# Asakusa Opera is a modern Japanese popular entertainment having elements of musical theatre – such as opera, operetta, American musicals – and sketch comedy – such as variety shows and vaudeville. It achieved popularity in Asakusa, the major entertainment district of Tokyo during the Taisho Period (1912-1926). Japanese theatre critic Ōzasa Yoshio regards Asakusa Opera as the first sign of Americanization of Japanese theatre (98:1986).

The birth of Asakusa Opera is regarded as Takagi Tokuko’s successful performances in 1916, featuring songs and dances inspired by American variety shows. Takagi had studied dance in New York City and performed in U.S. and European cabarets before returning to Japan. Takagi played the role of a French officer in *Female Troops Go to the Frontline* (1917), an American style musical comedy written and directed by Iba Takashiat Tokiwaza by Negishi Productions*.* The term “opera” was used by the Japan Opera Society for the first time when “mixed-gender” girls opera was produced by Nishimoto Asaharu, choreographer of *Evening in Venice* (1916) at Takarazuka Girls Opera and Suzuki Yasuyoshi, orchestra master in Takagi’s troupe. Meanwhile, Sassa Koka, the Nipponophone Company’s music producer formed Tokyo Opera Theatre and staged *A Night at a Café* (1917), an operetta he wrote at Nipponkan, the first opera theatre in Asakusa. The play produced a hit “The Song of Croquette,” originally composed by Masuda Tarōkaja for his comic opera at the Imperial Theatre, *Which Way?* (1917).

Many performers of Asakusa Opera studied at the Imperial Theatre’s opera school with Giovanni Vittorio Rossi. Some were recruited from Rossi’s Royal House built after he left the Imperial Theatre. The founding members of Tokyo Opera Theatre – future modern dance leader Ishii Baku, San Francisco born Sawa Morina – were both Rossi’s students. Other students like Shimizu Kintarō and his wife Shizuko moved to Asakusa and staged Royal House’s signature piece, Offenbach's *Orph*é*e aux Enfers* (1918) at Nipponkan. Fujiwara Yoshie, creator of the first opera company in Japan, Fujiwara Opera made a debut in Nipponkan’s Asakusa Opera in 1918.

Asakusa Opera fans in earlier days, called *peragoro* (a coined word combining “opera” and “gigolo”), were young intellectuals including future Japanese literature and art leaders—Miyazawa Kenji, Kawabata Yasunari and Tōgō Seiji. Each day three to five pieces, including opera and operetta, dance, and vaudeville, were staged twice a day with a low admission fee in a ten to fifteen day long production cycle.

Asakusa Opera entered its peak with appearance of Royal House’s prima donna, Hara Nobuko at Negishi Productions’s Kannon Theatre. Hara formed her own company, Hara Nobuko Opera Group, with former Royal House members including Taya Rikizō and staged the first production of Eichberg’s opera *The Doctor of Alcantara* (1918).

After Hara’s retirement and Takagi’s sudden death, Shōchiku formed the Shinsei Opera Company to stage Asakusa Opera in Tokyo, Osaka, Kyoto and Nagoya. The base in Tokyo was not Asakusa but Hongōza located in the educational center. Soon the Negishi Productions poached actors from Shōchiku and created Asakusa-based Negishi Opera Company. Its first production at Konryukan included Iba’s *Gautama Budda* (1919), a *sōsaku* opera (literally “creation opera”). After Iba and other literary section members left Asakusa, Negishi Opera focused on staging new Western grand opera pieces such as Verdi’s *Il Travatore* and *Rigoletto*, Gounod’s *Faust* and Bizet’s *Carmen* with Rossi’s opera comique pieces*.* Taya’s popularity invited the second peak of Asakusa Opera.

The 1923 Great Kantō earthquake destroyed all theatres in Asakusa. Negishi Opera Company continued to perform in different theatres of Tokyo and other cities. Others produced Asakusa Opera in newly built theatres. However, its popularity declined and the audience’s interest was shifted to the new forms of entertainment – light comedy and revue by Enomoto Kenichi, who had appeared as chorus boy in Negishi Opera Company in 1922.

SOURCES:

Ōzasa Yoshio. 1986. *Nihon gendai engekishi*. Tōkyō : Hakusuisha.

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