Playwrights dissatisfied with actors,
actors dissatisfied with directors:
actor training as one of prewar shingeki’s many dilemmas.

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The playwright Kinoshita Junji died on 30 October 2006 and it is only fitting that an article on actor-training in Japan should begin with reference to him. It is not an exaggeration to say that Kinoshita was the most versatile shingeki (modern drama) playwright of the twentieth century, a playwright of conscience who has been referred to as the Arthur Miller of Japan, and a restless perfectionist whose quest for a valid drama for modern Japan led him from realism through a new genre of minwageki (plays based on folktales) to a monumental re-enactment of the battle of Dannoura that is his masterpiece. Kinoshita’s two most famous plays are Yazuru (Twilight Crane, 1949), in which he dramatises a folktale in a way that admits of multiple interpretations, and Shigosen no Matsuri (Requiem on the Great Meridian, 1978), where he attempted to create an entirely new dramaturgy.

Apart from his achievements as a playwright, Kinoshita is known as a prolific commentator and theorist of all aspects of theatre. (He is also famous as a writer on equestrianism, but this is a side of his work that does not concern us here.) Immensely knowledgeable concerning European theatre (especially Shakespeare, many of whose plays he translated), Kinoshita was able to identify precisely the problems that the Japanese shingeki movement faced. One of these was actor-training. This was an issue that was raised by Kinoshita on the very first occasion that I met him. I had been introduced to him by the late Professor Maruyama Masao, who happened to be a visiting professor at the college in Oxford, St Antony’s, where I was doing my doctoral research. Professor Nishida Takeshi, whose retirement is being marked by this essay and the others in this book, was also a member of the same college.

In 1963 Kinoshita published an article (originally a lecture) entitled ‘Shingeki ni
tsuite; (‘On shingeki,’ Sugai and Matsumoto 1974: 122-156) in which he enumerated the reasons why, as he saw it, shingeki was not being successful, introducing thought-provoking comparisons with European and Chinese theatre. This article of Kinoshita's is primarily concerned with realist theatre in the sense of actors producing from within themselves and expressing through their bodies and voices a psychologically believable recreation of their characters. It is not surprising that the theories of Constantin Stanislavsky (1863-1938) lie behind this. Although some early practitioners of shingeki in the 1920s were aware of his theories, it was not until the 1950s, with the publication of a Japanese translation of An Actor Prepares in 1954, that his ideas were widely disseminated among the theatrical community. In ‘Shingeki ni tsuite’ Kinoshita makes direct reference to him by discussing the Beijing Opera actor Mei Lanfang (1894-1961) as an exponent of the Stanislavsky system.

Kinoshita was himself writing realist plays in the early 1960s (1962 Ottō to yobareru Nihonjin, A Japanese Called Otto; 1964 Fuyu no Jidai, Winter Season) and throughout this period was struggling with what he perceived as the weaknesses of the modern Japanese language as a stage medium and the inability of most actors to give adequate expression to the texts that they were performing. He writes: “Having a good voice” as a shingeki actor means that one can talk continuously for three hours without tiring, or that one’s voice carries easily to the third floor seats, or something of this kind - simple, practical matters that any actor should be master of and which come before any artistic expression. (Ibid: 126; translated by Jason Daniel) Here Kinoshita seems to be admitting that shingeki actors were being trained in basic techniques, but he questions whether they are able to use those techniques to convey the inner life of their characters to their audiences. At least by this time in Japan systematic training in acting techniques was available to aspiring actors through the Haiyū Yōseijō (Actors Training School), which had been founded by the Haiyū-za shingeki company in 1949, and a few other similar institutions. Although it was Kinoshita’s judgement in 1963 that shingeki acting technique still had many hurdles to overcome, the basic structure was now in place for actors of modern drama to use to take their art forward.

The early 1960s, however, were already about three quarters of a century away from the first tentative steps towards a modern drama that were taken in the Meiji period. Manifestations of interest in modern European drama were already evident in
the 1880s and even performances of this drama in Japan were taking place not long after theatre audiences in Paris and London had been given the opportunity to watch it. No British playwright of Kinoshita’s stature in his own country had criticised the inadequacies of the acting fraternity in such a general way. This perhaps suggests that the long process of development through which the modern drama movement in Japan went in the first half of the twentieth century had not contributed in a systematic way to the establishment of an acting culture that was adequate to the demands made on it during the early postwar decades.

Kinoshita Junji was not the first Japanese playwright to express anxiety over the ability of shingeki actors to bring their modern characters alive on the stage. A playwright of the previous generation, Kishida Kunio (1890-1954), had previously expressed himself in a much more forthright way than Kinoshita. Although their political ideologies were poles apart, Kishida and Kinoshita shared many concerns for the development of shingeki. Kishida too was not only a playwright but also a theorist concerning many facets of dramatic art. One of his earnest concerns was the shingeki actor, at whom he directed much adverse criticism throughout his career. In 1934 he wrote: ‘Still I come back to the fact that no actors of real talent have appeared. The New Theatre [shingeki] movement . . . needed the appearance of people equipped with modern education, modern perceptions, and personal charm.’ (Rimer 1974: 92)

This implied that shingeki made demands on its actors which were not envisaged in the 1880s when the acting profession was first being opened up. The route from mid-Meiji acting, when kabuki was the only referent, to the mid-1930s acting required for Kishida’s plays may seem to be a straight one from presentation to well-spoken representation, but on the contrary it was tortuous. On the way the shingeki actor had encountered a bewildering array of Western dramaturgy and had been guided by directors with widely different ideas of what a shingeki production should be.

This article will explore how actors and directors approached their respective tasks in the theatre and what their expectations of each other were. As far as possible, the personalities concerned will be allowed to speak for themselves. Although the comments of theatre historians will be valuable in suggesting the general image of the acting profession that obtained in the world outside the rehearsal room and the theatre,
the numerous autobiographical accounts of practising actors and directors can tell us something of what it was like being inside the rehearsal room and on the stage. Such source material is problematical, as the objectives of the writers vary widely and few dwell on interactions that would be of most interest to us. Whereas a Western actor will write frankly and critically about a director, Japanese actors do this more rarely. Evidence is often fragmentary and can sometimes only be identified as such by inference. It is clear, however, that perceptions of the respective functions and obligations of actors and directors changed considerably between the establishment of the first modern acting schools in the late Meiji period and the time when Kishida was most active as a playwright and critic.

**The legacy of kabuki acting.**

In one sense actors intent on playing the latest Western drama faced similar problems in Japan and Europe. In both cases the existing acting technique that was generally accepted was physically based on certain gestures and body movements habitually utilised to express certain emotions and feelings. *Kabuki* acting technique in Japan and the declamatory style current in Europe in the nineteenth century both required their actors to adopt certain physical methods of indicating emotion to their audiences and expected their audiences instantly to recognise these signals. In both cases training took place within the theatre environment rather than at special educational institutions. But the comparison stops there. *Kabuki* training was much more rigorous and extended over a much longer period of time. A son born to a leading *kabuki* acting family would begin training in his early childhood; his teachers would usually be the established actors in his family, beginning with his father and grandfather, and they would often be demanding and even harsh in their instruction. In Britain training would not usually begin until the would-be actor or actress had entered the company and he or she would be largely taught during the preparation for the next production.

Apart from the intensity and length of training, the objectives differed greatly between *kabuki* and Western theatre. English acting of the mid-nineteenth century may have been bombastic and formulaic compared with the realist acting that succeeded it, but what the audiences saw was an exaggerated version of real life
liberally supplemented by conventional means of expression. In both Japan and Europe audiences needed to accept and recognise conventions (yakusoku) to be able to enjoy the drama fully, but in Japan many such conventions were divorced from real life. The onnagata (male actor of female roles) and his voice and many of his gestures had to be accepted by the audiences as a valid theatrical method of expressing femininity and female emotions, something that audiences in Paris and London at the same time had no need of doing. Kabuki had developed a multitude of movement patterns (kata), some even just for single plays, which enhanced the theatrical experience of those in the audience who knew them but might only have had a tenuous logical connection with the narration of the plot. Kinoshita Junji in the same article quoted above rails against the illogicality of kabuki. The result was that as a member of the audience you had to be a devoted theatregoer to appreciate a performance fully, whereas in Europe a first-time visitor to a theatre would have adjusted easily to the means of expression used.

Kabuki dominated live theatre in Japan during the nineteenth century. Although the puppet theatre was active in both Osaka, its traditional home, and Edo, the only live theatre available to theatregoers apart from kabuki was no and small scale touring theatre. Public performances of no were few and far between, as no was virtually monopolised by the daimyō and, when they and their system were swept away by the Meiji Restoration of 1868, no was removed even further from the theatregoing public’s consciousness. From time to time a citizen of Edo might have been able to watch more lively theatre in the semi-improvised performances that small touring groups gave in makeshift theatres, but to all intents and purposes theatre meant kabuki as Japan began its drive to become a modern country in the years following the Restoration.

Kabuki had been a closed world for at least two centuries, but pressures from outside gradually led to a partial opening-up of the theatre world in the first few decades after 1868. Acquaintance with Western literature on the part of Meiji intellectuals, actual experience of Western theatre by some politicians, the Engeki Kairyō (Drama Reform) movement (when ‘drama’ unequivocally indicated kabuki) and finally the relaxation of the ban on women appearing on stage created a situation where new people (‘outsiders’ to the kabuki world) began to write plays and new people (who had not been born into kabuki acting families) conceived ambitions to become actors and actresses.
To be an actor one had to be able to act and one would naturally look to established actors to see how it was done. But in the 1880s the only models were kabuki actors and their own special type of acting. Almost no-one with acting ambitions could go to the West and observe Western acting styles in person. It was only during the Taishō period, with the popularity of imported films, that Japanese actors could actually see Western actors moving. By the mid-1890s the only theatre people who had seen Western theatre in situ were Sudō Sadanori (1867-1907) and Kawakami Otojirō (1864-1911), early pioneers of what was generally referred to as shin-engeki (new theatre) with their sōshi-shibai (plays performed by political activists) and shosei-shibai (student plays). Even they, however, were beholden to the kabuki theatre for the style of their early theatrical enterprises. Although Sudō was conscious that his aim was a more realistic form of theatre than kabuki, for the opening production of his company in 1888, he formally requested a kabuki actor, albeit a progressive one, Nakamura Sōjūrō (1835-1889), to teach them how to perform a play; Sōjūrō sent a disciple of his to choreograph the new actors. In the event this production made use of kabuki music as an accompaniment to its action. (Ōzasa 1985: 51) Kawakami is also reported to have been influenced by Sōjūrō. As late as 1907 an already established so-called ‘new actor’ (shin-haigai), Kitamura Rokusaburō, travelled late at night from Osaka to Kyoto and waited for Arashi Rikaku, a kabuki actor, to return from the theatre in the hope of obtaining his help in a part he was about to play. (Kaoru 1907: 11)

**Shimpa.**

The development of new genres is a notable feature of Japan’s theatre history in the modern period. The first of these was shimpa, which traces its origins to the sōshi-shibai and shosei-shibai of the 1880s mentioned above. Shimpa was the first alternative to kabuki in the modern period, and acting style could have been one of the major problems facing the new genre, as it sought to establish an identity for itself. If anything, however, it was the very presence of kabuki that made the task of the shimpa actors easier. Although the full body control with which kabuki actors delighted their audiences took many years to perfect, some plausible imitation of its major elements was not beyond the early shimpa pioneers, and their admixture of this and body movements nearer what was real appealed greatly to their audiences. This is roughly the situation in shimpa today. Much of a shimpa performance resembles
kabuki, to a Westerner at least: female parts are sometimes played by shimpa onnagata, there are climaxes that you can sense coming from the body movements of the actors, stars usually occupy prime positions on the stage, there is often quite pervasive musical accompaniment, etc, etc. Mizutani Yaeko, shimpa’s most famous star in the twentieth century, evinces no anxiety over the process of acting in one of her autobiographies. She slipped easily into the theatre as a child actor and under the guidance of directors whom she respected moved smoothly through her career. (Mizutani 1972)

Mizutani learnt on the job - she learnt to act mainly in rehearsals where from the start she had mentors present who would show her what to do. This in essence is how actor training had always been done in the kabuki theatre. When the theatrical world opened up in the Meiji period and kabuki lost its monopoly, it was clear there were features of this system which made it insufficient for a greatly expanded acting constituency. In particular the legacy of kabuki domination meant that there were no guidelines at all for women who wanted to become actors.

Drama Schools.

Kawakami Sadayakko, the ex-geisha who achieved fame as the first Japanese actress to become known in the West, was made acutely conscious of the need in Japan for the training of actresses by her various visits to the United States and Europe, and especially by her attendance at the Paris Conservatoire in 1907. She set up the first acting school in Japan - the Teikoku JoyūYōseijo (Imperial Drama School for Actresses) - in Osaka in the summer of 1908, probably influenced by the fact that the parameters for the acting of female roles in shimpa were rapidly becoming set by shimpa’s own onnagata, such as Kitamura Rokurō (1871-1961) and Kawai Takeo (1877-1942), the latter of whom was the son of a kabuki actor. (Ozasa 1985: 59) The content of its courses - Japanese and Western dance and music were prominent – indicates that the students were destined for the stage of the largest and newest commercial theatre of the time – the Teikoku Gekijō (Imperial Theatre, opened 1911). This was not an actor-training venture that had any significant impact on the development of modern theatre in Japan. We need to remember that the acting of female characters had been done by men for over two centuries; it was males performing females that still set the standard.
in the early 1900s. Hence it is perhaps not surprising that the first acting school should be set up for women.

This initiative was followed a few months later (November 1908) by the Ushigome Haiyū Yoseijō (Ushigome Drama School) (Toita 1961: 38), which was a mixed acting school aiming to train actors for the second major theatrical genre to develop in the modern period – what we now call shingeki. The call for students attracted three hundred applications, so there was plenty of demand for an acting career.

One thing was made clear to aspiring shingeki actors during this period – that their acting would require considerable cerebral effort. All applicants for the Ushigome Drama School had to take a three-part written examination: each part lasted one hour. The first part was an ethics essay on some title such as ‘Why is it wrong to do evil?’; the second tested knowledge of the Japanese language, especially the classical language; and the third required an essay in either English or German. These written exams were followed by practical exams in the afternoon, but Tanaka Eizō (1886-1968), one of the first generation of students, offers the opinion that successful applicants were chosen on the basis of their academic ability. (Toita 1961: 39) He and Sawada Shōjirō (1892-1929), later the founder of another new genre called Shinkokugeki but at this time a trainee shingeki actor, remember their teachers frequently saying that actors would have to have brains from now on. Bungei Kyōkai (see below) a little later also had an entrance exam, which similarly emphasised intellectual qualities: it was in four parts: 1) interview, to test motivation, 2) English, 3) reading aloud, 4) essay, on a subject such as ‘Compare new and old theatre.’ (Matsumoto 1966: 37-8). In the case of the Kindai-geki Kyōkai, a well-known shingeki group which was active between 1912 and 1919, essay-writing seems to have been part of the actors’ lives. One of the directors insisted that after casting and before rehearsals each actor should write an interpretation of his role which filled up ten pages. (Toita 1961: 108)

**Actor training.**

Bungei Kyōkai (Literary Arts Association) had begun life in 1906 as a kind of extra-curricular study group composed mainly of students of the famous educator and translator of Shakespeare, Tsubouchi Shōyō(1859-1935). With hindsight it would seem
that Bungei Kyōkai launched into actual stage productions before it was ready. It performed *Hamlet* in November, 1907, under the direction of Tsubouchi, but he seems to have had some difficulty with the casting. Although he did select one of the Bungei Kyōkai female students to play Ophelia (she was universally condemned by the critics), Gertrude was played by a man and the reviews suggest that Hamlet was played in an effeminate way that owed much to the image of aristocrats as portrayed on the *kabuki* stage. Two years later, in 1909, Bungei Kyōkai was reorganised so that it became effectively a theatre company with an attached drama school, whose training programme led to the standardly gendered *Hamlet* of 1911, a production credited with giving an important stimulus to the modern drama movement.

The actor-training programme set up by Bungeki Kyōkai in 1909 was the most comprehensive so far. Bungei Kyōkai’s programme of classes was held in the evenings for three hours from six to nine. Monday evenings consisted of an hour each of Arts theory, practical psychology and Shakespeare. One actress described the atmosphere at her first session: ‘Six long low tables were set out in rows on the tatami. Three people to each table. . . . So we were all lined up nicely, just as in a terakoya. Then Tsubouchi-sensei came in and started translating *The Merchant of Venice* from page 1.’ (Matsumoto Kappei 1966: 37) Out of sixteen units in the weekly schedule, six consisted of lectures and one was an English lesson.

From this point on it should have been clearer to an aspiring modern actor what was expected of him or her. During the Taishō period Bungei Kyōkai and other theatre groups performing ‘new drama’ relied heavily on recent Western plays written for mixed casts, but they also performed some plays by Japanese playwrights. The productions of Western and Japanese plays which have left an impact on theatre history were mainly in what one may loosely call a realistic format. Not only that, but some – eg Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* and a dramatisation of Tolstoy’s *Resurrection* - had strong female lead characters, which were played by an actress.

The reality was that intellectually the *shingeki* movement was leaping ahead, but other elements of the quite complicated process by which a play reaches the stage lagged a long way behind, and the messages that aspiring actors must have picked up from their environment were at best confusing. For example, Bungei Kyōkai’s rehearsal/
performance space was anti-traditional in that the stage had no *hanamichi*, the *hanamichi* being a powerful reminder of *kabuki* theatre practice. But when the student actor faced out to the auditorium, he saw not rows of seats but *masu*, the traditional criss-cross pattern of *tatami*-laid squares that was the standard arrangement in *kabuki* theatres. Actresses in Geijutsu-za, a successor group to Bungei Kyōkai, had to accept men playing some female roles in such plays as Ibsen's *A Doll's House or Heimat* by Sudermann (Kawashima 1972: 61). Intending actresses who read the newspapers might have been surprised to discover that because of the refusal of the leading actress in Maeterlinck's play *Monna Vanna* to go on tour, the leading female part was taken over by a man. (Ōzasa 1985: 143)

Between the early efforts by Bungei Kyōkai to train a new generation of actors at the end of the Meiji period and the mid-1920s heyday of the shingeki movement, there was little in the way of sustained actor-training initiatives. The *kabuki* actor Ichikawa Sadanji II, who had observed actor training in London in 1907, set up a Gendaigeki Joyū Yōseijo (Drama School for Actresses of Contemporary Drama) in 1921. (Toita 1961: 131) This had a brief existence and Yamamoto Yasue (1902-1993), one of the most famous shingeki actresses of the twentieth century, attended it. While Yamamoto expresses her gratitude at having had this opportunity, this school was intended to produce actresses who could act alongside *kabuki* actors in the latters' productions of new plays for *kabuki*. In 1924 Tsukiji Shōgekijō, amid the fanfares attending its inauguration as Japan's first modern theatre, promised to establish regular actor-training facilities, but this plan did not materialise. Instead, in the short run-up to the opening productions in June of that year, the young recruits to Tsukiji Shōgekijō were assembled daily at the house of Hijikata Yoshi (1898-1959), one of the founders of the company, and combined rehearsing with a training programme that did include Dalcroze exercises (a system of eurhythmics used in the West mainly for the training of opera singers), but also included lectures on drama theory and theatre history given by Osanai Kaoru.

The next serious attempt to train actors came in 1927 when Zen'ei-za (Vanguard Company), a vigorous shingeki company that was spearheading the proletarian drama movement, established what it described as the first drama school in Japan to be devoted to non-traditional, non-commercial drama. Zen'ei-za opened the Zen'ei-za Engeki Kenkyūjo in January 1927 in a large house in Sendagaya. (Sasaki 1959: 122) The
mission of the study centre was announced to be a revolution within the theatre world. Revolutionaries – theatre people of a new type had to be trained. Murayama Tomoyoshi (1901-1977), soon to become one of Japan’s busiest directors across a spectrum of theatre, developed this point in an article in *Engeki Shinchō*, in which he wrote that a drama school must never be just an actors’ school. What was needed for the drama of the future was not simply actors, but ‘theatre people.’ After founding the Zen’ei–za Drama Study Centre, the leaders examined the programmes of other drama schools, for instance that of Jacque Copeau’s Vieux Colombier in Paris. But, Murayama says, they found nothing useful; they wanted the Zen’ei–za centre to be ‘actualistic’ (jissai-teki) rather than ‘formalistic’ (keishiki-teki), as these other schools were. (Murayama 1927: 60-62)

The constitution of the centre stated its purpose to be the scientific study of drama theory and technique and the training of theatre people of the new age. Both Hisaita Eijirō (1898-1976; another Zen’ei-za leader and soon to be a leading shingeki playwright) and Murayama give priority to the study of theory, and more than half of the list of subjects which follows the constitution is concerned with drama theory and history. Murayama states unequivocally that general drama theory and sociology are the most important items of the training of their new theatre people. They must be able to reflect ‘accurate’ theory. (Murayama ibid)

Applications for admission as students were numerous and the centre started with a student body of thirty. We can see, however, that in spite of the glimmer of hope offered by Tsukiji Shōgekijō’s experimentation with physical training of the actor’s body, what happened in this drama school is a reversion to the predominantly theoretical approach of the late Meiji period. Except that there is a difference. By this time the proletarian drama movement is prospering and within it political theorists are prospering even more. What was increasingly required of shingeki actors from 1927 onwards was a knowledge of the latest and most authoritative Marxist arts theory and a personal ideology which would be appropriate for the drama they were going to perform.

Over about two decades those with ambitions to become an actor in Japan’s modern drama movement would have received very confusing signals about what that
drama was intended to be. In the beginning they were only acceptable if they could write essays on ethics and understand a European language. Once accepted they were treated like school-children and much of their training consisted of lectures by well-known authorities on European and Japanese theatre. For several years they would have had no modern acting to watch in Japan, but they would have been conscious that newspapers and magazine were devoting much space to kabuki actors experimenting with new plays. For new actors actually involved in productions of near-contemporary and controversial Western plays such as A Doll’s House, reminders of the traditional theatre were all around them on the stage, in the auditorium etc. Coming forward in time, we might imagine a young man or woman in 1924 trying to join what seems to be the most modern theatre company yet, Tsukiji Shōgekijō. He attends a class of swimming-suit-clad actors doing Western-style exercises - shocking if our imaginary actor is a woman and one actress at Tsukiji Shōgekijō certainly was shocked - but he still has to listen to lectures on theatre history and he is plunged straight into a hectic production schedule of Western plays that seem to differ greatly from each other. Even then it still seems to be being suggested that kabuki or shimpa actors might do better than him. For example, how did the young company of the Tsukiji Shōgekijō feel to learn that in order to give weight to the company’s opening production a kabuki actor was to be invited to play a leading role? In the event the kabuki actor declined; so a well-known shimpa actor appeared in his place. A kabuki actor, Kawarasaki Chōjirō appeared in a later production of Gorki’s Lower Depths. By this time the leaders of Tsukiji Shōgekijō had repeatedly stated in public that the new company was rejecting kabuki and shimpa outright. They still seemed to feel, however, that the stage presence of actors from these earlier genres would aid and encourage their own inexperienced players.

Then this imaginary acting hopeful hears of the establishment of a new acting school, but this time he finds he needs to study politics before he can start acting. He needs to commit himself to a political ideology before anyone will recognise his potentiality to perform a role in a play.

The lack of adequate practical training in modern acting is an issue that runs through shingeki history as far as the 1960s. At the beginning of the 1930s Iwata Toyoo (a playwright and translator with much direct experience of French theatre) was
running a small acting school called Shingeki Kenkyūjo (Modern Drama Study Centre). In his autobiography he wrote of his frustration at not being able to give his actors proper help with their technique. He goes as far as to suggest that there was in Japan not a single qualified teacher of acting technique, a stark contrast with kabuki and no which were blessed with an abundance of such teachers. Iwata’s students listened to lectures from great literary figures such as Kishida Kunio, but Iwata says that the only people who could have functioned as their live models were a heterogeneous group of star shingeki actors, whose spread of idiosyncrasies would only confuse student actors more. (Iwata 1956: 96-97)

It should not surprise us if these teachers felt they had a wealth of knowledge, particularly of Western culture, to pass on to the young actors who were going to bring the great classics of the West to life on the stage. They perceived the gap in knowledge between them and the student actors as huge. Matsui Sumako complains in her autobiography that she is not allowed to open her mouth during rehearsals. As late as 1927 at a zadankai of shingeki leaders printed in the main theatre magazine of the time (Engeki Shincho) it could still be said that actors’ education was remarkably behind the times. In the same zadankai there are several references to actors being required to keep their opinions to themselves. (Murayama et al 1927: 6)

In Japanese theatre, with its history of great artistic achievement, it was too easy for shingeki actors to fall back on a technique that was familiar to them. Tamura Akiko, one of the two first actresses in Tsukiji Shōgekijō, writes in her autobiography on how natural it was for confused actors like her to look to shimpa and other commercial theatre for answers. (Tamura and Koyama 1962: 35) Throughout the history of shingeki in the prewar period we find scattered examples of actors leaving the genre for groups that would come under that definition.

Directors.

Of course this picture of actors in the 1910s and 1920s is incomplete without a consideration of what went on during the rehearsal process. What I have tried to do here so far is to describe the general environment into which aspiring actors entered. What has emerged from the sources is a movement dominated by cultural leaders with
little or no experience of acting: the actors were not in a position to question the intellectual authority of these leaders; it was the actors who would be conveying dramatic masterpieces to the audiences, but they had no means of preparing themselves to do so. They were in a kind of limbo and it is much to the credit of some of them that they survived this period to become actors of considerable power after the war.

Throughout the period under discussion here would-be shingeki actors received little help from their audiences either. They would have known the excitement of kabuki audiences and the sentimental reactions of shimpa spectators, but they were themselves watched by rather earnest, passive people, who by many accounts were mainly in the theatre to learn about the Western play being performed. Right at the start of the shingeki movement Bungei Kyōkai had encouraged this: in its mission statement of 1911 it stated: ‘[The Association] will have as one of its objectives the raising of levels of taste in society at large.’ (Ōzasa 1985: 82) To that end Tsubouchi Shōyō sometimes prefaced performances by lectures on the plays. According to the Tsukiji Shōgekijō stage designer, Yoshida Kenkichi (1897-1982), the audiences there were ‘very well-behaved . . . if one made the slightest noise turning the pages of one’s programme, one was liable to have someone from a nearby seat turn to look at one.’ (Yoshida 1971: 81) Tsukiji Shōgekijō was likened to an examination hall. These determined students of Western theatre were so inhibited, according to Iwata Toyoo, that when they heard something funny, they were never sure whether they ought to laugh or not. Iwata records his gratitude as a director to a young apprentice geisha who attended a performance of Jules Romains’ Dr Knock in 1927 and laughed loudly at all the funny bits. (Iwata 1956: 85)

All in all shingeki actors needed much help. The gap in knowledge between them and those who taught them was frequently demonstrated to them (notably by Kishida Kunio). But in the end it was the actors who in practical terms would bring the plays to life on the stage. Their directors, who would be leading them in this enterprise, were therefore crucial to their development as actors.

Unfortunately for them the concept of enshutsu – of directors working with actors to achieve an overall artistic objective – was still very new in Japan during the early Taishō period, when the Meiji term butai kantoku was still current. By this time
butai kantoku covered a spectrum of meanings from general stage management (while the senior actors got on with directing themselves) to quite detailed supervision of all actors’ movements and utterances. By 1917, when it is said that the term enshutsu first came into common use, the difference between the two concepts seems to have been recognised in Japan, even in one instance apparently frightening off would-be directors. In that year a group with the name of Tōro-sha listed an individual under the heading butai kantoku in the programme of its opening production, but under enshutsu the whole company was cited. No individual in the company had wanted to assume the responsibility. It appears that it was not until the mid-1920s that the difference between enshutsu and butai kantoku was first established at the Tsukiji Shōgekiō by Osanai Kaoru. (Okakura and Kinoshita 1960: 9)

At the beginning of the Taishō period there were three principal figures engaging in the activity we might call directing: Tsubouchi Shōyō and Shimamura Hōgetsu (1871-1918) at Bungei Kyōkai and Osanai Kaoru (1881-1928) at Jiyū Gekijō. Osanai at this time was working with professional kabuki actors; his importance as a director of shingeki actors comes later, with Tsukiji Shōgekiō from 1924 until his death in 1928.

Tsubouchi directed only for Bungei Kyōkai, whereas Shimamura’s directorial experience extended through the early Taishō period when he was leading the company that had resulted from the break-up of Bungai Kyōkai, Geijutsu-za (Art Theatre). Tsubouchi was already famous and a figure of great authority in the literary world by the time that Bungei Kyōkai came into existence. One of his earliest concerns for a modern Japanese theatre had been diction. He had developed his own style of rōdoku (reading aloud) by frequent practice, both on his own and with selected students, over a period of more than thirty years. The origin of rōdoku has been traced to the traditional hon–yomi – the custom of playwrights in the traditional theatre reading their scripts aloud to those who were likely to be connected with a future performance. Tsubouchi regarded the kabuki actor Ichikawa Danjūrō 9th (1838-1903) as one of rōdoku’s highest practitioners and he considered this technique to be important for the modern theatre. (Matsumoto 1966: 22-23) Through his experience and theoretical conviction Tsubouchi was far superior in rōdoku technique to all his students and assistant teachers and everyone felt obliged to copy Tsubouchi as exactly as he could.
Tsubouchi distrusted Western acting methods since having observed foreigners' amateur dramatics in Yokohama and he had anyway by this time developed a style of delivery and movement that accorded with his reluctance to move too far away from Kabuki. He was good at teaching and demonstrating this. Tsubouchi gave his actors full instruction during rehearsal, but many found what he was aiming at unsatisfactory as a medium for the new drama. Shimamura Hōgetsu had spent a year and a half in the West and had observed theatre in Britain and Germany. The younger actors in Bunrei Kyōkai looked more to him and his productions of the latest European plays. Shimamura insisted that the actors and actresses in plays that he was directing memorised their lines perfectly. He also seems to have required them to memorise every gesture and exact repetition in successive performances characterised his productions. It would appear that the combination of Tsubouchi Shōyō and Shimamura Hōgetsu represented a case of what Sugimoto Ryōkichi, a shingeki director of the 1930s, referred to as yakusha ni shibai o oshieru (teaching plays to actors). (Sugimoto 1980: 9) There was little scope for actors to develop their own skills in such a system.

By contrast in the commercial theatre in the late 1910s and early 1920s young entrants into the acting profession were instructed minutely by their senior actors on how to achieve such-and-such an effect. Mizutani Yaeko writes on how fortunate she was in her career to have had sensei who would scold and correct her. She mentions by name three senior shimpa actors and a playwright. Mochizuki Yūko, who moved from commercial theatre to shingeki to film, is similarly warm about the senpai and sensei who helped her in that milieu. (Mochizuki Yūko 1957)

The shingeki actor’s life, however, seems artistically rather lonely in the 1920s. Tsukiji Shōgekijō had three regular directors, and two of them often come in for heavy, if indirect, criticism in actors’ autobiographies. Osanai Kaoru was the senior and most experienced director in the Tsukiji Shogekijo in the mid-1920s. His method was intensive read-throughs, during which he would strictly correct every little mistake; having reached the point where he wanted his actors to start using the stage, he would sketch the set on a black board (often a copy of a set he had seen in the West) and indicate where each character was to enter and exit. That was it. If he did not like something, he had his actors repeat the offending passage over and over again but often left them bewildered because he seemed unable to explain what he wanted from them.
Hijikata Yoshi, Osanai’s young colleague and the main force behind Tsukiji Shōgekijō, tended to be foul-mouthed and bad-tempered at rehearsals, according to the actor Tōno Eijirō. (Tōno 1964: 200) Tamura Akiko remembered her anguish when Hijikata issued his ‘demands’ (chāmon is the term she uses) and she had no idea how to respond. She wrote that she gave up asking questions because she could not help her.

By contrast Aoyama Sugisaku (1891-1956), the third of the Tsukiji Shōgekijō directors, attracts universal praise from actors who worked under him. He was an ex-actor of some experience and understood their problems. Tōno comments approvingly that he did not write books or articles (as both Hijikata Yoshi and Osanai Kaoru had); he had no theory that he wanted to prove on the stage. He was just happy to watch his actors develop under his direction. (Tōno 1964: 204)

Aoyama was an exception. The pattern through to 1934, when Kishida wrote the critical sentences quoted above, was of directors, who were often playwrights like Kishida himself, knowing what they wanted but unable to get it from their actors. As would have happened in any theatrical culture, some strong individuals develop into superb actors, and one or two of them, like Takizawa Osamu, were able to give positive help to their junior colleagues, but the generality of shingeki actors had been ill-equipped for the important cultural work that they were doing.

In 1939 the director Kitamura Kihachi (1898-1960) was able to write: ‘In Japan actors had been kawara-kojiki in the past. After Meiji they were recognised as artists and rose in social esteem. Now they are members of the intellectual class; probably no-one does not recognise that they contribute to the country’s culture through drama.’ (Kitamura 1939: 145) If Kitamura was right, this was indeed a great change in the way society regarded actors over the first seventy years of the modern era. Although many of the leaders of shingeki realised there was a fundamental weakness in the training that the actors were receiving, circumstances dictated that it was the knowledge acquired through performing a wide variety of Western plays that distinguished them from their predecessors. Somehow the idea had become dominant that shingeki actors were to be educated rather than trained, and it is hard to avoid the conclusion that
although *enshutsu* as a concept was well established by the end of the 1930s, stage presence as the culmination of a rounded training programme, something which all *kabuki* actors acquired through long years of study with senior actors, still eluded many of them.

**References**


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