Although the company continues to perform for a certain public today, it can be said that Sawada's catering to public taste produced little of artistic merit.

All three of the movements described above came from within the commercial theatre itself, and they all failed. (Nor, in fact, did the professional companies in Europe provide the impetus for the modern drama.) The various

<sup>10</sup> UNESCO, *Theatre in Japan*, p. 192.

experiments in Japan did, however, serve to indicate a dissatisfaction with the traditional theatre on the part of the actors, producers, and at least some of the audience.

*Shōyō: Active Evolution through Amateurs*

The fourth and final experiment to modernize the theatre before 1925 came from efforts made outside the milieu of the commercial theatre, as it had in Europe, and was based on the activities of the leading literary critic of the day, Tsubouchi Shōyō (1859-1935). Shōyō was a protean figure in the Japanese literary and theatrical world, who defined the nature of the western novel for the Japanese as early as 1885 in his *Shōsetsu shinzai* (*The Essence of the Novel*). He wrote fiction, and he supported other important novelists like Futabatei Shimei in their efforts to create a distinctive style in modern Japanese literature. He translated the entire work of Shakespeare into Japanese and wrote several plays himself. His career has been well described elsewhere.<sup>11</sup>

Shōyō had a deep interest in modernizing the Japanese stage, evident both in his own playwriting experiments and in his sponsorship of a dramatic company. He was the most powerful and the most effective voice for modernization rather than out-and-out westernization, and his contribution to the modern Japanese theatre was enormous.

SHŌYŌ'S PLAYS

Shōyō was not satisfied with the *katsureki* experiments of Danjūrō. He did not, of course, foresee or expect the decline of *kabuki*; indeed he felt that the form, for all its possible faults, was the form of drama evolved by the Japanese over a long period and that it should continue to serve them well.

As a literary critic, Shōyō's familiarity with the European masterpieces, especially Shakespeare's, convinced him that what would infuse new life into *kabuki* was not the superficial historical accuracy of *katsureki*, but the gradual crea-

<sup>11</sup> Notably in *Ukigumo: Japan's First Modern Novel* by Marleigh Ryan.

tion of a new repertory in which the psychological dimensions of the plays would be expanded. Although Shōyō did not consider himself primarily a playwright, he wrote two important experimental plays in which he tried to put into practice his ideas for reforming *kabuki* to give it the kind of contemporary appeal he thought necessary.

The first of these plays, *Kiri no Hitoha* (*A Leaf of Paulownia*) was written in 1884 when he was only twenty-five. He wrote it as a specific reply to those who wanted to do away with *kabuki* and its "excesses" and so, Shōyō thought, destroy the Japanese theatre altogether. Kawatake has documented how Shōyō carefully studied Shakespeare and Chikamatsu, the great Tokugawa dramatist, for three years in preparation for the writing of this play.<sup>12</sup>

The play is in six acts and chronicles the latter days in the career of Katagiri Katsumoto (1556-1615), a famous warrior who served the ruler of Japan, Hideyoshi Toyotomi, faithfully for many years until, after a complicated series of incidents, he was beguiled by Tokugawa Ieyasu into betraying his former master. Shōyō stated that his purpose in writing the play was to try to recreate the atmosphere of tragedy in Osaka castle at that time, and his complex play seems to fulfill his wishes amply. He took hints from *Hamlet* in his composition of certain scenes which, if not historically accurate, do evoke a good deal of atmosphere, even if the effect seems by modern standards a bit overwrought. The portrayal of Katagiri as a victim of circumstance rather than as an out-and-out villain was particularly novel. How the historical Katagiri died is not precisely known, but when the play appeared Shōyō was nevertheless criticized for the fact that in it Katagiri did not die for his supposed villainy. Shōyō replied to the criticism by saying that for a man in Katagiri's position to live was worse than to die.

*A Leaf of Paulownia* was published in serial form in

<sup>12</sup> See Kawatake Shigetoshi, *Gaisetsu Nihon engekishi* (Tokyo, 1966), p. 230.

successive issues of *Waseda Bungaku* (*Waseda Literature*) in 1894 and 1895. The play was well received in literary circles, but the professional actors for whom Shōyō had written it, in the hope of interesting them in his new style of drama, did not find it to their liking. It went unproduced until 1904, at which time it had a great critical and popular success. Shōyō was finally accepted, thirty years after the publication of his text, as a playwright of stature.

More important than this early play, however, was his *En no Gyōja* (*The Hermit*), which he wrote, rewrote, and revised from 1914 until 1921. Several versions of the play were published during those years.

Between the writing of *A Leaf of Paulownia* and *The Hermit*, Shōyō had discovered Ibsen. In a lecture in 1909 on Ibsen's contribution to the world theatre, Shōyō lamented the fact that, although the Japanese had been able to create successful novels in the international style, the low level of the contemporary Japanese theatre represented the greatest shortcoming in all the Japanese arts. Japan, Shōyō insisted, lagged forty years behind the west and had not even been able to imitate, let alone create, western-style drama. Ibsen had led the modernization of the European stage and Ibsen must therefore be studied.

*The Hermit* is a dramatic legend concerning the Buddhist monk and hermit En no Gyōja, his struggles with the animalistic divinity Hitokoto, and the failure of his disciple Hirotaru to follow his teachings because of his love for a woman. The play is highly poetic and has several powerful scenes, especially those between Hitokoto, who is held prisoner by En no Gyōja, and his mother Katsuragi.

Shōyō is said to have written the play from a sense of deep emotion about his own life in the theatre. Kawatake has written<sup>13</sup> that the play constitutes a kind of spiritual autobiography, with En no Gyōja as Shōyō himself and the

<sup>13</sup> See Kawatake Shigetoshi, *Ningen Tsubouchi Shōyō* (Tokyo, 1959), pp. 205-208.

## MODERNIZATION OR WESTERNIZATION

actor Shimamura Hōgetsu (who deserted Shōyō's theatre company, as described below) as the model for the ungrateful disciple.

The first printed version of the play appeared in the August 1916 issue of the magazine *Shinengei* (*New Theatre Arts*) and, in a slightly revised form, was published as a book the following year.<sup>14</sup> The play caused quite a sensation and so excited one Waseda University professor who was then studying comparative literature in Paris that he translated it into French. It was published there in 1920 and was the first modern play from Japan to be rendered into any western language.

Although the play deals with characters and incidents shrouded in myth and legend, Shōyō, perhaps under the influence of Ibsen, gave full play to the psychological rather than the merely colorful aspects of the story, and the shifts of emotions and attitudes of the major characters during the course of the play seem logical, even compelling. Shōyō had come a long way toward modernizing the Japanese drama while still keeping within the bounds and the forms familiar to his audience. Rather than using a modern social drama, like Ibsen, he used a traditional story in which to reflect his deepest anxieties and beliefs as a creative person.

## SHŌYŌ'S THEATRE COMPANY

Shōyō was aware that, in addition to new plays, some kind of organization would be needed to mount them on the stage.

As early as 1890, Shōyō, concerned about proper methods of elocution for spoken Japanese, formed a playreading group with some of his younger colleagues. He wrote plays,

<sup>14</sup> *The Hermit* received its first stage performance in 1926 when it was chosen for performance by the Tsukiji shōgekijō (Tsukiji Little Theatre). This production was a *cause célèbre* in the theatre world, for reasons that do not affect any evaluation of Shōyō's work. See below, pp. 70-71.