Angura

“*Angura*” has been called the most effective fusion of art and politics from Japan’s turbulent years of social protest in the 1960s and ‘70s. “*Angura*” is the Japanese contraction for the term “*andaaguraundo engeki*,” or “underground theatre.” Although Japan borrowed the term “underground” from the counterculture movement in the U.S. and England in the 1960s, and applied the word to many different aspects of evolving youth culture, the contraction, “*angura*” refers only to the theatre form. Some scholars conflate “*angura*” with “*shōgekijō-undō*” (“the little theatre movement”), while others argue the two are separate movements within the same stream of counterculture theatre beginning in 1960.

The aesthetic genesis of *angura* was the growing dissatisfaction of Japan’s first post-WWII generation with *shingeki*. The generation that came of age in the late 1950s and 1960s was hungry for alternate forms of theatrical expression. In the political arena, that same generation was mobilized by opposition to renewals of the Japan/U.S. Security Treaty in 1960 and 1970. Although *angura* gave highly effective artistic voice to the politics opposing treaty renewal, the fusion of art and politics in *angura* covers a wide spectrum that includes apolitical authors and directors such as Betsuyaku Minoru (b. 1937) and Terayama Shūji (1935-83). Others at the heart of the *angura* phenomenon are Kara Jūrō (b. 1940), Suzuki Tadashi (b. 1939), Ōta Shōgo (1939-2007), and Satoh Makoto (b. 1943).

Critic Senda Akihiko (b. 1940) identifies nine ways that *angura* differed from *shingeki*: 1) dramatic structure, 2) acting styles and techniques, 3) theatrical space, 4) promoting humor and encouraging laughter, 5) inclusion of music, 6) intersections with traditional theatre forms, 7) developing theatrical theories, 8) becoming a theatre movement, and 9) an increase in overseas performances.

Dramatic time and place became more fluid in *angura*. Plots were less linear and characters from ancient history might interact with contemporary humans as well as gods. Acting styles became more presentational. Greater theatricality and physicality were reactions to *shingeki’s* naturalistic acting, as well as an attempt to recapture the pre-modern liminal qualities of actors. *Angura* playwrights and directors drew Japanese folklore, especially the spirit world, placing immortals such as the Emperor, Priests, the Beatles, and dog-gods on stage.

Theatrical spaces became more flexible and even mobile. Not only was the fourth wall broken down, but site-specific performances were created. Kara’s Situation Theatre Company (*Jokkyō gekijō*) in its red tent, and Satoh’s Black Tent Theatre (*Kuro tento*) were able to move about the country performing in vacant lots or public spaces of parks and shrines.

Humor, along with music, was introduced into the plays for the sake of variety, and for its Brechtian qualities. Humor and music appealed to the target audience of youth and created an emotional distance within the small playing spaces. That overt theatricality was one intersection with traditional theatre forms. Live music is part of all traditional Japanese theatre forms, as are song and dance. Kabuki especially openly acknowledges the theatrical nature of performance. Directors such as Kara drew on this presentational style of kabuki. Ōta Shōgo and Suzuki Tadashi on the other hand drew on the subtleties and stillness of *nō*.

*Angura* practitioners began to articulate and write down their theories of theatre. Suzuki codified his actor training method that has spread worldwide. Kara wrote about the physicalities of acting and the liminality of shared flesh and emotions.

Japan’s vibrant theatre of the 1960s was a fairly tight community. Many of the theatre companies were directly involved in the political protests of the 1960s. Some critics define the *angura* movement by those protests and exclude the apolitical work of Terayama Shūji and Betsuyaku Minoru. There work shares the other qualities of *angura*, as well as Senda’s ninth aspect of change; overseas performances. Kara, Satoh, Terayama and others began to have exchanges with playwrights and directors from other countries, traveling to Europe and the Middle East to perform and find solidarity with like-minded theatre makers of the counterculture. Ninagawa Yukio and Suzuki’s directorial works made an impact abroad, and a variety of contemporary works were translated into foreign languages.

Theatrical expression shifted as the creative social and political energies of the 1960s faded and *angura* lost its effervescence, but the movements leaders continued produce work. The spirit of *angura* is still found in troupes such as Kara-gumi, Shinjuku Ryōzanpaku, and Kegawa-zoku.

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