Matsui Sumako (1886-1919)

The first superstar shingeki actress in Japan’s modernist theatre movement.

Born Kobayashi Masako in Nagano Prefecture, she went to Tokyo at 16 and became interested in theatre with the encouragement of her second husband. In 1909, she was admitted into Bungei Kyōkai’s newly launched Theatre Academy. Hard work and determination to become an actress enabled her, with only elementary education, to survive the rigorous two-year co-ed program using as textbooks English language original or translated scripts. At the Theatre Academy’s graduation presentation in May 1911, she debuted as Ophelia in Japan’s first production of *Hamlet* in its entirety in the recently opened Imperial Theatre. The overwhelmingly positive reception of her role eliminated once and for all the need in shingeki for onnagata, the male impersonation of female roles. It is at this time that she adopted her professional name. Her role as Nora in *A Doll’s House* in September the same year at Bungei Kyōkai’s newly completed private theatre was so successful that it was produced again two months later at Imperial Theatre, at the latter’s request. The success came from her superb natural and acquired skills to reveal the interior world of the roles she played, which established her as the leading actress in modern Japanese theatre.

The production of *A Doll’s House* coincided with the rise of feminist movement in Japan. This coincidence made Matsui Sumako an icon seeking women’s liberation, as well as a star in the new theatre. But it also incurred the outrage of conservatives who condemned Nora’s immorality in abandoning her family. In the following year, she played Magda in Hermann Sudemann’s *Heimat*, another feminist piece about the moral conflict between a father and his daughter.

Meanwhile, Matsui Sumako was a new woman in life as well as on stage, as seen in her affair started around this time with Shimamura Hōgetsu, instructor at the Theatre Academy and director of both of the plays above, with a family. The scandal left Sumako expelled from Bungei Kyōkai, and Hōgetsu resigned, both in May 1913.

The abrupt and unpleasant separation from Bungei Kyōkai, however, did not stop their relationship, nor did it dampen the enthusiasm about shingeki of the two who jointly launched Geijutsu-za (Art Theatre) in September 1913. If Sumako’s Bungei Kyōkai days are remembered for her feminist roles, her Geijutsu-za days are remembered for her femme fatale roles, including that of the title roles of Maeterlinck’s *Monna Vanna*, Oscar Wilde’s *Salome*, both in 1913, and Rautendelein, half child and half fairy in Gerhart Hauptmann’s *The Sunken Bell*, in1918. Thanks to the switch to a dualist approach to theatre by Hōgetsu in 1914, the Geijutsu-za period also witnessed the peak of Sumako’s achievement in her role as Katyusha in *Resurrection*, adapted from Tolstoy’s novel. The ensuing nationwide popularity of its theme song and fashion still remains a phenomenon in shingeki history, unparalleled before or since. Her roles of femme fatale, however, continued. She was playing Isabella, of Gabriele D'Annunzio’s *Dream of a Spring Morning*, when Hōgetsu died, and hanged herself exactly two months later on January 5, 1919, after acting in *Nikuten* (The Meat Store) and *Carmen*, two dramas in which she played women who are killed.

GUOHE ZHENG