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| Jiyū-gekijō |
| Free Theatre |
| Jiyū-gekijō (“Free Theatre”), founded in 1909 by the director Osanai Kaoru (1881-1928) and kabuki actor Ichikawa Sadanji II (1880-1940), was established to produce contemporary realist plays using kabuki actors. The company aimed to produce works modeled on the naturalistic stagings of André Antoine’s Théâtre Libre. The theatre’s first offering was a translation of Henrik Ibsen’s *John Gabriel Borkman* in November, 1909. There quickly followed productions of plays by Groky, Maeterlinck, and Chekhov, among others.  Sadanji had been to Europe in 1907 and came back to Japan enamored of all theatre things Western. Osanai’s project was a perfect fit, and the Jiyū-gekijō was pivotal for developing Japanese interest in naturalist plays and the use of theatre to spread new ideas. One problem was that all the company members were kabuki actors from Sadanji’s troupe. Although Osanai initially insisted on doing only translations of Western plays, Japanese playwrights had some opportunities. There was great intellectual and artisitic interest in the company, unfortunately, the theatrical kabuki style did not match the naturalism of the plays produced, and the company could not survive, and closed in 1919. Nonetheless, the theatre, along with Tsubouchi Shōyō’s Bungei-kyōkai (“Literary Society”), helped establish the *shingeki* (“new theatre”) movement. |
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