Tsubouchi Shōyō (May 22, 1859 – February 28, 1935)

Critic, translator, teacher, playwright, scholar and early shingeki innovator, Tsubouchi Shōyō pioneered not only modern theatre in Meiji Japan but was the inventor of theatre history as a discipline, the first person to translate the complete works of Shakespeare into Japanese, and reformed the traditional theatre.

Born Tsubouchi Yūzō in Gifu Prefecture in South central Japan in 1859, just before the Meiji Restoration, Tsubouchi graduated from what is now called Tokyo University and became a lecturer at Waseda University. He published an essay on fiction and drama in 1885 arguing they should be viewed as art forms worthy of respect and study. He followed with a book, *Wagakuni no shigeki* (Japan’s Historical Drama) in 1893. As a result of his critical works, he fell into a public debate with friend and rival Mori Ōgai, who criticized Tsubouchi for valuing realism too highly. Tsubouchi’s ambition in both modern and traditional dramatic literature was to develop a Japanese literature the equal of any in the world.

He began his translations of Shakespeare in 1884, translating the complete works by 1928. He rendered Shakespeare in the language style and form of kabuki, seeking to link the poetry of the former with the latter. Tsubouchi’s translations remained the standard until Fukuda Tsuneari’s in the fifties. Tsubouchi recognized early on the similarities between Shakespeare and the classical Japanese playwright Chikamatsu Monzaemon. Shakespeare served as a model for modern theatre for Tsubouchi. Seeking to reform the kabuki, which he felt lacked psychological realism, he wrote a modern kabuki play *Kiri hitoha* (Paulownia Leaf, 1885) using *Hamlet* as a model, although also containing elements of *King Lear*. His acknowledged masterpiece, *En no gyōya* (En the Ascetic, 1916) was shaped by *The Tempest*. His attempt to use kabuki actors to perform Shakespeare, however, convinced him he needed to train inexperienced amateurs to create a modern theatre unencumbered by the stylization of kabuki acting.

This quest led him to found the Bungei Kyōkai (Literary Arts Society) at Waseda University in 1906, using university students as performers in translations of Western plays. Tsubouchi trained actors in his own home, using scenes from Shakespeare and Ibsen to develop a modern acting style. In addition to his critical rivalry with Mori, Tsubouchi was also rivaled by Osanai Kaoru, whose Jiyū Gekijō was the other major company developing shingeki in performance. Important Bungei productions included *The Merchant of Venice* (1906), *Hamlet* (1907, revived in 1911) and Ibsen’s *A Doll House*, directed by Shimamura Hōgetsu and starring Matsui Sumako. Many of the students in the Bungei Kyōkai developed into the stars of early shingeki. A scandal surrounding the affair of Shimamura and Matsui, however, led to their resignation from the company and to the eventual disbanding of the Bungei Kyōkai. Tsubouchi responded to the fall of the company by focusing on translation and writing, not producing theatre again until the 1920s when he briefly staged some pageants at the university.

Tsubouchi passed away in 1935. Waseda University’s theatre museum and library is named after him.

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