Engeki kairyō kai (Theatre Reform Society, 1886-1888)

A quasi-government agency and prelude to modernist movement in Japanese theatre.

From its early days, the Meiji government adopted an ambivalent and self-contradictory policy towards theatre. On the one hand, it continued the Tokugawa period censorship when deeming theatre subversive or otherwise “injurious to public morals;” on the other hand, it wanted theatre to help promote its nation-building programs to make Japan an equal to the Western powers. The latter aspect of the policy was prompted in part by the surprising discovery of Meiji leaders during their tour to the West that theatre was part of the high culture in the West worthy of entertaining the upper classes and foreign dignitaries. Kabuki caught the attention of Meiji leaders as a potential Japanese counterpart of Western drama. The desire of Meiji leaders coincided with the indigenous modernist efforts to reform this traditional performing art to suit the needs of the times, particularly those of Morita Kan’ya XII (1846-1897), actor and manager of an important kabuki family line who had connections with government officials. It is this coincidence that led to the creation of Engeki kairyō kai (Theatre Reform Society), launched in August 1886 at the proposal of Suematsu Norizumi (1855-1920), journalist-turned-politician and son-in-law of Itō Hirobumi, Japan’s first prime minister, with Itō’s own endorsement. Its founders include Foreign Minister Inoue Kaoru, Education Minister Mori Arinori, business leader Shibusawa Eiichi, and influential scholars Yoda Gakkai and Fukuchi Ōchi.

The purpose of Engeki kairyō kai, as stated in its declaration, was of three-fold: to reform the despicable customs of the existing theatre by creating worthy scripts, to raise the thitherto low social status of playwrights in doing so, and to build new theatres appropriate for such pieces and other entertainment and concerts.

Activities of Engeki kairyō kai include sessions of reading out new scripts by its members as well as productions of these. The new scripts can be classified into two types: pieces adapted from Nō classics and pieces of new creation. The former includes *Benkei in the Boat* (Funa benkei) and *The Maple Viewing Party* (Momiji-gari), both adapted by Kawatake Mokuami (1816-1893); the latter *The Glory of the Famous Waka Poetry Gleaned in Yoshino* (Yoshino shūi meika homare), created jointly by Yoda Gakkai and Kawajiri Hōkin, a play that advocates loyalty to the emperor through the story of Kusunoki Masatsura, a warrior of the Southern-Northern court period.

As a prelude to modernist movement in Japanese theatre, Engeki kairyō kai was unique in having government sponsorship. It was disbanded when the first Itō cabinet ended in 1888, without producing memorable pieces. Nevertheless, its historical significance should be noted. First, at the height of its activities in April 1887, Meiji Emperor watched a kabuki at the residence of Inoue Kaoru. This royal endorsement forever changed the social status of kabuki artists who had been held as low as, or lower than, the outcast burakumin until 1871 when the Decree of Emancipation of Burakumin (Senmin kaihō rei) was promulgated. Second, it is through this organization that authors unrelated to Japan’s theatre establishment, such as Yoda Gakkai (1834-1909), started contributing scripts. Third, it led to the participation in theatre by elite intellectual artists including Mori Ōgai and Tsubouchi Shōyō, and to the founding of Bungei kyōkai later.

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