**Shinkokugeki** (New National Theatre)

In response to the growth of shingeki, actor Sawada Shōjirō developed a form designed to appeal to urban masses, especially in Tokyo, that blended elements of shingeki and kabuki with an overlay of patriotism, which he called *shinkokugeki* (New National Theatre), based on the principle of *hanpozenshinshugi* - ‘half step forward’. *Shinkokugeki* refers to both the style of performance and the company that performed it.

Waseda University student Sawada Shōjirō (1892-1929) became a shingeki actor in Tsubouchi Shōyō’s Bungei Kyōkai (Literary Society), later achieving popularity in performances with the Geijutsu-za (Art Theatre), appearing opposite Matsui Sumako**,** and with the *Kindaigeki Kyōkai* (Modern Drama Society). He believed that shingeki was too elite a form and other theatres too commercial and lowbrow. Sawada wanted to create theatre that would appeal to the urban masses but that was also not crassly commercialized.

In 1917 he developed and began performing what he called *‘*new national theatre’(*shinkokugeki*). It failed initially in Tokyo, but he took his company first to Kyoto, then to Osaka, where, in desperation, they added a swordfight scene to a play about samurai. Unlike the kabuki, whose *tachimawari* combat scenes are a highly stylized dance, this fight was energetic, fast and violent. In other words, comparatively realistic violence was incorporated and audiences perceived Sawada’s productions as a new genre. The novelty appealed to audiences and shinkokugeki began to grow in popularity.

By 1920, Sawada formulated his *hanpozenshinshugi* (sometimes called *hanposhugi* - the ‘half-step principle’). If modern theatre takes a full step forward, he theorized, the audience would not follow. If theatre stays where it is right now, there is no progress in the art. Thus, a ‘half-step’ is required to lead the audience forward without leaving them behind, guiding the audience to better theatre. Under this principle, numerous contemporary playwrights, most notably Mayama Seika, wrote plays for Sawada’s company.

From 1919 to the early 1920s he appeared in a number of popular plays about Edo era samurai and thieves, while also playing in translated shingeki plays, such as an adaptation of Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, in which he played Raskolnikov. His sword-fighting plays, however, remained his most popular and influenced period films (*jidaigeki*) and sword fighting films (*chambara*). Sawada performed in 169 plays in his nineteen year career, but shinkokugeki began to fade with his death in 1929 and finally ended due to austerity during the war years and censorship afterwards. Although the patriotism of his plays appealed to the wartime government, the company was simply too expensive to maintain, especially when audiences could not afford tickets. The militaristic patriotism and swordplay ran into trouble with Occupation censors after the war and the style of shinkokugeki more or less disappeared. The company officially ended in 1987.

Further Reading:

Anderson, Joseph L. (2011) *Enter a Samurai: Kawakami Otojiro and Japanese Theatre in the West, Volume 1*. Tucson, AZ :Wheatmark.

Ivy, Marilyn (1995) *Discourses of the Vanishing: Modernity, Phantasm, Japan*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Powell, Brian (2002) *Japan’s Modern Theatre: A Century of Continuity and Change*. London: Japan Library.

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