Mayama Seika (1878-1948)

Novelist, historian and one of the most prominent playwrights in Japan’s modernist theatre movement.

Born Mayama Akira in Sendai, he studied medicine in high school and worked as a lay doctor in 1902. While in middle school, he showed interest in literature. Inspired by Tokutomi Rokka (1868-1927) to become a novelist, he moved to Tokyo in 1903. Mayama’s first story was published when his mentor Satō Kōroku (1874-1949) submitted it to meet his own deadline signed with Seika, a name subsequently adopted by Mayama as his own. Also under Satō, he helped adapt *Konjiki Yasha* (The Golden Demon) by Ozaki Kōyō for stage. In 1907, he published *Minami Koizumi-mura* (The South Koizumi Village) winning recognition as a major Naturalist novelist. His novelist career ended disgracefully in 1910, however, for double-publishing his manuscripts. Ostracized from the bundan, he turned to scholarly research on Edo history, an abiding passion that engaged him for most of his life, which not only produced authoritative studies on Ihara Saikaku but, later, lent his drama depth and historicity.

Invited by actor Kitamura Rokurō, he joined Shōchiku in 1913 as a playwright, gaining life-long patronage from Ōtani Takejirō and Noma Seiji, founders of Shōchiku and the Kōdansha publishing house respectively. In 1915-1917, he wrote pieces of mostly contemporary social drama for shinpa, including *Mihana Adahana* (A Flower is Useless that Blossoms without Bearing Fruits). A turning point came in 1918, when he wrote two historical plays which were produced by kabuki, a much more prestigious genre. Another turning point came in 1924,when the main stream Chūō Kōron published his *Genbaku to Chōei* (Genbaku and Choei), marking his readmission to the bundan and the beginning of his long series of historical plays. In 1925-1928, most of his pieces were produced by Sawada Shōjirō (1892-1929), the founder of shinkokugeki. These include *Tōchūken Kumoemon* and *Sakamoto Ryōma*, on historical figures of the titles. In 1928-1933, while still produced by shinpa, shinkokugeki and, to a lesser extent, shingeki, Mayama’s works were increasingly premiered by kabuki, as is the case with *Nogi Shōgun* (General Nogi, 1929), and *Rai San’yō (*Rai Sanyo, 1931). Starting from 1932, nearly all of his best works were led by Ichikawa Sadanji II, the most popular actor of the day and a reformer of kabuki. Confident with his success, Mayaka experimented with the instinctive world of yakuza, as in *Kunisada Chūji* (1932), female psychology, as in *Yaoya Oshichi* (Oshichi of the Greengrocer’s, 1933), and intellectual engagements, as in the trilogy on the last days of the Tokugawa shogunate including *Shōgun Edo o Saru* (The Shogun Leaves Edo, 1933). Mayama devoted the seven years from 1934 to 1941 to the creation of his monumental *Genroku Chūshingura* (A Treasure House of Loyal Retainers in the Genroku Period), a cycle of ten plays and an ambitious challenge to the classical *Kanadehon Chūshingura*, to be produced by Sadanji II and, after his death in 1940, Zenshin-za.

Between 1924 and his death in 1948, Mayama wrote some sixty plays, one third of which are still regularly performed, an achievement made more remarkable by the fact that he was an invalid confined to bed from 1931. Political elements are sometimes noted in Mayama’s plays as a reflection of his times, such as Marxism in *Sakamoto Ryōma* and nationalism in *Kuga Shōsa* (Major Kuga, 1932).Artistically, however, Mayama practiced consistently his modernist principles of historicity and the primacy of playwrights over actors. His plays are demanding on both actors and the spectators for their literariness and psychological depth making them prime examples of shin kabuki.

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