Geijutsu-za

The Geijutsu-za (Art Theatre) first iteration was founded in 1913 by the actors Shimomura Hōgetsu (1871-1918) and Matsui Sumako (1886-1919) after they were expelled from Tsubouchi Shōyo’s (1859-1935) Bungei-kyōkai for fraternization. The lovers, Matsui in particular, had been acclaimed for their acting with Bungei-kyōkai, and they continued their successes at the Geijutsu-za. Unfortunately, Shimomura succumbed in November 1918 to the worldwide influenza epidemic, and a distraught Matsui committed suicide two months later. With their loss, the company disbanded until it was reformed in 1924 by one of the original members, playwright and director Mizutani Chikushi (1882-1935). The revived company lasted until 1945.

The company’s successes from 1913-1918 were the result of Shimomura’s promotional talent capitalizing on the daring charisma of Matsui. The novelty of seeing real women, banned from the Tokyo stage for almost three centuries, Matsui’s talent and her artistic rivalry with Kawakami Sada Yakko (1871-1946), created a rich vein for Shimomura to mine. In the second Geijutsu-za offering, Matsui created a sensation playing Oscar Wilde’s *Salome*. The company’s third production, Shimomura’s adaptation of Tolstoy’s *Fukkatsu* (*Resurrection*) in 1914, with Matsui playing the role of Katsusha, was one of *shingeiki*’s greatest popular and commercial hits.

*Resurrection* ran for 444 performances. Matsui’s portrayal of Katsusha was acclaimed in part because sang “The Ballad of Katusha.” This was the first time a popular song had been included in the performance of a *shingeki* play, and the song itself became a huge popular hit, selling over 20,000 gramophone recordings. The company followed these achievements with adaptations of Ivan Turgenev’s *On the Eve* in 1915, and Tolstoy’s *The Living Corpse* in 1917. These two productions also featured Matsui singing songs that became popular hits.

Despite these successes, there was rising dissention in the company. Matsui clashed frequently with other members of the company, especially the leading man, Sawada Shōjirō (1892-1929). Matsui was undoubtedly the major draw for the company, and made it a point to remind everyone in off-stage altercations. Sawada finally quit the company after the run of *The Living Corpse* ostensibly over long-running artistic differences with Shimomura. He and other members of the company, notably Mizutani, who quit in 1914 after the Geijutsu-za’s inaugural production, were opposed to the commercialized offerings. Sawada had complained that *Resurrection* was no more than tawdry melodrama. He wanted to pursue more serious dramatic innovations rather than popular commercial success.

The Geijutsu-za’s last successful production in 1918 was *The Sunken Bell* by Gerhart Hauptmann (1862-1946). It was during the run of a dramatic version of *Carmen* after Shimomura’s death that Matsui killed herself. The company fell apart, and although the revived Geijutsu-za under Mizutani had a longer run, it never rivaled the achievements of Matsui and Shimomura.

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