Ichikawa Sadanji II (1880-1940)

Japan's most popular actor in 1910s-1930s who is unique in having contributed to modernist movement in both kabuki and shingeki, Japan’s traditional and modern theatres.

Born Takahashii Eijirō, son of Ichikawa Sadanji I, he first appeared on stage at four and, by eighteen, had the stage names of first Botan and then Koyone and Enshō. When Sadanji I died in 1904, he inherited not only Meiji-za, his father's company and theatre, but an enormous debt. Sadanji I was the last of the Meiji kabuki superstars to die in two years, leaving his son without his fame and skills, tasting the coldness of the kabuki establishment. With the support of Kawakami Otojirō (1864-1911) and particularly Matsui Shōyō (1870-1933), however, he led Meiji-za through the difficulties and became Ichikawa Sadanji II in 1906.

This period witnessed not only the decline of kabuki, but also the rise of shimpa. This, along with his experience with the kabuki establishment, turned his interest to modern theatre as well. In 1906-1907, he travelled in Europe for eight months watching Western masterpieces, taking courses, and observing Western theatre management. Inspired by the discoveries of this trip, he attempted a modernist reform at Meiji-za upon his return. The reform, which included allowing actresses in kabuki and the elimination of the age-old tradition of catering services to spectators in theatre, proved to be too radical to be acceptable. This setback channeled his modernist enthusiasm to a different platform. In 1909, with Osanai Kaoru (1880-1928), he launched Free Theatre (Jiyū gekijō), a pioneering attempt at shingeki, which produced *John Gabriel Borkman*, the first Ibsen play ever produced in Japan, followed by translated pieces, including Gorky's Lower Depth, and created ones, including Mori Ogai's *Ikuta River* and Nagai Kafu's *Taira no Koremori*. While playing the roles of protagonists in these modernist pieces, he also restored and modernized some kabuki pieces long forgotten, such as *The Mysterious Hair Remover* (Kenuki), *The Thunder God* (Narukami) and Tsuruya Nanboku's supernatural works. These made him the most popular actor in Japan.

His success owed much to the support of members of the Critics Association (gappyō kai), most of whom later joined the Seven-grass Association (Nanakusa kai), an organization formed in 1921 to create or recommend new pieces--the shin kabuki pieces--for him at a time when theatres vied each other in catering to the low taste of audiences disregarding script quality. Members of this group included Oka Onitarō, Okamoto Kidō, Nagai Kafū, Matsui Shōōī and Osanai Kaoru. Meetings of the Seven-grass Association were sponsored by Shōchiku, which bought out Meiji-za and hired Sadanji II since 1912 as its biggest star. The success helped him reemerge strong from the Kanto Earthquake in 1923. In 1924, he toured Korea and Manchuria. In 1928, he visited the Soviet Union with *Chūshingura*, kabuki's first overseas production ever. His exchanges with Soviet film director Sergejs Eizenštein stimulated both artistically. This visit, however, made the authorities suspicious of him under communist influence, which led to his subsequent roles as the "patriotic heroes" of Japanese Empire, even donations to the military in 1937. He died in February 1940.

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