Bungei Kyōkai (Literary Arts Society, 1906-1913)

Launched in February 1906 out of a drama club of Waseda University students, Bungei Kyōkai was one of the two pioneering organizations of modernist movement in Japanese theatre, the other being Jiyū Gekijō. Bungei Kyōkai, particularly its second period, is considered the beginning of shingeki for its contributions to modernism in establishing professional actors and actresses in modern Japanese theatre, its impact on society, and in its having elite intellectuals as its leaders.

During its early period, Bungei Kyōkai was more reformative in nature: while it produced selected acts of *The Merchant of Venice* and *Hamlet*, it also produced Tsubouchi Shōyō’s modern kabuki *A Paulownia Leaf* (Kiri hitoha), and the role of Portia in *Merchant* was played by an onnagata (male performer of female roles in kabuki). This led to the resignation of disappointed members and its financial difficulties. To overcome the challenges, Shimamura Hōgetsu, Tsubouchi Shōyō’s disciple and the de facto manager of the organization, persuaded his teacher to take direct charge from February 1909. Shōyō started Bungei Kyōkai’s second period by building, on the property of his own residence, a theatre academy, intended for both training and research. The two-year co-ed Academy program was quite rigorous, with Hōgetsu and Shōyō among the instructors and using as textbooks the original script of *The Merchant of Venice* and the English translation of *A Doll’s House*. Later, however, elements of traditional Japanese performing arts, including kyōgen and stage fighting, were added to the curriculum, reflecting Shōyō’s vision of a national theatre as the ultimate goal of Bungei Kyōkai. In May 1911, as the graduation presentation of the Academy’s first class and Bungei Kyōkai’s first production under Shōyō, *Hamlet* was staged in its entirety in the recently opened Imperial Theatre. Matsui Sumako’s debut as Ophelia was well received, eliminating henceforth the need of onnagata in shingeki. The success also enabled Bungei Kyōkai to pay its graduates annual salaries, thus the birth of professional actors in Japan’s modern theatre. In September 1911, *A Doll’s House* was produced at Bungei Kyōkai’s newly completed private theatre, also on Shōyō’s property. Matsui Sumako’s role as Nora was so well received that the piece was produced in Imperial Theatre again two months later, at the request of that theatre, replacing the pre-scheduled *Othello*, despite its rehearsal well under way. The production of *A Doll’s House* coincided with the rise of Japan’s feminist movement and the emergence of “new women”—Japan’s Noras.  While this made a superstar of Matsui Sumako, who played the role of the “real” Nora, it also incurred the outrage of conservatives who condemned Nora’s immorality in abandoning her family. In May 1912, Herman Sudemann’s *Heimat* was banned by the government, after Bungei Kyōkai’s successful first production of the piece, for its discrepancy with Japanese moral code as prescribed in the Imperial Rescript on Education. The ban was lifted when Hōgetsu compromised by changing the ending of the play. During the ensuing tour of *Heimat*, the scandal of the affair between Hōgetsu and Sumako, coupled with complaints against the lack of transparency in the management of the organization, led to internal conflicts and eventually Hōgetsu’s resignation and Sumako’s being expelled, both in May 1913, following a successful production three months earlier of *Wilhelm Meyer-Förster’s Alt-Heidelberg*. Bungei Kyōkai was disbanded right after *Julius Caesar*, its sixth and final production, in June 1913.

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