Kubo Sakae

Kubo Sakae (1900-58) was a leading *shingeki* playwright before WWII, and a *shingeki* socialist hero afterward. His greatest dramatic work is the epic *Kazanbai-chi* (*Land of Volcanic Ash*, 1937-8) about the exploitation of peasant labour on farms in the most northern Japanese island of Hokkaido where he was born. His heroic status is from his 1940 arrest as a communist, refusal to recant his socialist beliefs, and imprisonment until the war’s end.

Although Kubo returned to writing and socialist activism after the war, political divisions within the socialist movement and in *shingeki*, stymied his further success. In an act of personal despair and political theatre (some say petulance) intended to jolt competing factions within the socialist movement to unite, Kubo committed suicide in 1958.

Kubo joined the Tsukiji Shōgekijō in 1926 after graduating from Tokyo University with a degree in German Literature. He began translating plays from German. In 1928, Kubo joined Hijikata Yoshi’s new troupe, the New Tsukiji Company, and began writing his own works. The company produced Kubo’s first play of note in 1930. *Shinsetsu Kokusenya gassen* (*The New Tale of the Battle of Coxinga*) drew on ancient Chinese and Japanese lore.

Kubo became more deeply involved in proletarian theatre, and in 1930 he helped launch a periodical called “Proletarian Theatre” to advocate for Socialist Realism. To that end he published treatises such as “Socialist Realism and Revolutionary (anti-capitalist) Realism.” In the theatre, Kubo aimed for his plays to be artistic and scientific demonstrations of Marxism. His output in 1932 includes *Chūgoku Konan-shō* (*Hunan Province, China*) and *Seinen kyōiku* (*Youth Education*).

As authoritarian oppression of socialists and communists mounted in the early 1930s, Kubo, Senda Koreya (1904-1994) and others banded together and established the leftwing New Cooperative Troupe (*Shinkyō gekidan*) in 1935. It was here that Kubo wrote and directed *Land of Volcanic Ash*. The play is divided into two parts with a total of nine acts. It revolves around the efforts of a scientist and local farmers to make the potassium-poor soil of the region more productive. Using potash fertilizer runs counter a government policy that is lining the pockets of avaricious capitalists. The scientist gambles his professional (and family) life trying to overturn that policy.

All of the leaders of the New Cooperative Troupe were arrested in 1940 and coerced into recanting their communist beliefs. Kubo was the only holdout. Although he was a hero of the left, some, such as Senda, suspected Kubo had sold them out. Kubo’s used his status to push for a re-commitment to prewar Soviet-style Socialist Realism. He produced *Ringo-en nikki* (*Apple Orchard Diary*, 1952), but had little success. Senda and others felt theatre was in a new era that demanded a different approach to socialism. This reflected the split in the Japanese Communist Party between following Politboro dictates or creating a revolution on a local timetable. Unable to re-establish allies in the theatre world, and distraught over the political divide in Japanese communism, Kubo took his own life.

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