Mori Ōgai (February 17, 1862 – July 8, 1922)

Mori Ōgai served as a surgeon in the Japanese Imperial Army, was a translator, novelist, dramatist and literary theorist in the Meiji and Taisho periods. While a dramatist in his own right, he is as important for his translations (especially of Ibsen) and his critical writings.

Mori Ōgai was born Mori Rintarō to an aristocratic family in Iwami Province in Southwestern Japan. After the Meiji Restoration, his family moved to Tokyo and he began to study German. Graduating from medical college in 1881 at the age of 19, he enlisted in the Japanese Imperial Army, which sent him to Germany to study, returning in 1885. During his time in Europe, Mori became interested in Western literature and began translating German works into Japanese.

His critical assertions in the popular and intellectual presses resulted in drama considered as literature the equal of other forms, and that well respected individuals could read drama, attend theatre and engage in serious discussion about both. His debates in print with Tsubouchi Shōyō, his intellectual rival, focused on the nature and purpose of drama. Tsubouchi advocated for realism, Mori sensing a universal ideal behind literature. Collectively they staked out important principles behind modern Japanese dramatic literature.

His translations for the stage served both as model for new Japanese drama as well as providing excellent versions of Ibsen, Stringberg, Lessing, Wedekind, and other dramatists for performance. It was his version of Ibsen’s *John Gabriel Borkman* that Osanai Kaoru chose for the Jiyū Gekijō’s first production in 1909. Mori translated Marinetti’s *First Manifesto of Futurism* only a few months after it was first published in Italy in 1910.

His own plays were well received by critics. He wrote his first play, *Tamakushige Futari Urashima* (The Jeweled Casket and the Two Urashimas) in 1902, published in his younger brother’s magazine *Kabuki*. His one act Kamen (The Mask, 1909) is regarded as one of his most important original plays. Poorly produced initially by a shimpa company, audiences recognized its powerful portrayal of contemporary Tokyo life through the story of a young man who decides to continue with a regular life despite a diagnosis of terminal tuberculosis. The play included quotations from Nietzsche and the main character attending a piano recital. His other major play from this period, *Ikutagawa* (The Ikuta River, 1910), is a model of colloquial Japanese language on stage.

After his death, Mori continued to be a presence on the modern stage through shimpa and shingeki adaptations of his novels such as *Gan* (Wild Geese), produced by Shinsei Shimpa.

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KEVIN WETMORE