Kawakami Sadayakko (1871-1946)

Sadayakko (also sometimes transliterated Sada Yakko or Sada Yacco) was Japan’s first modern actress , a pioneer of western drama in Japan and one of the first Japanese to perform in the West, with her husband she was an innovator of intercultural theatre.

Born Sada Koyama in Tokyo to a large merchant family, she was sent to train as a geisha from the age of four, debuting at the age of twelve. In addition to training in the geisha arts, she learned to read and write, ride a horse, and other skills usually reserved for men, which was progressive and unusual for the time. She rapidly rose through the ranks to find patrons from the highest levels of society, including Prime Minister Itō Hirobumi. In 1893 she married impresario and shimpa pioneer Kawakami Otojirō, a shrewd self-promoter who transformed his wife into the first professional actress in Japan.

With the Kawakami Company, Sada Yakko undertook three tours of the West in 1899 to 1901, 1901 to 1902 and 1907 to 1908, performing in numerous venues throughout the United States and Europe, including Honolulu, San Francisco, Seattle, Chicago, New York and Wshington, D.C., including a performance for President McKinley. In Europe she performed in London, Paris, Brussels, Berlin, Vienna, Prague, Moscow, Rome and many other cities. They performed at the World’s Fair and for Queen Victoria and Czar Nicholas II. While in the West, she and her husband met Henry Irving and Ellen Terry and began performing Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice after seeing Irving as Shylock and Terry as Portia. Upon their return to Japan in 1902, the Kawakamis began to perform Shakespeare, including adaptations of *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *Merchant of Venice*, all starring Sadayakko, as well as adaptations of plays by Maeterlinck, Sardou, and Dumas *fils*. The Kawakamis also opened The Imperial Actress School in Tokyo in 1908 for the training of female performers, recently legalized by the Meiji government.

Otojirō died in 1911 and Sadayakko continued to perform for much of the rest of the decade, winning acclaim for her performances in the eponymous role in Oscar Wilde’s *Salome*. She retired in 1917 after performing in Aida, returning to the theatre only occasionally to direct children’s theatre through the 1930s.

During her life Sadayakko, like her husband, was looked down upon by the Japanese cultural establishment. More recent reappraisals of her life and work, however, perceive her as a groundbreaking actress, role model and pioneer of intercultural theatre. Ayako Kano sees Sadayakko, along with Matsui Sumako, as performing a model for modern women in her roles. Japanese women would see her plays in order to learn how to act “modern.” Likewise, Jonah Salz sees the Kawakamis as innovators and creators of fusion theatre that blended elements of Japanese theatre with elements of Western theatre and were among the first to present western dramaturgy on Japanese stages, including the first major productions of Shakespeare in Japan.

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