Katsureki-mono

“Living History” plays, these were historical pieces of kabuki created in Meiji 10s and 20s (1868-1888) as attempts to reform the genre’s Edo Period (1603-1867) practice to suit the rapidly changing times and, as such, representing an early phase of the modernist movement in Japanese theatre.

Due to strict government censorship to prevent subversion, kabuki plays based on historic events in the Edo Period tended to twist the plot, set the action in the distant past (a practice known as mitate, “disguise”), or otherwise to include absurd materials or performance tricks. Unsatisfied with such a state at a new age, Ichikawa Danjūrō IV (1838-1903), a famous Meiji Period (1868-1912) actor, started in 1870s to reform this art in response to what he perceived as the expectations of the post-Restoration spectators and to make it worthy of entertaining the upper classes and foreign dignitaries. To achieve his goal, Ichikawa Danjūrō IV invited Kawatake Mokuami (1838-1893), the greatest playwright of the day, to create new historical pieces based on documented history. Moreover, costumes, props, even lines used in these pieces were all to be the result of careful research and investigation. A sense of realism was thus introduced into kabuki. These efforts received enthusiastic support from another reformer, Morita Kan’ya XII (1846-1897), actor and manager of an important kabuki family line who had inherited Morita-za theatre and renamed it Shintomi-za in 1875, where many katsureki-mono pieces were to be staged. The year 1878 witnessed the production of Kawatake Mokuami’s *Two Bows and the Multifaceted Shigedo* (Nichō no Yumi Chigusa no Shigedō) depicting a scene in the Gempei War (1180–1185), a conflict between the Taira and the Minamoto clans resulting in the fall of the former and the establishment of the Kamakura shogunate by the latter. Citing a comment on historic plays by Ida Gakkai (1834-1909), scholar, novelist, playwright and another stronger supporter of kabuki reform, writer Kanagaki Robun (1829-1894) wrote a report on the occasion for the Kanayomi Shimbun newspaper referring to the piece as a “katsureki,” thus the term katsureki-mono, literally “living history pieces.”

While katsureki-mono enjoyed popularity among the intellectuals, they were not well received by spectators of the working class who were more used to the old style kabuki, as seen in the wide criticism of these pieces in the newspapers of the day. For this reason, no more katasureki-mono plays were written after the 1880s. Today, only a few best known katsureki-mono pieces continue to be produced, all by Kawatake Mokuami. These include *Takatoki* (Takatoki), telling the story about Kamakura Period (1185-1333) ruler Hōjō Takatoki, *Sakai no Taiko* (*The Big Drums of Sakai*), about a battle during the Warring States Period (1467-1573) between Takeda Shingen and Tokugawa Ieyasu, and *Momoyama Monogatari* (A Tale of Momoyama), about Toyotomi Hidetsugu, Toyotomi Hideyoshi’s adopted son and a Azuchi-Momoyama Period (1573-1603) warrior.

Although creative activities of katsureki-mono as a phase of Japanese modernist theatre movement lasted no more than 20 years in the Meiji Period, it can be argued that the legacy of the innovative approaches taken by Ichikawa Danjūrō IV and Kawatake Mokuami to this traditional performance art is carried on later in shin kabuki.

GUOHE ZHENG