

MODERN ASIA THROUGH Drama and Theatre

By Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr.

To many in the West, especially students, Asian performing arts means the traditional arts: kabuki, nō, jingju (Beijing Opera), and kathakali. Many are also familiar with the cinema of Asia, thanks to the growth in popularity of the cinemas of China (*Hero*), Japan (via anime and Americanized versions of Japanese films such as *Ju-on* and *Ringu*), and India (via a growing awareness of “Bollywood”). Yet between premodern tradition and postmodern cinema is a century of modern Asian theatre and drama—over a hundred years of non-traditional plays and performances that embody all of the social, political, and cultural concerns of Asia as it encountered the West and then began to modernize.

In the nineteenth century, Western drama began to develop the theatre with which most of the world is familiar today: naturalism and realism. The French theorist Emile Zola called for “naturalism in the theatre” and coined the term “slice of life” to describe the type of theatre he envisioned. Within a generation, playwrights such as Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg, and Anton Chekov began creating dramas for a realistic theatre that formed the basis for contemporary Western theatre practice. Simultaneously, students, artists, and scholars from China, Japan, India, and Southeast Asia began to journey to Europe and the United States to encounter this kind of theatre in development. They returned to their own nations and began to develop modern dramas and performances that both engaged this new theatre of realism and explored the issues confronting their modernizing societies.

Modern drama, therefore, is not just valuable for the teaching of dramatic literature or theatre history—it serves as a gateway into the teaching of modern Asia in a variety of disciplines. In *The Man Who Saved Kabuki*, Okamoto Shiro’s study of Japanese theatre during the occupation, the author relates the story of Santha Rama Rau, the wife of General McArthur’s aide-de-camp Faubion Bowers and the daughter of India’s first ambassador of Japan, who was told by her father, “Go see Japanese theatre. The fastest road to understanding a people’s ideas is their theatre.”¹ Theatre is the art form in which human beings engage in human behavior live, in front of other human beings. With the emergent realism movement, the modern theatres of Asia took to depicting the everyday life of average people as well as engaging the issues confronting traditional societies wrestling with modernism. Present in these plays are philosophy and religion, as well as conceptions of gender, politics, culture, and psychology. By putting actors onto a stage, the playwrights and directors demonstrate conceptions of the body—how those in their respective societies stand, sit, eat, sleep, and use the things that surround them, giving the reader or audience member an understanding of the culture represented.

The theatre has also been seen by its practitioners as a means to modernize society, challenging not only traditional theatre, but also

traditional ideas and ways of doing things. As J. Thomas Rimer notes, the early modern Japanese playwrights, for example, followed Tolstoy in believing that artists must “develop a social conscience and take practical steps to bring about a concrete social realization of their ideas and beliefs.”² This drama, *shingeki* (new theatre), served to engage the issues of modern Japan in a way that kabuki no longer could. In India, Nobel Laureate Rabindranth Tagore saw the theatre as a means to both modernize his nation as well as provide a contemporary voice to Indian (and Bengali) concerns in the face of British colonialism. In China, the development of *huachu* (spoken drama) in Shanghai by students who had studied abroad was seen by those students as a method to overthrow the Manchu, establish a Chinese Republic, and provide the Chinese with modern models of behavior. Subsequent generations in China saw the theatre as a means to promote Marxism, and later socialist democracy. The Cultural Revolution can be understood both through the drama it produced and the drama later written about it.

Individual plays show the effect of modernization on individual lives. For example, in *Chichi Kaeru* (*The Father Returns*, 1920) by Japanese playwright Kikuchi Kan, a father who abandoned his family, forcing them through years of hardship, returns to them after his mistress leaves him. While the rest of the family is glad to see him, his oldest son, in defiance of filial piety, rejects him, and argues that he chose to leave the family, and is therefore no longer a member.

Shingeki split into literary and political branches. In the former, writers such as Tsubouchi Shōyō and Kishida Kunio saw the theatre as a means to develop a strong modern literary tradition in which plays presented psychological realism. In the latter, writers such as Kubo Sakae and Senda Koreya presented socialistic realism—a theatre dedicated to demonstrating how society shaped the life of the individual. Kubo’s play *Kazanbaichi* (*Land of Volcanic Ash*, 1938) concerns the lives of several generations of farmers on Hokkaido. It is an excellent depiction of everyday life in an agricultural community in northern Japan in the early thirties. The exchanges between characters, the conflicts, and the very human responses to the difficulties of their lives give insight into the reality of this existence in a way that no narrative text could.³

One aspect of modern Asia that may best be understood through its exploration and representation in drama is the changing role of women in society. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the influence of Henrik Ibsen’s play *A Doll House*, the advent of actresses on stage after centuries of male-only traditional theatre, and the growing suffrage and women’s rights movements in Asia resulted in a series of plays and performances that engage the place of women in modern Asian society. In China, *Chung-shen ta-shih* (*The Greatest Event in Life*) by Hu Shih, published in 1919, shows a young T’ien Ya-Mei desiring to marry Mr. Ch’en.⁴ Her mother, a Daoist,

forbids the marriage after consulting a fortune teller and being told that the marriage will not be fortuitous. Her father, arguing that three millennia ago the Ch'en and the T'ien were one family, forbids the marriage on Confucian grounds. Ya-Mei sneaks away and elopes with Mr. Ch'en in his motor car, leaving behind a note saying, "This is the greatest event in your daughter's life. Your daughter ought to make the decision herself." This ending is remarkable in its disavowal of Confucian ethics and filial piety, but shows theatre on the forefront of the women's rights movement in modern Asia.

Ayako Kano's excellent *Acting Like a Woman in Modern Japan* demonstrates how the actresses Sadayakko Kawakami and Matsui Sumako not only pioneered the role of women as actresses by playing modern women on stage in modern plays, but actually had a profound impact on the debates in Tokyo at the time about the role of women in modern Japan. As the title suggests, by "acting like modern women" on stage, Sadayakko and Matsui provided a model for their audiences to act like modern women in life.⁵

Through modern drama, one can chart cultural change over time, as well as explore the issues of each historic period with the immediacy that theatre provides. For example, the 1960 AMPO crisis, in which the Japanese government renewed the US-Japan Mutual Security Treaty over the objections of student protestors, resulted in a radical transformation of Japanese theatre in which the younger generation rejected the orthodoxy of *shingeki* and sought to develop a more Japanese idiom for theatre. This "return of the gods," as David Goodman terms it, resulted in fascinating new plays dealing with the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Second World War, and the concerns of modern, urban Japan.⁶ Plays such as Tanaka Chikao's *Maria no Kubi (The Head of Mary)*, 1959), which explores the fact that ground zero for the Nagasaki bomb was Urakami Cathedral, the largest Catholic Church in Japan, and the impact of the bombing on believers, Betsuyaku Minoru's *Matchi-uri no shojō (The Little Match Girl)*, 1966), which uses the Hans Christian Anderson fairy tale to indict the older generation for waging the Second World War at the expense of those who were children during the war, and Satoh Makoto's *Atashi no Beatles (My Beatles)*, 1967), which explores the true story of the murder of a Japanese high school girl by her Korean boyfriend through his imaginary interactions with the Beatles, are not only great drama, they are snapshots of the concerns and issues shaping post-war Japan.⁷

More recently, plays such as *Kujira no bohyō (Epitaph for the Whales)*, 1993) by Sakate Yōji, which engages how the closing down of the Japanese whaling industry has profoundly affected the lives of those whose only job they had ever known was hunting whales, Makino Nozomi's *Genshikaku kurabu (Tokyo Atomic Club)*, 1997), which concerns the crisis of conscience of Japanese physicists asked to develop an atomic bomb during the war, and *Gojira (Godzilla)*, 1987) by Ohashi Yasuhiko, in which the title monster is brought to meet his human girlfriend's family—to their shock and horror—in a satire of Japanese family values, all demonstrate contemporary concerns in modern Japan brought to life on stage.⁸ Almost a century after Matsui Sumako and Kawakami Sadayakko paved the way for women on stage, playwrights such as Nagai Ai, whose *Toki no monooki (Time's Storeroom)*, 1994) is a comedy about a middle school teacher in Japan in the sixties when television was introduced to Japan, and Iijima Sanae and Suzuki Yumi, whose *Hōōchō no hinin hō (The Rhythm Method)*, 1994), is a comedy concerning pre-

war experiments in birth control originally performed by an all-female company, continue to explore the role of women in contemporary Japan.⁹

In China, as well, changes in the modern nation can be charted through its drama. Compare the Ibsenesque families and their business activities in Tsao Yu's *Thunderstorm* or *Peking Man*, written in pre-war China, with the families and businesses in Lao She's *Chaguan (Teahouse)*, 1957) and Jin Yun's *Gouerye de Niepan (Uncle Doggie's Nirvana)*, 1986). The film *Farewell My Concubine* demonstrates the history of twentieth-century China as seen through the eyes of two Beijing Opera actors, who endure the British, the Second World War, the rise of the Maoists, the Cultural Revolution, and then the post-Mao thawing.

Modern drama also provides an interesting means of exploring interculturalism and cross-cultural influences. For example, one of the first modern plays presented in China was *The Black Slave's Cry to Heaven* in 1907, an adaptation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* performed by Chinese students in Japan the year before. One of the most popular plays in Japan in the past four decades has been a musical adaptation of *Gone with the Wind*. The Xinhua News Agency announced that China premiered a musical based on *Casablanca* in April 2005.¹⁰ In *Jews in the Japanese Mind*, David G. Goodman and Masanori Miyazawa argue that the Japanese perception and understanding of Jews and Judaism was profoundly shaped by Meiji-era productions of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*.¹¹ In short, the modern theatre and drama of Asia is, at its heart, intercultural in origin and often remains intercultural. How African-Americans and Jews are presented on the stages of Asia tells us a good deal about both ourselves and about the Asian perception of the West.

Teaching modern Asia through drama is also facilitated by the fact that more and more material has become available in translation into English. From China, one can easily now find plays of Gao Xingjian and Tsao Yu, as well as anthologies such as Edward M. Gunn's *Twentieth Century Chinese Drama*, which contains sixteen plays spanning from 1919 to 1979, Haiping Yan's *Theater & Society*, which presents five plays from 1983 to 1988, and, most recently, *An Oxford Anthology of Contemporary Chinese Drama*, which offers fifteen plays: six from contemporary mainland China, five from Taiwan, and four from Hong Kong, as recently as 1995. The Japan Playwrights Association is in the midst of publishing *Half a Century of Japanese Theater*, a series of volumes featuring English language translations of the best plays by the best playwrights for each decade of the second half of the twentieth century. Much new modern dramatic material is also coming out of India, Korea, and Southeast Asia, finally available in English.

As Asia interacted with the West in the nineteenth century, a modern theatre began to develop in both East and West. Though often given a back seat to traditional theatre, it nevertheless remains a wonderful gateway to the concerns, politics, and culture of modern Asia. By representing people engaging in human behavior in historical contexts, the theatre can and does often function as a cultural time machine, giving the reader or audience an encounter with a culture "in the moment." Rather than historical narrative, which tends towards the impersonal, indifferent, and the macro scale, drama and theatre rely upon the recreation of the personal and the specific moment in time, reflecting how social, political, and cultural changes impacted on the lives of individuals during those periods. These dramas, demonstrating the individual experience of historic events, can

be used in the classroom to expand students' visions of Asia beyond the traditional, and use drama and theatre as a tool to understand the modernization of Asia as seen by the people who went through it and, in some cases, are continuing to go through it. Penny M. Rode, in an article for *Education About Asia* in Spring 2004, bemoaned the "perception of Asia as strangely exotic and unfathomable," allowing students to fall into a "comfortable Eurocentrism."¹² The strength of modern Asian theatre is that it breaks away from the exoticism of traditional performing arts and popular Asian cinema (read: Anime), and develops a more balanced relationship between Western student and Eastern subject by making the relationship between East and West more complex, and the theatre and the concerns that theatre echoes simultaneously both more familiar and different without being beyond our understanding. ■

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NOTES

1. Shiro Okamoto, *The Man Who Saved Kabuki*. Translated and adapted by Samuel L. Leiter (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001), 49–50.
2. J. Thomas Rimer, *Toward a Modern Japanese Theatre: Kishida Kunio* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 46.
3. An English translation is available. Kubo Sakae, *Land of Volcanic Ash*. Translated by David G. Goodman (Ithaca: Cornell University East Asia Press, 1986).
4. This play demonstrates not only Ibsen's influence in the *Doll House*-like situation and Miss T'ien's Nora-like solution but also the shaping influence of all the theatres of the West. Hu Shih studied in the United States in the early twentieth century and wrote the play initially in English, translating it himself into Chinese for performance in China. See the translation and introduction in Edward M. Gunn, ed. *Twentieth-Century Chinese Drama* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983).
5. Ayako Kano, *Acting Like a Woman in Modern Japan* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).
6. Goodman employs the term both in *The Cambridge Guide to Asian Theater*, edited by James R. Brandon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 156, and as the title (or subtitle, depending on the edition) of his own *Japanese Drama and Culture in the 1960s: The Return of the Gods* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1988), re-released as *The Return of the Gods: Japanese Drama and Culture in the 1960s*.
7. A translation of *The Head of Mary* can be found in David Goodman's *After Apocalypse: Four Plays of Hiroshima and Nagasaki* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986). A translation of *The Little Match Girl* can be found in John Gillespie and Robert Rolf's *Alternative Japanese Drama* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1992). A translation of *My Beatles* can be found in David Goodman's *Japanese Drama and Culture in the 1960s: The Return of the Gods* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1988).
8. Translations of *Epitaph for the Whales* and *Tokyo Atomic Club* can be found in Japan Playwrights Association. *Half a Century of Japanese Theater Volume I: 1990s, Part 1* (Tokyo: Kinokuniya, 1999). *Godzilla* has been translated into English twice: translated by John K. Gillespie in *Half a Century of Japanese Theater Volume III: 1980s Part 1*, edited by Japan Playwrights Association (Tokyo: Kinokuniya, 2001) and by M. Cody Poulton in a single volume (Winnipeg: Scirocco Drama, 2002).
9. A translation of *Time's Storeroom* can be found in Japan Playwrights Association's *Half a Century of Japanese Theater Volume I: 1990s, Part 1* (Tokyo: Kinokuniya, 1999). A translation of *Rhythm Method* can be found in *Half a Century of Japanese Theater Volume II: 1990s, Part 2* (Tokyo: Kinokuniya, 2000).
10. "'Casablanca' musical is set." *Los Angeles Times*. 10 March 2005: E5.
11. David G. Goodman and Masanori Miyazawa. *Jews in the Japanese Mind: The History and Uses of a Cultural Stereotype* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Press, 2000).
12. Penny M. Rode, "Genji to Godzilla: Using Art and Film to Teach Japan," *Education About Asia*, Vol. 9, No. 1, (Spring 2004): 18.

KEVIN J. WETMORE, JR., who teaches theatre at Loyola Marymount University, is the co-editor of *Modern Japanese Theatre and Performance*.