Hijikata Yoshi (1898-1959)

Shingeki director and one of the most important early leaders of modernist movement in Japanese theatre, Hijikata Yoshi was the co-founder of the Tsukiji Shōgekijō and an active presence in Soviet-Japanese theatrical interactions.

Born of an aristocrat family, he lost his father as an infant and grew up in the houses of his maternal and paternal grandparents. Thanks to the theatre-going traditions of both families, he was exposed from an early age to theatre, both traditional and its emerging modern counterparts. This led to his creation, with friends, of two amateur theatres, at ages 13 and 18. At 21, he directed *The Death of Tintagiles* by Maurice Maeterlinck. His choice of this mystical piece was criticized as detached from life reflecting his aristocratic upbringing, a criticism that “hit my weakest spot” leaving a permanent impact on him. The impact was intensified later by the realistic and engaging stage of Hirasawa Keishichi’s Worker’s Theatre, a sharp contrast with the theatre he had known, as rich men’s pastime. Determined to make theatre his career around this time, he became a disciple of Osanai Kaoru and together they established theatre directing as a respected profession in Japan.

When his paternal grandfather died of Spanish flu in 1918, he inherited from him the title of “Count.” While a college student and an apprentice director he was able to accumulate a large amount of wealth, paying off family debts. Unable to stand the Japanese theatre establishment of the time and with a fortune, he left for Europe in November 1922 to study Western theatre. In Paris and Berlin, he was watching plays daily and studying drama history and directing theories when news of the Great Kanto Earthquake reached him in September 1923. En route back to Japan, he spent a week in Moscow where he met Meyerhold and watched plays directed by him, a week that he felt taught him more about theatre than the previous several years he had spent in Europe put together.

To create his ideal theatre, he constructed “Japan’s first modern theatre,” Tsukiji Shōgekijō, with money saved by cutting short his Europe trip, and launched a company of the same name with Osanai as a co-founder. Opened in June 1924, Tsukiji Shōgekijō soon established its mainstream status in Japan’s modern theatre with productions of translated realistic and Expressionistic pieces and later created ones.  Shortly after Osanai’s sudden death in December 1928, however, the company split into two troupes due to influence of proletarian theatre movement. Hijitaka became the director of Shin Tsukiji Gekidan, one of the splits, a left-wing company.

In 1933-34, he represented Japan in Moscow at Theatre Olympiad and at the First Soviet Writers’ Conference. His aristocratic title was stripped in 1934 for his illegal trip to, and revolutionary speech in, the Soviet Union. Despite his Marxist views, however, he was expelled from USSR in 1937 as a suspect of Japanese spy. He then lived in exile in France. Extreme poverty forced him to return to Japan in 1941, only to be arrested and sentenced 5 years in prison. Released from prison in October 1945, he became a guest member of the restarted Shinkyō Gekidan, a leader in several cultural and theatre organizations beside directing four plays. He joined Japanese Communist Party in January 1946 but later had doubts on their policies in the 1950s.  He died of lung cancer in June 1959.

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