Shingeki

“*Shingeki*” (lit. “new theatre”) is a word coined in late Meiji Period Japan (1868-1912) referring to dramatic works and theatre performance styles imported and adapted from late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Europe. Almost every Japanese theatre form created in the 20th and 21st centuries is influenced by *shingeki*, but after the 1960s it was no longer a term associated with the avant garde. *Shingeki* existed as a distinct theatrical genre for just over a decade in the late-Meiji and early-Taisho (1912-26) Periods, however, its legacy remains in Japanese theatre.

During the Meiji Period’s rapid modernization and westernization *kabuki* and *nō* presentational forms were criticized, naturalist and realist staging by playwrights such as Ibsen, Chekhov, and Hauptmann, were promoted, and the view of dramatic texts as literature rather than as a springboard for an actor’s virtuosity became dominant. In the first decades of the twentieth century people such as Tsubouchi Shōyō (1858-1935) and Osanai Kaoru (1881-1928) sought to create a sharp distinction between pre-modern and modern forms of performance. The result was *shingeki*.

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*Shingeki* was synonymous with modern theatre in Japan from 1906 until about 1960, when younger artists began rejecting its political baggage and the perception that it had become a stale regurgitation of western psychological realism. However, throughout the twentieth century, *shingeki* has been a Japanese crucible reflecting Brechtian theatre, Surrealism, Absurdism, and minimalist works.

Tsubouchi founded the Literary Arts Society (*Bungei Kyōkai*) at Waseda University in 1906 to train actors in new acting styles, and to produce works from Shakespeare. It produced the first Japanese staging of Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* (1911) and new Japanese plays. Osanai and Ichikawa Sadanji II (1880-1940) formed one of the first professional *shingeki* companies, the Free Theatre (*Jiyū Gekijō*), which staged Ibsen’s *John Gabriel Borkman* in 1909, considered the first *shingeki* production.

*Shingeki* flourished, getting a boost from the destruction caused by the 1923 Great Kantō Earthquake. In the aftermath, Osanai and Hijikata Yoshi (1898-1959) used state-of-the-art innovations from the West to build the Tsukiji Little Theatre (*Tsukiji shōgekijō*) in 1924. They formed a company dedicated to training actors for productions of translated Western plays—at the expense of most works by indigenous playwrights. In addition to *shingeki* realism, the company also tackled avant-garde Western works, and European influence extended to leftist political leanings. However, the proletarian agenda was not strong enough to satisfy men such as Senda Koreya (1904-94), who left the company in 1927 to study in Germany.

By Senda’s 1931 return, the political and aesthetic approaches toward *shingeki* had diverged. Politics received attention because the Marxist beliefs of many practitioners in the theatre world conflicted with the Japanese militaristic tide. Theatre became a didactic tool to promote the political agendas of trade unions and the Communist Party, but also apolitical playwrights wanted to develop a Japanese linguistic, psychological, and representational aesthetic.

Men like Senda and Murayama Tomoyoshi (1901-77) staged various plays promoting leftwing causes and ideology even as the government violently suppressed communist supporters, but it was playwright Kubo Sakae (1900-58) who created the greatest work of prewar *shingeki*: *Land of Volcanic Ash* (*Kazanbai-chi*, 1937-38). This epic work is set in Hokkaidō where farmers struggled to produce crops from the potassium-poor soil. A university agriculture professor is caught in a vise of his own research findings, the needs of the local farmers, and pressures from capitalists and a national government preparing for war. *Land of Volcanic Ash* was successful even as leftists were being thrown into jail. Kubo, arrested in 1940, spent the remainder of the war in prison, and hailed as a *shingeki* hero after the war.

Tanaka Chikao (1905-95), Kubota Mantarō (1889-1963), and Kishida Kunio (1890-1954) were the most notable playwrights of the aesthetic approach. These men formed the Tsukiji Theatre (*Tsukiji-za*) in 1932 to stage original Japanese works. Kishida’s one-acts, such as *Paper Balloon* (*Kami fūsen*, 1925), as well as full-length plays like *The Two Daughters of Mr. Sawa* (*Sawa-shi no futari musume*, 1935) capture the shifting social values of the time. In 1937, Kishida helped form the Literary Theatre (*Bungaku-za*), which avoided political topics in the service of developing talented playwrights. During the war Kishida avoided authoritarian censure as Director of Culture for the Imperial Rule Association. His political legacy is questioned, but many consider Kishida Japan’s best prewar *shingeki* playwright. The Kishida Drama Prize is now one of Japan’s most prestigious.

*Shingeki* flourished after the war. The U.S. Occupation authorities encouraged new plays on themes of democracy while suppressing what they saw as the feudalism of traditional theatre forms. Occupation support aided development of uncontroversial mainstream commercial theatre, but jailed wartime *shingeki* heroes such as Kubo and Senda retained their socialist commitments. 1950s and 60s *shingeki* encompassed a broad political and aesthetic spectrum. Senda translated and produced Bertolt Brecht’s plays. Ultra-conservative Mishima Yukio (1925-70) wrote modern nō plays, and liberal Abe Kōbō (1924-93) wrote surreal social commentaries such as *You Too are Guilty* (1965). In 1962 Betsuyaku Minoru wrote *The Elephant*, influenced by the absurdism of Eugene Ionesco and Samuel Beckett.

In the 1960s, *shingeki* lost its cachet as a creative endeavor, becoming maligned as western-style psychological realism produced at mainstream commercial theatres. Additionally, political infighting among the older generation of theatre practitioners spurred a post-war generation to search for theatrical expression more suitable to the changing social and political landscape, energizing new endeavors known as the *shōgekijō* (Little Theater) and *angura* (Underground) movements. Producing both political and apolitical theatre, those movements represented a denunciation, but not an antithesis of *shingeki*. As Kishida and Kubo’s plays of the 1930s, and Mishima and Abe’s plays of the 1950s, demonstrate, *shingeki’s* variety exceeds a narrow theatrical definition. The label “*shingeki*” was rarely used for plays after the 1960s, however, its legacy as dramatic literature continues in Hirata Oriza’s (b. 1962) apolitical plays such as *Tokyo Notes* (1992) about contemporary Japanese family and social dynamics, and overtly political works such as Sakate Yōji’s (b. 1962) *Futenma* (2004) condemning the long-term U.S. military presence in Okinawa.

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