Izumi Kyōka (1873-1939)

Izumi Kyōka was a novelist and shimpa playwright whose plays provided the heart of the shimpa repertory and demonstrated a new model for dramatic literature. Izumi’s work tended towards anti-naturalism, with supernatural elements, romanticism, and a yearning for the pre-modern past. His plays represent a transitional form from traditional to modern Japanese theatre.

Izumi emerged in the 1890s as a novelist and short story author. Other writers adapted Izumi’s novels for the shimpa stage, evoking the Tokugawa era while also embracing the mood and modes of Meiji and Taisho Japan. Most notably, Kawakami Otojiro adapted Izumi’s 1894 novel *Giketsu kyōketsu* (Loyal Blood, Valiant Blood) as *Taki no shiraito*, the first full-fledged shimpa adaptation of a popular novel. It remains shinpa’s and Izumi’s most successful drama. The floodgates opened on a series of stage adaptations of popular literature. A dozen plays adapted from Izumi’s fiction, including *Tatsumi kōdan* (A Tale of the Southwest Quarter, 1900), *Tsuya monogatari* (The Virgin’s Tale, 1906), *Shirasagi* (The White Heron, 1910) and *Keiko ōgi* (The Practice Fan, 1912). Izumi’s novels tended towards stories of young men in tragic relationships with female entertainers. Strong maternal figures in these stories can be traced back to his mother dying when he was ten. Izumi received no royalties from these adaptations, but they brought him fame and public interest, which revived his career.

Growing tired of the changes made to his work, Izumi began writing original plays in 1900. He used kabuki dramaturgy as a model, blending its style with the example of European novels such as those of Jules Verne, Alexandre Dumas, and Victor Hugo. While his writing had always been melodramatic, his drama began to focus as much on the occult and supernatural as well, employing surrealism rather than naturalism in plays such as *Yashagaike* (Demon Pond, 1913), *Kaijin bessō* (The Sea God’s Villa, 1913) and *Tenshu monogatari* (The Tale of the Castle Tower, 1917).

Izumi also had a profound influence on the emerging Japanese cinema, which also adapted his novels and plays for the silent screen and then as talkies. At least thirty films have been developed from Izumi’s work, beginning in 1910 with a film version of *Tsuya monogatari* and continuing through the present.

Critics have argued his work is overly melodramatic, excessive and nostalgic. Beginning in the 1960s, however, reappraised his work as counter-cultural, absurdist and containing essential Japaneseness. He became a role model and his work favored by the generation of theater makers who came of age in the angura era, providing a model for the blending of elements of traditional theatre with modern dramaturgies and sensibilities. Current critical assessment of Izumi’s work is that his narratives occupy an uncertain and instable place between past and present. Film director Akutagawa Hiroshi, who adapted two of Izumi’s works for screen, has called him “a point of contact between Japan’s traditional performing arts and the modern.”

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