Osanai Kaoru (1881-1928) was a Japanese director, playwright, critic, teacher, theatre manager, and translator. One of the key figures in the shingeki movement, Osanai is credited with moving the Japanese stage towards modernist realism and naturalism. The founder of several key shingeki companies, Osanai was heavily involved in actor training and the move towards a Stanislavskian based realistic form of theatre.

Osanai was born in Hiroshima in 1881. He graduated from Tokyo Imperial University in 1909 with a degree in English Literature. After graduation, he assisted Tanizaki Jun’ichirō in starting and producing the literary journal Shinshicho (New Trends of Thought); he also translated western drama for the journal. In 1909 he formed the Jiyū Gekijō (Free Theatre) with kabuki actor Ichikawa Sadanji II. Rejecting both kabuki and shimpa conventions, the Free Theatre’s first production was Ibsen’s John Gabriel Borkman. From that point onward the Free Theatre staged productions of modern realist plays, including works by Wedekind, Gorki and Chekhov. Osanai and Ichikawa also made the decision to use professional kabuki actors in Free Theatre productions; this did, however, result in confusion of acting and performance styles, especially as Osanai pushed for an end to declamatory forms of kabuki performance in favor of more naturalistic modes of speech and action.

In order to further his understanding of realist theatre Osanai travelled to Russia and Germany in 1912 and 1913 where he saw the work of Max Reinhardt and Konstantin Stanislavski. While there he was greatly influenced by what he witnessed, especially with Stanislavski’s use of an ensemble and Reinhardt’s “cult of the director.” He returned to the Free Theatre where he directed plays until 1919, when the theatre folded due to a shortage of funds. In 1920 Osanai was hired by the film company Shochiku to head up their acting school.

After the Kantō earthquake in 1923, Osanai founded a new ensemble with Hijikata Yoshi at the Tsukiji Shōgekijō (The Tsukiji Little Theatre), the first theatre built in Japan along the Western architectural model. The theatre and company were dedicated to producing Western modernist plays in translation, a move that angered and alienated several of Japan’s budding shingeki playwrights. Osanai, at this point, believed that shingeki playwrights were still inferior to their western counterparts as they had not seen enough of this form of theatre to be able to write it well. He also considered his own attempts at playwriting to be similarly flawed. Therefore, he focused the efforts of the company towards actor development, opening a summer program for the training of actors in naturalistic techniques with Hijikata in 1924. Osanai and Hijikata often clashed over style; Osanai preferred work that focused instead on naturalism and psychological acting. Hijikata, on the other hand, was more into political, theatrical, and experimental work. They continued to work together, producing both types of plays (approximately 50 different productions) until Osanai’s death in 1928.

Although primarily known as a teacher, director, and theatre company manager, Osanai was also a playwright and adapter of Western works. His play Musuko (The Son, 1922), which was a moderate success in 1922 but became popular after his death; it was one of the most popular plays in the postwar period in Japan.

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