Kawakami Otojirō

Kawakami Otojirō (1864-1911) was an actor, comedian, and impresario in Japan’s early modern period who was the first to tour Japanese performances, albeit in a rather unconventional exoticized forms, to the West in 1899-1901 and again from 1901-2. Otojirō married the actress, and former geisha, Kawakami Sada Yakko in 1896. She became his major creative collaborator, and she was the troupe’s featured performer during their tours.

The troupe went to France from 1907 to 1908 to study every aspect of Western theatre. Upon their return to Japan, Kawakami opened the Imperial Actress Training Institute, and the Imperial Theatre as a home for the troupe in Osaka.

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Otojirō left his home in Fukuoka at age14, ending up in Kyoto where he had several occupations and became a liberal political agitator until he apprenticed to a *rakugo* (comic storytelling) master. His apprenticeship inspired him to create an amateur theatre company with a fellow political activist. The amateur status of the troupe allowed them to fly slightly under the radar of the authorities, but in 1888, Kawakami created a musical sensation, the Oppekepe [trumpet] Song. This was a satirical song with a rousing chorus that imitated the sound of a trumpet, “oppekepe!”

The song and the troupe caught the attention of then Prime Minister Itō Hirobumi (1841-1909). Itō invited the troupe to a party where Kawakami was introduced to the geisha Sada Yakko.

In 1893 Kawakami went to France to study theatre. When he returned to Japan, the naturalistic styles of acting, stage design, lighting, etc., contributed to the rise of *shinpa* (“new wave”) theatre. Otojirō married Sada Yakko shortly after returning from France.

Over the next few years, Kawakami’s company did not have much success, prompting him to play his first overseas tour. Although she could not yet appear on stage in Japan, Sada Yakko was able to perform in San Francisco, and American audiences were charmed by her exotic Japanese dances. The couple adapted some famous dance scenes from kabuki, cutting much of the dialogue and embellishing them in ways attractive to Western audiences. Japanese critics bemoaned these bastardized versions, but the audiences loved them. By the time the troupe reached Boston, they had developed their signature pieces, *The Geisha and the Knight*, and a version of *The Maiden of Dōjōji Temple*.

Back in Japan after the second tour, the company had mixed results. They threw themselves into patriotic dramatizations of reports from the 1904-5 Russo-Japanese War. Well-received productions of that period included *Othello* and various plays made famous by Sarah Bernhardt.

The troupe’s Imperial Theatre, completed in February 1910 with the latest Western innovations, and had a gala opening series of successful productions. In the summer of 1911, the company returned from a tour of Japan. Kawakami fell ill during rehearsal of Ibsen’s *The Enemy of the People*, and passes away on November 11. His entrepreneurial spirit contributed greatly to bringing Japanese theatre to the attention of the West, and to the westernized modernization of theatrical production in Japan.

JOHN SWAIN