Kishida Kunio (1890-1954) is considered to be one of the founders of Japanese shingeki drama and one of the most important modern Japanese dramatists. Through his use of imagistic language and psychological realism, Kishida established the “literary” school of shingeki theatre.

Kishida was born in 1890 in Tokyo Japan to a military family. He was commissioned as an officer n the Japanese army in 1912 but left two years later, disillusioned by military life. He entered Tokyo Imperial University in 1917 in order to study French Literature. In 1919 he traveled to Paris to study with French playwright Jacques Copeau.

Kishida returned to Japan in 1923 and introduced many of the ideas Copeau had shown him to the shingeki stage. From 1924-1929 he wrote numerous one act plays for both performance and publication; these works included Kami fūsen (paper Balloon, 1925), Buranko (the Swing, 1925) and Ashita wa Tenki (Tomorrow it will be fine, 1928). These plays examined the emotional lives of their characters as they focused on issues of domesticity.

From 1929-1936 Kishida shifted towards writing multi-act plays for the theatre. With actor Tomoda Kyōsuke and actress Tamura Akiko he founded the Tsukijiza (Tsukiji Troupe) in 1932. This was the first shingeki company based on Kishida’s literary form of modern drama. He also founded Gekisaku (playwriting) magazine in the same year, which became a platform for Kishida to articulate and promote his apolitical view of theatre as well as a place to promote new Japanese playwrights such as Tanaka Chikao and Uchimura Naoya.

In 1936 Kishida was also made Director of Culture for the Taisei yokusankai (Imperial Rule Assistance Administration, IRAA) which helped to concentrate governmental power in the hands of the militarists. He remained with the IRAA until 1942. For many postwar Japanese, this has led to claims of collaboration between Kishida and the militarist government and thus tainted his artistic legacy. It is worth noting that the Bungakuza was the only major shingeki theatre company allowed by the wartime government to remain open; however, this probably had more to do with Kishida’s personal influence and the non-political nature of his work than any collaborative effort.

After the war, Kishida turned toward satire as a form for expressing the disorientation and disconnection felt by many Japanese. These included his first postwar play, Hayami onna-juku (Hayami School for Girls, 1948) and Nyonin katsugō (Adoration, 1949). However his post war output was a mere shadow of his prewar fecundity; he wrote only five plays between 1945-1954.

Kishida’s characters are trapped in emotionally desolate worlds where they struggle with a sense of paralysis and dislocation. His works, which often feature absent or failed father figures, portray the emotional realities of the disintegration of the familial unit. He was a key figure in the promotion of language as a critical part of shingeki writing, and his plays are known for their evocative, specific and powerful linguistic qualities. The Kishida Prize in drama, Japan’s foremost drama award, is named for him.

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