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.

It was while he was producing plays at the Jiyū-gekijō that Osanai gave impetus to the term *shingeki*. It was theatre that was neither kabuki nor *shimpa*. Although modeled on the Théâtre Libre, the Jiyū-gekijō was free in that it had no theatre of its own in which to perform. That freedom was part of Osanai’s strategy to avoid competition with commercial theatre by producing plays with limited runs.

Osanai famously exhorted his company members to “Become amateurs!” He wanted them to learn a new style, but the problem for these actors was that neither they nor Osanai had models of Western realist acting to follow, therefore, kabuki theatricalism was their default style.

In order to develop theatrical production capabilities and audience appreciation, Osanai alternated Western plays with original Japanese creations. The problem for the Japanese Playwrights was that they were novices competing with the likes of Ibsen and Hauptmann. That the audiences preferred the Western plays was another blow to the Japanese writers.

It was after Osanai’s first trip abroad in 1912-13 that his enthusiasm for the Jiyū-gekijō waned. His experiences with Max Reinhardt and Konstantin Stanislavski opened up new possibilities for Osanai. In addition, audience interest began to wane, the number of productions decreased, and finances suffered. Osanai and Sadanji closed the Jiyū-gekijō in 1919 for a period of reflection.

JOHN SWAIN