**Kawakami Sadayakko (b. 18 July 1871, Tokyo, Japan; d. 7 December 1946, Atami, Japan)**

**Kawakami Otojirō (b. 1 January 1864, Hakata (now Fukuoka), Japan, d. 11 November 1911, Osaka, Japan)**

**Summary**

Otojiro Kawakami was one of the founders of *shimpa*—a new school of theatre that featured contemporary political plots, documentary drama, and realistic acting. With the support of his wife, Sadayakko, who was one of the earliest Japanese actresses since the Tokugawa ban, Otojiro built the first modern theatre in Japan in 1896, modelled after European theatres. In 1899-1900, the couple toured with their troupe across the U.S. and Europe, and went again to Europe in 1901-1902 and in 1907-1908. They presented adaptations of Japanese and Western plotlines in an acting style that drew from kabuki, *shimpa*, and Euro-American realism, striking audiences as both exotic and modern. Upon returning to Japan, the Kawakamis promulgated theatrical reforms based on their observations in Europe. In 1903, they opened the first Actress Training Institute, led by Sadayakko, which was later taken over by Tokyo’s Imperial Theatre. In the U.S. and Europe, the Kawakami’s performances became touchstones of both realism and abstraction in modernist theatre. In Japan, their work adapting Western dramas and staging new works in a contemporary fashion laid the foundation for Japan’s development of a modern theatre.

**Training**

Otojiro briefly sought out training for *rakugo*, comic storytelling, under Katsura Bunnosuke in Osaka in 1888, and his ability to imitate and innovate with flair provided the foundation for his artistic work. Otojiro made a short trip to Europe in early 1893, where his observations of the theatre informed his criticisms of tradition-bound Japanese theatre. In contrast, Sadayakko went through the intensive, traditional training of an elite geisha, learning to play the *shamisen* and *koto*, singing, dancing (including *nihon buyō*—traditional Japanese dance, often used in Kabuki), as well as tea ceremony and flower arranging. She also styled herself as a ‘modern’ geisha, learning to ride a horse, play billiards, and swim. While abroad, Sadayakko attentively observed performances wherever she went and absorbed elements of realistic acting into her own work. In 1907, when Sadayakko and Otojiro returned to Europe in order to further research French theatre, Sadayakko studied at the Conservatoire in Auteil, outside of Paris.

**Innovations in Japan**

Otojiro Kawakami’s work as a political agitator led him to join the *shoshi shibai* movement, which paired a reformed kabuki performance style with activist revolutionary messages. In 1889 he became famous for his *oppekeppe bushi*—a traditional nonsense syllable patter song to which he set satirical lyrics criticizing politicians and elite society. Along with the actor Sadanori Sudō, Otojiro’s efforts established Japan’s first modern theatre movement—*shimpa*.

Otojiro’s troupe challenged Kabuki’s spectacle, stylization, staccato singing, and heavy make-up by performing in realistic, contemporary settings with smooth, spoken speech and little make-up. Otojiro took his subject matter from recent political events. When the Sino-Japanese War began in 1894, Otojiro took advantage of widespread patriotic sentiment to present *Sozetsu Kaizetsu Nisshin Senso* (‘The Sublime, Exhilarating Sino-Japanese War’), which thrilled audiences with its realistic battle scenes, containing bugle and military songs, fireworks, and electric lights. Otojiro travelled to Korea in October 1894 to observe the war in person. His observations and photographs were quickly turned into *Otojiro Kawakami’s Battlefield Record of Things Seen and Heard* (1894), which premiered in December of that year, as well as a private performance for the Crown Prince (future Emperor Taisho). This exciting, documentary-style theatre established *shimpa* as a modern, relevant form that challenged Kabuki’s primacy in Japan.

In 1896 Otojiro and Sadayakko opened the Kawakami-za, Japan’s first modern theatre, which featured seats and a proscenium arch, and eliminated the *hanamichi*. There, Otojiro presented his adaptations of *The Three Musketeers* (1896) and *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1897), for which he employed his strategy of translating foreign stories to fit to local circumstances and expectations.

**Tours Abroad**

In their tours abroad the Kawakami troupe took advantage of the Japonisme mania, fulfilling popular desire to see authentic costumes, sets, and actors from Japan. During their U.S. tour, Otojiro created the showpiece of their foreign performances, *The Geisha and the Knight* (1899). Cobbled together from the kabuki play *Sayaate* and a kabuki adaptation of the nō classic *Dojoji*, *The Geisha and the Knight* thrilled audiences with a fierce sword battle as well as Sadayakko’s mesmerizing dance scenes. The troupe, and Sadayakko in particular, earned their greatest acclaim at the 1900 Paris Exposition, where they performed at the Théâtre Loïe Fuller (whose namesake managed the troupe’s touring from then on).

Frequently compared to the grand actresses of the day, such as Ellen Terry, Eleanora Duse, and Sarah Bernhardt, Sadayakko’s style was seen as more detached, elegant, and realistic because she seemed to avoid the histrionics of her peers. Audiences flocked to see her dancing—characterized as both passionate and restrained—as well as her death scenes. Critics marvelled at the physical change that she underwent, seemingly literalizing death in her body. In the U.S. Sadyakko’s precision fulfilled expectations for a realist modern theatre, while in Europe, her understatement hinted at modernism’s emerging abstraction.

**Return to Japan**

Upon returning to Japan, the Kawakamis campaigned for changes in the Japanese theatre system, advocating a higher social status for actors and reformed training systems that would encourage innovation instead of imitation of a master. They opened a school for actresses in 1903 to encourage the legitimacy of women on stage, followed by a theatre for child actors. In 1904 Otojiro instituted further reforms to his productions at the Meiji-za: cutting ties with the neighbouring teahouses, which had traditionally provided refreshments for a fee, he offered a much shorter performance at lower ticket prices. The troupe performed pieces created during their time abroad, as well as adaptations of Western classics, such as *Othello* (1903) and *Hamlet* (1903), which was, perhaps the first contemporary-dress production of Shakespeare in the world. In 1910, a month after the establishment of the *shingeki* Imperial Theatre in Tokyo, Otojiro opened the lavish European-style New Imperial Theatre in Osaka. When Otojiro died in 1911, Sadayakko continued to perform, touring Japan and Korea. After retiring from the stage in 1917, she opened another children’s theatre and training school outside of Tokyo in 1925

**Tara Rodman**

**Selected Works**

オッペケペ節 [Oppekeppe Bushi] (1988)

意外 [Strange] (1894)

壮絶快絶日清戦争 [The Sublime, Exhilarating Sino-Japanese War] (1894)

戦地見聞日記 [Otojiro Kawakami’s Battlefield Record of Things Seen and Heard] (1894)

三銃士 [The Three Musketeers] (1896)

八十日間世界一周 [Around the World in Eight Days] (1897)

*The Geisha and the Knight* (1899)

*Zingoro* (1899)

*The Loyal Wife,* or *Kesa Gozen* (1899)

*Sairaku* (adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice*), 1900

*Scarlet Snow* (1900)

オセロ[Othello] (1903)

ハムレット [Hamlet] (1903)

唖旅行 [Dumb Travel] (1908)

新国王 [New Nation’s King] (adaptation of *Alt Heidelberg*) (1910)

トスカ [Tosca] (1914)

サロメ [Salome] (1914)

**References and Further Reading**

Anderson, J.L. (2011) *Enter a Samurai: Kawakami Otojirō and Japanese Theatre in the West*, Tuscon AZ: Wheatmark.

Berg, S.C. (1993) ‘Sada Yacco: The American Tour, 1899-1900’, *Dance Chronicle* 16 (2): 147-196; (1995) ‘Sada Yacco in London and Paris, 1900: Le Rêve Réalisé’, *Dance Chronicle* 18 (3): 343-404.

Kano, A. (2001) *Acting like a Woman in Modern Japan: Theatre, Gender, and Nationalism*, New York: Palgrave.

Rodman, T. (2013) ‘A Modernist Audience: The Kawakami Troupe, Matsuki Bunkio, and Boston Japonisme’, *Theatre Journal* 65 (4): 489-505.

Salz, J. (1993) ‘Intercultural Pioneers: Otojirō Kawakami and Sada Yakko’, *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 20: 25-74.

**Selected Paratextual Material**

Image of Otojiro in *Battlefield Record of Things Seen and Heard*

<http://enpaku.waseda.ac.jp/db/enpakunishik/results-big.php?shiryo_no=101-5388>

Image of Sadayakko, Photo: P. Nadar, *Le Théatre* Cover, October 1900, no.44

<http://digital.library.villanova.edu/Item/vudl:49104>

Image of troupe’s New York performance, Photo: Byron, *Le Théatre*, September 1900, no. 41

<http://digital.library.villanova.edu/Item/vudl:49002>

Pablo Picasso, *The Dancer Sadayakko*

<http://www.bcn.cat/museupicasso/en/exhibitions/temporals/imatges-secretes/rooms.html>