Shinpa, the shortened version of the Japanese word shinpageki, or new school drama, was an early Japanese attempt at reforming the theatre along modernist lines. The plays featured flamboyant kabuki performance styles and modern realistic dialogue; they were a mélange of plays from domestic dramas to documentary theatre to the early Japanese adaptations of Shakespeare.

Shinpa dramas were general based on stories of contemporary domestic life instead of historical dramas. Its plays often exploited the traditional kabuki devices of social obligations conflicting with love or other emotions (giri vs. ninjō). Initially, plays were composed by company actors and modified throughout performance runs. Many shinpa playwrights were essentially adapters who took serialized fiction novels and rewrote them for the stage. Shinpa also staged adaptations of Western drama including works of Shakespeare, Maeterlinck, and Sardou. These plays were often heavily adapted attempts at interweaving classical Japanese performance forms with Western texts. Other authors focused on the creation of gendaigeki (contemporary plays), plays about domestic problems amongst Japan’s growing middle class.

Shinpa was so named to distinguish it from kyūha (“old school”) theatre, especially kabuki. Most early productions were amateurish in quality, produced by shōshi, political protestors organized by Sudō Sadanori (1867-1907), who formed the Dainippon Geigeki Kyōfūkai (Great Japan Society for the Reformation of Theatre) with the goal of using theatre, especially plays known as sōshi shibai (political plays), against the conservative political establishment. Sudō’s company was generally looked on as a curiosity and, although they toured Japan they were never much of an audience draw.

Shinpa originally used kabuki onnagata performers (male actors who specialized in women’s roles) but women were allowed onstage after 1890. Despite this, however, some shinpa performances continued to use onnagata performers.

The first great shinpa impresario was Kawakami Otojirō, who began to garner critical attention with his staging of docudramas about the Sino-Japanese war. He opened his own theatre, the Kawakamiza (Kawakami Theatre) in 1896 as a location for staging shinpa works but had to sell it shortly thereafter to settle debts. Kawakami toured the United States with his wife, Kawakami Sadayakko, the first modern Japanese actress. Upon their return to Japan, they became heavily involved in the adaptation and production of Western texts, which they called seigeki (true theatre). Kawakami and Sadayakko also opened the Imperial Actress School in 1908,as the first training academy for female performers.

Shinpa continued to grow in popularity from 1900 through the 1930s with plays by noted authors such as Izumi Kyōka and Mayama Seika and actors such as Ii Yōhō ad Kawai Takeo. In 1907 230 shinpa actors formed the Shinhayū daidō danketsu (The Grand Coalition of New Actors), thus demonstrating the establishment of shinpa as a form distinct from kabuki. Authors such as Izumi began to write plays especially for the shinpa theatre. Shinpa also became a film genre at this time; in addition, the form of rensageki (linked drama) was a shinpa merging of cinema and theatre. The production would be part theatrical live production, part film.

The beginnings of shingeki and its own rise in popularity affected shinpa. Yet even into the 1930s there were still multiples shinpa companies in Tokyo, and playwrights such as Seto Eiichi and Kawaguchi Matsutarō were writing for the shinpa theatre. Nonetheless, the genre was becoming more and more centered on acting and star–driven projects; Seto’s geisha plays, for example, owe much to the legendary performances of onnagata Hanayagi Shōtarō. This was also the time of actress Mizutani Yaeko, whose performances in sentimental shinpa melodramas made her popular throughout Japan.

Shinpa companies performed during the Second World War, especially patriotic plays. The genre existed after the Second World War, but in a much reduced state, again dependent upon star vehicles for financial success. Especially as the 1950s progressed, shinpa came to be seen as sentimental and old fashioned. Still shinpa is an important link in Japanese modernism; as an early experiment in modern theatre it straddled shingeki style realism and kabuki stylization in performance. Shinpa was also a major influence in the development of modern theatre in other Asian nations; it influences the Korean shinp’agŭk and China’s early forms of huaju.

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