As with so many other aspects of life in Meiji Japan, theatre also went through the convulsions of modernization, and theatre “reform” (as it was called) was part and parcel of a public effort to create a modern, “civilized” nation. These were, in the first place, top-down efforts by the government to clean up kabuki’s unsavory reputation as a vulgar entertainment for the masses and make it presentable to both foreigners and the gentry, the former samurai class. From the very first decade of the Meiji era, the theatre was identified as an important site for promoting the government’s official program of “civilization and enlightenment” (bunmei kaika), but kabuki was also by its disposition a deeply conservative institution and suspicious of government meddling. This is not altogether surprising: both as an art and as a business, kabuki had evolved in reaction to official restrictions, and by the 1870s it was one of the few vestiges of Edo culture that did not seem threatened with extinction.

Kabuki’s relationship with authority had always been complex. The Edo shogunate (bakufu) considered it a necessary evil to be tolerated but strictly regulated, just like prostitution, and throughout the Edo era the bakufu frequently stepped in to ban plays of a politically sensitive nature, punish actors for pretensions beyond their station, and (on one occasion) even close down a theatre completely (the Yamamura-za in 1714). In turn, the theatre was careful to pay lip service to government moral and sumptuary edicts, all the while attempting, within these narrow confines, to provide the public with a world of thrilling action, glamorous actors, and the larger-than-life characters they
played. Along with the licensed quarters with which the theatre remained associated both geographically and socially, kabuki’s reputation as a place of not only sexual fantasy but also sexual practice ensured, on the one hand, its central role in the popular culture of the Edo era and, on the other, its notoriety as a place beyond the pale of polite culture.

Neither kabuki’s popularity nor its dubious reputation changed substantially during the first years of the Meiji era. If anything, the new Meiji government viewed it as an even greater embarrassment and impediment to calls for “civilization and enlightenment.” Official legations to the West, as well as accounts by those who traveled and studied there in the 1860s and ’70s, portrayed the theatre as an entertainment for high society, a place for the cultivation of finer sensibilities and moral principles. The nō theatre had served a similar but limited purpose for the ruling class of the Edo era, but it endured great hardship for several years after the dissolution of the old regime before, in the late 1870s, regaining a modicum of official patronage.1

At the same time, the new Meiji government began to take a proactive role in kabuki reform as well. As early as April 1872, the Tokyo municipal government issued a directive to the three major theatres, the Ichimura-za, Nakamura-za, and Morita-za: “With respect to the fact that in recent times both nobility and foreigners are increasingly going to the theatre, portrayal is hereby forbidden of any lewd acts that adults would be ashamed to see in the company of their children. Furthermore, plots for the edification of audiences should be introduced.”2 This was followed up in June by a similar directive from the newly established Ministry of Instruction (Kyōbushō). As Fujiki Hiroyuki notes, this “top-down reform” focused on four specific areas to do with the dramatic text:

(1) Theatre should be a didactic tool for edifying the masses;
(2) Plays should therefore have a moral message, promoting virtue and castigating vice;
(3) The subject matter should be refined, and vulgar and lewd elements expunged;
(4) Plays should faithfully portray historical facts as they occurred.3

Further measures were implemented a decade later, in 1882, with “regulations for playhouses” issued by the Tokyo police department mandating a license system for theatres; limiting their number, seating capacity, and hours of performance; and establishing a reporting and censorship system for the
performance of plays, as well as reserved seating for police watchdogs. Government censorship of the theatre would become in many respects tighter than it had been even under the Tokugawa shogunate.

Artful accommodation to authority had always been kabuki’s modus vivendi. When Morita Kan’ya XII (1846–1897) opened his Shintomi-za in 1878, the theatre’s lead actor, Ichikawa Danjūrō IX (1838–1903), read a speech decrying the salacious ways of traditional kabuki and vowing to “clean away the filth.” The speech had been written for him by the journalist and publisher Fukuchi Ōchi (1841–1906), a man closely connected to the government and one of the spearheads of kabuki reform. Danjūrō’s speech is illustrative of the extent to which the theatre at least paid lip service to government directives.

During the first two decades of the Meiji era, kabuki’s response to official pressure to clean up its act was most evident in its pursuit of greater topicality and historical verisimilitude, particularly in playwright Kawatake Mokuami’s (1816–1893) “crop-haired plays” (zangirimon) and “living history” (katsureki) plays for the actors Onoe Kikugorō V (1844–1903) and Danjūrō. But the essential features of kabuki acting and dramaturgy had not changed, and the introduction of new subject matter or historically accurate details in costume and nomenclature were fairly superficial and ultimately satisfied neither the government nor the public. Calls for more substantial reform came, leading to the establishment of the Society for Theatre Reform (Engeki Kairyōkai) in 1886. Organized by a number of Japan’s leading political figures, including Prime Minister Itō Hirobumi, Foreign Minister Inoue Kaoru, and Minister of Education Mori Arinori, the Society’s de facto chairman was Itō’s son-in-law, Suematsu Kenchō (1855–1920), a man who had spent nine years abroad, two of them at Cambridge University. Financier Shibusawa Eiichi, politician and educator Toyama Masakazu (1848–1900), scholar Yoda Gakkai (1833–1909), and Fukuchi Ōchi were also prominent members. In its constitution, the Society identified three major goals for reform: do away with kabuki’s tradition of vice and produce a theatre that encouraged virtue; promote the importance of new drama; and construct modern theatre buildings.

This was an era in which reform (kairyō) was the buzzword for many enterprises (including language, dress, education, religion, fiction, and prostitution, among others); what lay behind many of these were efforts by the government to persuade the world that Japan had become a modern, civilized nation and was thereby able (it was hoped) to do away with the unequal trade treaties foisted on the country by foreign powers after its “opening” to the West in the 1850s. The overall aim of the Society was to transform kabuki
from a popular into a highbrow art form, analogous to the theatre and grand opera Suematsu and many of his colleagues in the Society had seen performed in the West. Opinion on how this was to be accomplished widely varied from member to member, however, from those who advocated the eradication of practically all elements that define *kabuki*—the *hanamichi* runway, the *onna-gata* (male actors of female roles), the *geza* incidental music, the *chobo* (narrator and *shamisen* accompaniment, a device inherited from the puppet theatre), *kuroko* stage hands, and so on—to those who believed traditional *kabuki* could be rehabilitated with some scrupulous trimming. Suematsu Kenchō, for one, reflected the latter view. In a speech entitled “Opinions on Theatre Reform,” he noted that reform should not entail simply donning Western dress and imitating what was done on the European stage, but rather keeping what worked while changing what was no longer appropriate. Much of his criticism was targeted at the traditional repertory of plays and the role of the playwright. In the past, the playwright had been no more than “a slave to the actors.” While acknowledging that the likes of a Shakespeare (to say nothing of a Chikamatsu Monzaemon or Takeda Izumo) did not appear every day, Suematsu stressed that substantial reform to *kabuki* would come only when the theatre attracted first-rate writers, and he proposed a prize for the best plays, which would then be published and produced with government support. The publication of drama and not just its staging, he added, would serve to promote reasoned criticism and raise the literary standards of plays.

Much of the problem with *kabuki* drama, Suematsu asserted, lay in its impurity as a literary genre. The West had comedy and tragedy, with tragedy held up as the nobler form, but these distinctions were blurred in *kabuki*, such that most plays were “neither truly sad nor truly amusing.” Moreover, *kabuki* showed no regard for the Three Unities of time, place, and action extolled (but seldom practiced) in classical European theatre. *Kabuki* plays were too long and convoluted, and their casts were too large. With regard to acting, Suematsu insisted that “without female actors real theatre cannot be created,” but he expressed doubts as to how female actors could be included under present conditions. He proposed the establishment of a joint-stock company to raise funds for a new theatre and the training of new actors and dramatists.

Suematsu decried the old moralism of promoting virtue and castigating vice (kanzen chōaku) that was pushed on *kabuki* during both the Edo era and the early years of Meiji, but he did view the theatre as a place where the sensibilities of all classes (and not just the gentry) could be refined. Theatre was therefore useful inasmuch as it could play a role in nation building.
for many of the Society’s critics, this view smacked of more government interference. While in agreement with many of Suematsu’s main points, Tsubouchi Shōyō (1859–1935) took issue with his covert didacticism, arguing, as he had done in his 1885 *Essence of the Novel* (*Shōsetsu shinzui*), for the independence of aesthetic criteria over moral principles. “Immoral” characters like Iago and Shylock were frequently subjects for great art, he stressed.\(^\text{10}\) Shōyō followed this argument up with a more concerted critique of the Society’s proposals in an essay entitled “Expressing my modest opinions upon hearing of the establishment of the Society for Theatre Reform”: “The reform of playscripts is the essential basis of any theatre reform, and unless this is carried out, all other reform measures will be of no avail. . . . Since, fundamentally, the main purpose of the theatre, as of the novel, is to portray the truth (the truth of human emotions, the truth of social conditions), to be so concerned with extraneous matters as to kill this truth is a dangerous priority.”\(^\text{11}\)

Shōyō felt that both the Society for Theatre Reform and Danjūrō’s “living history” plays were predicated on a superficial reform of *kabuki*, focusing on matters to do with costume, makeup, scenery, and stage properties. The essence of historical drama, Shōyō asserted, lay not in faithfulness to historical facts, but in the portrayal of truths that only drama could express. *Kabuki* characters were stereotypes, and dramatists were needed who could create flesh and blood human beings. Similar criticism came from Takada Sanae, an educator who, like Shōyō, played a key role in the establishment of Waseda University. Like many others, Takada stressed the importance of cultivating new drama written by playwrights who were independent from the old system of the *zatsuki sakusha*, or stable of writers employed by theatres to write works at the request of actors and managers.

Given that the Society for Theatre Reform represented overwhelmingly government interests and had very little input from either theatre or intellectual circles, it was met with resounding criticism and accordingly had little power to effect any change. Both Morita Kan’ya and Ichikawa Danjūrō rejected its proposals for reform, and the Society came under attack from prominent intellectuals. The reform movement reorganized itself twice, first into the even more conservative Society for the Betterment of Entertainment (Engei Kyōfūkai) in 1888, then the following year into the more inclusive Japan Entertainment Society (Nihon Engei Kyōkai), which enlisted as members a number of intellectuals like Takada Sanae, Shōyō, Mori Ōgai (1862–1922), art historian Okakura Kakuzō, and journalist and translator Morita Shiken, as well as *kabuki* actors like Danjūrō. Hijikata Hisamoto (1833–1918), minister
of the Imperial Household Agency and grandfather of Hijikata Yoshi (1898–1959), one of the founders of the Tsukiji Little Theatre, was its chair. The chief results of these official efforts to reform theatre were, first, a command performance of kabuki before Emperor Meiji in 1887 and, second, the opening in Tsukiji of the Kabuki-za, Tokyo’s largest theatre for that time, in 1889.

From *Kyakuhon* to *Gikyoku*: The Birth of Drama as a Literary Genre

The Meiji era was an age when the very terminology for theatre and literature was being invented, most often as translations of Western ideas that bore little relationship to the traditional forms that had hitherto been defined by such words as engeki (theatre) or bungaku (literature), themselves Japanese transliterations of Chinese terms. Indeed, although Japan could boast a plethora of theatrical forms, no umbrella term existed to encompass them all. The lack of agreed basic terms for such concepts as theatre and drama muddled the debate, as did efforts for reform in the Meiji era, Mōri Mitsuya notes. The graphs for engeki (演劇), for example, were frequently glossed as shibai (play); the term was generally regarded as synonymous with kabuki.  

From 1877 to 1890 “drama” (gikyoku) was not even listed as a literary genre in the *Statistical Yearbook of Japan* (Nihon tōkei nenkan).  

As we have seen, much of the debate surrounding theatre reform in the 1880s revolved around efforts to recognize the artistic value of the dramatic text and to reform kabuki playscripts (kyakuhon) in accordance with newly imported Western ideals of dramatic form. In addition to the high social status accorded to theatre in nineteenth-century Europe and America, the importance accorded there to drama as a literary genre exercised some of the best minds of the Meiji era. As has been noted, the significance of drama as a literary genre in the West is exceptional and is surely based on the contingent fact of the central role it plays in classical Greek culture and Aristotle’s *Poetics*.  

Nishi Amane (1826–1894), Mori Ōgai’s mentor, was instrumental in introducing Aristotle and Western drama theory to the Japanese. His *Hyakugaku renkan* (1870–1872) identified a variety of poetic forms, including epic, lyric, ballad, and drama. Drama was further distinguished into comedic and tragic forms; these forms were more refined than those seen in Japanese theatre, which was “a medium for the lewd and base,” Nishi asserted.  

Numerous other Meiji intellectuals, from liberal politician Nakae Chōmin and critic Ishibashi Ningetsu (1865–1926) to novelist Futabatei Shimei (1864–1909) and
Dostoyevsky translator Uchida Roan (1868–1929), served as conduits of Aristotelian drama theory, via nineteenth-century aestheticians like Hegel, Lessing, and Belinsky. Many recognized that while Japan had a rich and venerable theatrical culture and even a number of illustrious playwrights, nonetheless the dramatic text had counted for little or nothing of literary value.

Meiji was thus a period that saw the emergence of drama as a literary genre in contrast to the kabuki playscript, which had served to feature the actors’ skills. In Acting like a Woman in Meiji Japan, Ayako Kano describes how theatre in Meiji Japan came under the influence of a new, Western-inspired logocentrism that privileged the written—and particularly the printed—text over any other form of artistic expression. Such privileging would have a crucial impact on efforts to “reform” theatre and, in the first instance, reflected in an emerging consensus that the dramatic text would have to play a key role in this reform. Suematsu Kenchō bemoaned the fact that kabuki playwrights were slaves to the actors, but the “New Theatre” (shingeki) would create a new hierarchy of creativity, transforming actors into “interpretive slaves” of a godlike author, whose written words must be faithfully given voice on stage without change, unlike the typical practice of kabuki actors, who would ad lib when they forgot their lines or felt the language simply didn't suit them. In large part, this move reflected a power struggle between the traditional kabuki, where actors were king, and the rising Meiji intelligentsia, who felt increasingly that external control of the theatre was needed to elevate it into a more respectable art form. Kawatake Mokuami, kabuki’s preeminent playwright of the nineteenth century, would signal a major change when he published a play, Shimoyo no kane jūji no tsujitsura (Crossroads at ten bells on a frosty night), in the pages of Kabuki shinpō (Kabuki news) prior to staging it at the Shintomi-za in 1880. It was thought, however, that professional writers independent of the traditional theatre world were needed to assert drama’s new status as a literary genre. Both Yoda Gakkai and Fukuchi Ōchi, fellow members of the Society for Theatre Reform, would be among the first playwrights for kabuki who were not “stable” writers. (There were some exceptional cases during the Edo era of independent writers, like Kaibara Ekiken [1630–1714], who wrote kabuki plays.)

In theatre particularly, but also in many of the other popular storytelling arts of Edo and Meiji Japan—kōdan and naniwabushi (military tales) and rakugo (comic monologue), to name a few—the distinction between author and performer was often fuzzy. The story was not primarily a text to be read but a script for performance, to be heard with the ear and seen physically acted
out. The Meiji era was a crossroads of experimentation, where the public, theatrical, and performative culture of Edo was eventually exchanged for a literary culture of private reading and appreciation of written texts. In his introduction to a seminal essay by Maeda Ai on the transformation of reading practices in the Meiji era, James Fujii notes that the second decade of Meiji (roughly the 1880s) opened “the nation to modernity as a moment of failed community where solitary reading and privatization echo the silencing of not just reading, but of the sociality that found brief expression in the Freedom and Popular Rights Movement” of Nakae Chōmin. Maeda describes how the spread of publications in movable type and the rise in literacy levels revolutionized the practice of writing and its reception in the Meiji era. “Interest in the literary arts had been nurtured by oral literary traditions,” including kabuki, he writes, describing how such oral forms of recitation as rōshō (sonorous reading) and sodoku (reading literary Chinese not so much for the meaning as for the sound) emphasized the performative, rhythmic, and material qualities of language over its semantic or mimetic value. Writing in 1932, the ethnologist Yanagita Kunio could still claim that Japanese literature “has not yet crossed the bridge from an oral to a literary art.” Though this process was protracted in Japan as it underwent modernization, evidence of substantial change could already be seen in the 1880s and early ’90s. Shōyō remarked in 1891 that “the ancients ‘read’ the works of others with their ears, while people today enjoy the benefit of reading with their eyes,” adding that the new practice of private reading “must follow the principle of excavating the deep significance of the text.” Literary and artistic practices increasingly emphasized language’s function as a medium for representation, where the aim of artistic expression was not so much to portray appealing patterns or colorful surfaces but rather to lay bare the interiors of the human soul. Accordingly, literary efforts moved away from highly figurative lyric or prose, classical diction, and musical or rhythmic effects toward prosaic locutions and plain speech—in short, toward the creation of a modern vernacular literature: genbun itchi, literally the “unification of the vernacular and literary.” Thus there was a shift away from the voice of the actor, reciter, or storyteller to the authorial “voice” of the text itself. Increasingly, then, the purpose of a literary work, whether fiction, poetry, or drama, would be to articulate what Shōyō called the author’s “true intent” (hon’i), or subjectivity.

Professional storytellers like San’yūtei Enchō (1839–1900) nonetheless played a significant role in the construction of a modern literary idiom. Many critics have noted that his performances (and the dictated texts that were
popular spinoffs of Enchō’s work) impressed writers like Futabatei Shimei, who, with his A Drifting Cloud (Ukigumo, 1887), would forge a new vernacular idiom for fiction in Japan. Shimei’s translations of Turgenev also provided a stylebook for modern fiction, but (Maeda tellingly notes) he was equally impressed by dramatic recitations of Russian literature given by Nicholas Gray, his teacher at the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies. (This was an age when Charles Dickens’s highly theatrical recitations of his own novels were powerful generators of book sales.)23 If it seems paradoxical that the old oral arts (wagei) pointed to a modern idiom of expression, it must be remembered that kabuki and storytelling provided the first inkling of modern vernacular expression in Japanese culture. Even Edo pulp fiction was heavily dialogue-driven.

One other feature of Meiji culture was its quest for artistic and generic purity, and many critics would take traditional Japanese plays to task for their “impure,” hybrid form. As noted, drawing on Aristotle and other Western theorists, Nishi Amane and other critics in his wake divided literature into three major genres: epic or narrative, lyric, and drama. Discussing the characteristics of these genres, Hisamatsu Sadahiro, in his Doitsu gikyoku tai’i (An outline of German drama, 1887), wrote that “drama harmoniously combines the two forms of epos and lyric into one genre,” and “it would not be wrong to say that it is the most refined and elegant of all the arts,” encompassing the purest elements of such various forms as choral and instrumental music, architecture, painting, dance, and so on—essentially a reiteration of Richard Wagner’s idea of a “total art.” Indeed, Hisamatsu concludes, “Drama is the most artistic of all the arts.”24

Like Hisamatsu, Mori Ōgai too asserted that the dramatic text was the most important element in a theatrical work. Decrying “our long established habit of disregarding the element of poetry in a play,” he argued for “first the drama, then the performance. The drama is primary, the performance secondary.”25 In Japan, however, Ōgai continued, “the ideal of performance has degenerated into a set of rules for promoting familiar ways of thinking and doing—rules that do not clarify the Society’s ultimate goals.”26 In his criticism of the Society for Theatre Reform’s program, Ōgai would argue for a narrower definition of drama than Hisamatsu’s notion of a total art, however, making a clear distinction between what he called “straight drama” (seigeki) and “opera” (gakugeki), with the latter “falling somewhere between a jidaimono in kabuki and a jōruri puppet play.” He complained of “distracting ‘operatic elements’ in our national practice.” In opera, the stage business (Händlung) is slower and more elaborate, but “a play should be given life through its text: it should
present poetic nuances in dialogue form, with the actor bringing the script to life. . . . If the audience needs a good deal of stage business to hold its attention, this can only mean that the play is not a good one or it is not being well performed.”27 He argued for a “simpler and more truly artistic theatre” that did not try to “distract the audience with specious shows of ‘real’ stage effects.”28 In other essays, he called for “backstage poets” and “a theatre that makes dialogue the master.”29

Ishibashi Ningetsu’s *Gikyokuron* (Drama theory, 1893) would echo and expand upon many of Ōgai’s opinions. Opening his essay with the statement that “I hold that drama is the most important genre in poetics,” Ningetsu calls for Meiji “to become an age in which drama flourishes.”30 He laments that the Edo era slighted drama and that contemporary criticism has privileged fiction. Outlining the characteristics of epic, lyric, and dramatic literature, Ningetsu stresses that drama “must not be confused with epic.”31 He defines drama as “something that manifests the actions (including suffering) of men from the past and renders them artistically, relying on the language of the dramatic personae.”32 He approvingly cites Chikamatsu’s definition of language in *jōruri* [puppet theatre] as “a living thing essential to the action . . . portraying reality as it is, while also showing by means of art what is not real.”33

Ningetsu would not be the first or the last critic to hold up Chikamatsu as a standard-bearer for dramatic literature. Noted as being the first dramatist credited as “author” (sakusha) of his own plays, it is said that Chikamatsu switched from writing *kabuki* to *jōruri* because the puppets couldn’t change his lines the way *kabuki* actors did.34 William Lee has pointed out that the rise of Chikamatsu scholarship in the 1880s was linked to the “discovery” of drama as a literary genre.35

The most important critic to write on Chikamatsu was Tsubouchi Shōyō, whose formidable energies turned away from fiction to drama after the mid-1880s. The comparison between the two great dramatists of Japan and England, Chikamatsu and Shakespeare, nonetheless highlighted for Shōyō what the new drama in his country desperately required. In what is a seminal text of Meiji drama criticism, “Our Nation’s Historical Drama” (Wagakuni no shigeki, 1893–1894), Shōyō would write that traditional Japanese drama (particularly Chikamatsu’s and Mokuami’s history plays) could be characterized as “dream–fantasy plays” (mugen-geki):

In what respect do they resemble dreams and fantasies? It is in their ridiculous scripts, the farfetched events they portray, their unnatural characters,
their desultory relationships, their absurd plots, their plethora of metamorphoses and inconsistencies, their lack of unity of interest, their shocking incidents, their exaggerated acts—in all these respects they are fantasies that exist only in dreams. [Italicized words here and below are given in Chinese characters but provided with English glosses.]

Japanese drama, in short, exhibits a dreamlike view of life, where fantasy is not distinguished from reality and it is impossible to reason why events happen or characters act the way they do. Life may seem like a dream, Shōyō continued, but we need to make sense of it, and so too with drama. Only fools and madmen would take pleasure in the purely irrational. Shakespeare’s plays, he goes on, are “tragedies of character,” whereas Japanese history plays are typically “dramas of intrigue” or of fate. In such plays, “Events have no causal relationship and characters have no individuality. In Shakespeare’s masterpieces, at the same time that there is interest (umami) in each and every act, there is an overlying idea (honshi) running through the entire work which gives rise to a kind of microcosm, but the ingenuity of our drama, while rich in interest particular to each act, completely lacks any overlying idea.” In such plays, “Events have no causal relationship and characters have no individuality. In Shakespeare’s masterpieces, at the same time that there is interest (umami) in each and every act, there is an overlying idea (honshi) running through the entire work which gives rise to a kind of microcosm, but the ingenuity of our drama, while rich in interest particular to each act, completely lacks any overlying idea.”

The beauty of such dramaturgy is manifest in the part but not the whole. Shōyō stressed what had been noted earlier by Suematsu, that puppet plays and kabuki made a travesty of the Three Unities of time, place, and action. The pleasure afforded by traditional Japanese theatre, Shōyō acknowledged, lay in its “remarkable variety, not only of appearance, but also of tone,” its ability within the course of an entire play or program to run the gamut of human emotions, with “sudden swings from the severe to the salacious, from the refined and elegant to the ludicrous, now virtuous, now violent, now awesome, now weird, never just one thing or another.”

This paratactic instinct, a taste for variety over cohesion, was underscored in late Edo culture by two dramaturgical trends in kabuki. One was naimaze, the technique of “twisting together” separate narrative strands, often discrete plot lines with quite independent casts of characters that would be familiar to audiences from other plays. The other trend militating against structural, stylistic, or thematic unity was called midori: breaking up multi-act history plays, dramas that we have seen were already loosely structured, then shuffling them together in a kind of “best of” program with isolated acts from sewamono (domestic plays) and dance plays. For Edo more than for Kimagata (Osaka and Kyoto) audiences, performance of favorite actors trumped plot. The midori program is still typically the way a kabuki production is put
together. Presenting multi-act dramas in their entirety (tōshi-kyōgen) is still rather exceptional, often reserved for such plays as Chūshingura, and it is a relatively recent phenomenon of somewhat antiquarian instincts.40

Earlier efforts to reform drama, such as those of the Society for Theatre Reform, were inconsistent and contradictory, Shōyō asserted. He proposed three major items for a more substantial reform of Japanese drama:

(1) A clear distinction between dramatic and narrative modes. (This is essentially the same advice that other critics like Hisamatsu, Ōgai, and Ningetsu had given, as well as Shōyō in his own “Bijiron-kō” [Essays in rhetoric, 1892].)

(2) Greater structural consistency: a “unity of interest” that is equivalent to the theme or action of the drama;

(3) Character as the mainspring and rationale for all actions and events of the drama.41

Danjūrō’s “living history” plays or the roughhouse political sōshi (hooligan) and shosei (student) plays of people like Sudo Sadanori (1867–1907) and Kawakami Otojirō (1864–1911), Shōyō claimed, managed to be innovative in only superficial effects, such as costuming and makeup, setting, subject matter, or declamation, but the dramaturgy had not substantially changed, and that was precisely where reform was required.

What we see, in short, in Shōyō’s critique is an attempt to create a discrete literary genre for drama predicated on a more individuated portrayal of human character, where the self is constructed out of conflict with other emerging selves.42 Moreover, he advocates a strong, cohesive, and rational structure in which a logical cause-and-effect sequence of events is constructed out of the actions of individual characters. Such a structure creates an aesthetic of unity and purity, in contrast to the hybrid, episodic, and discursive beauty of kabuki and puppet plays. At the same time, in contrast to kabuki’s aesthetics of surfaces, Shōyō points toward a dramaturgy of interiors that attempts to anatomize the human soul.

In contrast to Shōyō, who believed that a modern theatre could be created by reforming kabuki, the romantic poet and critic Kitamura Tōkoku (1868–1894) doubted whether kabuki could ever incorporate the new dramaturgy of Western theatre. Inspired by Shōyō’s essay on historical drama, which was then still being serialized in the pages of Waseda Literature (Waseda bungaku), Tōkoku published an essay entitled “What Lies Ahead for Drama?”
Meiji Drama Theory before Ibsen

(Gekishi no zento ikaga) in the December 1893 issue of his journal Bungaku-kai (Literary world). Asserting that “a revolution in the theatre must come through a revolution in the drama,” Tōkoku believed kabuki’s conventions were a great stumbling block to reform. Where Shōyō saw a lack of overall coherence to the structure of a kabuki play, however, Tōkoku praised what he called its “symmetrical harmony” (seigöteki chōwa; here too English glosses are given for the Chinese characters), a harmony achieved by a highly refined synthesis of movement (dance), music (narimono), gesture, dialogue, narrative accompaniment, and so on.43 Japanese dramaturgy was, nonetheless, a slave to such harmony of rhythmic and choreographic form. Tōkoku praised kabuki dance but noted that it was designed to highlight the art of the actor, and in performance one forgot all about the character the actor was playing and even the plot, becoming enthralled in, as it were, a “moving painting.” Subordinating the actions of the dramatis personae to choreographed movement and instrumental accompaniment destroyed any attempt at realistic identification of the actor in the role; hence action was predicated on aesthetic principles quite alien to how drama was understood in the West. (Drama, after all, means “action” in Greek, but in Aristotle the term refers chiefly to the plot). Kabuki dance, which exemplified the aesthetic of this theatre, in short, was scenic, but it was not dramatic.44 The spirit of Japanese theatre, Tōkoku stressed, was to highlight theatrical events, not the actions of the stage characters. The knot tying movement to music must be disentangled before real reform could be seen. If the new drama was to become a “mimetic art” (mokeiteki bijutsu), then it would require the concerted work of two kinds of playwrights: those independent of kabuki and its conventions and those who could interpret the new aesthetic to dramaturges skilled in the old forms.45

Tōkoku put his finger on the problem of how, in practical terms, kabuki could ever be transformed into a modern dramatic art, but his proposed solution was weak and undeveloped. Matsumoto Shinko notes that Tōkoku’s theatre criticism reflects his keenly felt sense of the disjunction between tradition and modernity, the nigh impossibility of marrying the new to the old.46

Putting Theory into Practice: Genbun Itchi and the Problem of Dramatic Dialogue

Tōkoku’s interest in dramatic form dates back to some of his earliest writings. After Tōkoku’s death (by his own hand, at the age of twenty-seven in 1894), the poet and later novelist Shimazaki Tōson (1872–1943) would write volubly
of his friend’s love of drama. Like many of his generation, the theatre reform movement of the 1880s had awakened Tōkoku to drama’s importance as a literary genre. His most important play, *Hōraikyoku* (Song of Penglai, 1891)—clearly written under the influence of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Goethe’s *Faust*, and above all Byron’s *Manfred*—portrays a poet grown sick of the world who climbs Penglai, the mountain of Daoist legend, to commune with the immortal spirits there. Lured by a mountain nymph who resembles his dead wife, he disappears into a cave, never to return to the world below. Written in classical Japanese in the five-seven syllable prosody of traditional verse, *Hōraikyoku* baffled Tōkoku’s contemporaries, who could not decide what sort of creature it was: poetry or play? Tōkoku himself expressed in the preface to the play his doubts as to whether the contemporary theatre could stage it.

Akiba Tarō writes the following:

> Though structurally it is a drama, [Tōkoku’s play] is too poetic and too subjective, such that his wild, vehement, complex, and delicate ideas and sensibilities could not find adequate expression in our theatre as it was, so he had to resort to borrowing from the models he had of Western dramatic verse. Skepticism, suffering, pessimism, idealism, romanticism, rebellion, destruction: there was simply no way all these sentiments, which Tōkoku attempted to portray in his dramatic world, could be given expression within the conventions of traditional Japanese drama.

*Hōraikyoku* nonetheless paved the way for drama as a literary form to express the thoughts and emotions of its author, and though no theatre yet existed that could stage such work, it inspired similar attempts by other writers associated with the literary world (*bundan*) and not theatre circles. The 1890s marked the emergence of drama as a literary genre, with works published in the burgeoning literary magazines of the day, journals like *Literary World* (*Bungakukai*), *Waseda Literature*, and *The Weir* (*Shigarami zōshi*). (One of the first drama collections for reading, however, was of *kabuki* plays, mostly by Mokuami: *Kyōgen hyakushu* [A hundred plays], published by Shun’yōdō in eight volumes in 1892–1893.) Tōkoku’s friend Tōson wrote a play called *Hikyoku biwa hōshi* (The biwa priest: A tragic lyric, 1893), and Kōda Rohan (1867–1947) penned *Yūfuku shijin* (The happy poet, 1894), but both works were clearly exercises in literary form and neither writer had much interest or hope in seeing them staged.

Following “Our Nation’s Historical Drama,” Shōyō also wrote several
history plays, the first of which was *Kiri hitoha* (A paulownia leaf, 1894–1895), about the fall of the Toyotomi family in the late sixteenth century, as well as a sequel to this play, *Hototogisu kojō rakugetsu* (A sinking moon over the lonely castle where the cuckoo cries, 1897). Clearly his model was Shakespeare, whose history plays and tragedies presented a dramaturgy and language that could, he felt, make *kabuki* drama a literature and not simply a pretext for stage art.50

In the introduction to his translation of *A Sinking Moon*, J. Thomas Rimer notes that “writing after his enthusiastic immersion in Shakespeare’s historical dramas, Shōyō created a spoken language for the play that is elevated, resonant and complex. It closely resembles neither traditional *kabuki* dialogue nor modern speech but represents, rather, an experiment at creating a kind of ‘Shakespearian’ analogue in the Japanese language.”51 Though not immediately staged (*A Paulownia Leaf* was first produced in 1904 and *A Sinking Moon* in 1905), both works achieved some theatrical success and are still occasionally performed.

Both Tōkoku and Shōyō would make considerable advances in dramatic structure and characterization, as well as in the introduction of themes that were alien to the traditional theatre, but dramatic language remained resistant to change. The language of drama is by nature that of dialogue, but as we have seen, traditional Japanese drama contained within it considerable elements of both the epic and the lyric. Over the course of centuries, Japan’s traditional performing arts had developed rhetorical styles that were radically different from the dialogue of modern Western drama. In the first place, classical Japanese diction does not make a clear distinction between indirect and direct speech. Ayako Kano notes that in traditional Japanese theatre—*nō* and puppet theatre and to some extent *kabuki* as well—“there is no clear distinction between dialogue and narration,” between direct, first-person speech and indirect, third-person narration. This is most obvious in the *nō*, where the chorus may speak on behalf of the *shite* (protagonist), or alternatively the protagonist may refer to the character he or she plays in the third person. Though jarring in English, this shift of grammatical person, between direct and indirect speech, is seamless in Japanese. Indirect rather than direct speech governs all the traditional performing arts. Kano adds that in the puppet theatre all speech, whether construed as “dialogue” or “narration,” issues from the mouth of the chanter. Even *kabuki* dialogue—or, for that matter, any speech in the theatre—is indirect and mediated simply by virtue of the fact that theatrical language is not spontaneous: the actor is a mouthpiece reiterating words provided by someone else.52
Kabuki sutezerifu (ad libbed dialogue), if anything, only highlights the artificiality of stage speech by calling attention to the actor’s versatility, his ability as an actor rather than a character in a play, to intensify the pleasure of performance. Kano goes on to characterize kabuki’s nonverbal elements, notably song and dance, as forms of “indirect speech.”

Thus, neither kabuki nor puppet theatre was, strictly speaking, dialogue drama. Traditional drama, including kyōgen, is predominantly in verse or patterned dialogue (versified or rhythmically delivered), often combined with long passages of monologue and narrative. The language of the Japanese theatre until quite recent times was typically regarded as something larger than life, to be delivered in a higher register than ordinary spoken language. Stage dialogue and social discourse—conversation—were fundamentally different creatures. Certain practical considerations, such as the need for an actor to project his voice so as to be heard by all members of the audience in a theatre, helped create a uniquely theatrical style of declamation. In time, this style acquired its own aesthetic in kabuki, giving rise to patterned speech such as watarizerifu, a rhythmic device whereby dialogue is shared among stage characters. Rhetorical patterns in kabuki reached their apogee with Mokuami’s distinctive seven-five prosodic speeches and dialogue or his bravura yakuharai monologues, in which a hero harangues his adversaries.

The closest thing to “dialogue” in traditional Japanese drama is mondō, literally “question and answer,” a word employed in nō to describe what is ultimately a rather minor function of this genre—that is, a verbal exchange between stage characters. This term originally referred to philosophical debates as practiced by Confucianists and Zen Buddhists. Something of this didactical function can still be detected in nō, but mondō never quite had the connotation of communication or debate that “dialogue” has had in the Western tradition. Instead, the form typically conveyed the imparting of knowledge from master to disciple, rather than shared discovery of the truth through dialectical reasoning. In short, the Western notion of dialogue was predicated on a more horizontal, egalitarian set of social relations than that which existed in traditional Japanese society. The language of modern drama, which posits highly individuated characters struggling for self-realization in conflict with their peers, was alien to the Japanese social sphere. Traditional Japanese drama would typically resolve any potential conflict in a transcending of the self through identification with nature or higher spiritual and social ideals such as nirvana or fealty. The standard term used today for stage dialogue is serifu; in other contexts, the word taiwa is also used for dialogue. Dialogue essentially
involve an exchange between individuals where the unspoken subject, the
point of talking, is to explore and establish the terms of the relationship be-
tween the speakers. Contemporary playwright Hirata Oriza contrasts taiwa
with kaiwa (conversation) as follows: taiwa is “the exchange of new infor-
mation between strangers,” whereas kaiwa is “pleasant speech between people
who already know each other.” Japanese, he claims, are notoriously poor at
dialogue. In a world in which relationships are not problematized, conver-
sation can reign freely, but dialogue is difficult.

One of the cardinal aspects of modernity in any art is its attempt to
conceal the devices of its mediation, to present directly an illusion of reality
“as it is.” In linguistic terms, for the theatre this involved a transformation of
stage art from indirect to direct speech. This project of making language more
immediate and transparent worked at cross-purposes to the rhetorical func-
tion of speech in, for example, kabuki. There was a populist, if not democratic,
reason behind this effort. The shift from a classical to a “colloquial” language
in written documents and spoken utterances was indicative of the project of
modernization in virtually all elements of Japanese culture. As Karatani Kōjin
has pointed out, the vernacularization of modern literature was in fact an ar-
tificial and literary creation; at the same time, Meiji nation-building efforts
to forge a standardized spoken Japanese created a language that was equally
synthetic. Moreover, class lines divided the language of the theatre from that
of polite society, and language reform reflected the implementation of new
schema of social stratification. “Standard Japanese” (hyōjungo) was closer to
the dialect spoken by Tokyo’s ruling shizoku class, men and women who were
typically the offspring of samurai, whereas kabuki dialogue was typically the
language spoken by the working-class Edo townsperson.

In fiction, critics identify the beginning of vernacularization in Futabatei
Shimei and Oguri Fūyō’s literary experiments in the 1880s, a task that did not
achieve fruition perhaps until the 1920s, with the first installments of Shiga
Naoya’s A Dark Night’s Passing (An’ya kōrō). In the realm of public documents,
it can be argued that a truly vernacular language was not in place until after
1945. Vernacularization in Japanese drama lagged behind that of fiction by
more than a decade and some, like Hirata Oriza, claim it is still an unfinished
project.

Playwright Kinoshita Junji (1914–2006), one of the few others who has
written on vernacularization in the theatre, has argued that the irrational ele-
ments of traditional Japanese drama are intrinsic to the classical language.
Unlike modern adaptations of classical Western drama, traditional Japanese
drama is resistant to translation into a modern vernacular. Kinoshita points out that, unlike the West, Japan had to grapple with the creation of modern dramatic dialogue in modernizing its theatre.\textsuperscript{57} It is not really until the Taishō era that dramatists came close to writing dialogue in a modern vernacular. Those who wished to write drama had to struggle not only with \textit{kabuki} conventions, but also a choice of what register of language to exploit. In the absence of a common spoken language, “reformist” \textit{kabuki} playwrights like Fukuchi Ōchi and Yoda Gakkai resorted to classical Chinese and Japanese locutions, as if in an attempt to shake off the yoke of \textit{kabuki} diction. Vernacular speech eluded the Meiji playwrights, especially those with literary pretensions, and the drama written in the 1890s by people like Tōkoku, Tōson, and Rohan was predominantly in the seven-five prosody of classical Japanese poetry. Ironically, as drama evolved as a literary form, it initially estranged itself even further from colloquial expression, the lifeblood of modern stage dialogue.

Kinoshita has noted how the drama and translations of Shōyō and Ōgai, Meiji Japan’s most indefatigable exponents for the modernization of theatre, reprised the history of the Japanese language. I will have cause to examine Ōgai’s plays in further detail in chapter 2 and so will restrict my discussion here to Shōyō’s work. Plays like \textit{A Paulownia Leaf} or \textit{Urashima Tārō: A New Lyric} (\textit{Shinkyoku Urashima Tārō}, 1904)—a work in which Shōyō would try to put into practice his theories of lyric drama—never broke new ground stylistically, however.\textsuperscript{58} As noted above, Rimer calls Shōyō’s style “elevated, resonant and complex,” but these attributes did not necessarily make it an easy language for stage delivery. Hirata Oriza counters that “were one to read it in print, one could make out what he means, but there are many passages that, were one to hear them only, one really would have no idea what was being said.”\textsuperscript{59} Hirata deems that it was impossible for actors untrained in this strange amalgam of “translatese” (\textit{hon’yakuchō}) and pseudo-classical diction to make such dialogue intelligible. Nor did the diction of Shōyō’s \textit{En the Ascetic} (\textit{En no gyōja}, 1917), the first Japanese play to be performed at the Tsukiji Little Theatre, in 1926, mark a radical departure from that employed in \textit{A Paulownia Leaf} or \textit{A Sinking Moon}. Shōyō’s lifelong quest to create a modern theatre out of the flesh and bones of \textit{kabuki} would remain quixotic; it would seem its theatrical conventions stymied his creativity as a dramatist. On the other hand, his greatest experiments in the modernization of dramatic language would take place in his translations of Shakespeare. Over the course of fifty years, from 1884 to 1934 (just one year before his death), he translated Shakespeare’s entire oeuvre, not only some thirty-seven plays but also his narrative verse and sonnets.
Though he is not consistent or thorough in his analysis, Kinoshita identifies five stages in the development of Shōyō’s Japanese translations over this time: from versified puppet theatre or kabuki diction, through experiments with nō and kyōgen and the classical, literary idiom of the Heian romance (monogatari), to a mixture of the literary and colloquial, finally, quite late in his career, to a more or less modern colloquial language.60

In his own drama, Shōyō managed to achieve a greater synthesis of modern and traditional forms, yet he did so not by tackling modern subject matter but by re-envisioning how the past was to be portrayed. Neither he nor Tōkoku crafted dramatic dialogue in a vernacular tongue about matters close to the daily lives of their contemporaries, however. The language of Japanese drama until the twentieth century essentially remained in a classical, literary idiom, increasingly divorced from the language spoken on the streets, one that itself was undergoing a revolution.

Shinpa Adaptations and the Melodramatic Imagination

Shōyō’s history plays marked the beginning of the new genre called shin-(new) kabuki, and in the ensuing years, many playwrights such as Okamoto Kidō (1872–1939), Matsui Shōyō (1870–1933), Mayama Seika (1878–1948), and Hasegawa Shin (1884–1963) would ensure that the repertoire of kabuki drama was being refreshed by excellent new work.61 With Mokuami’s death in 1893, the position of the traditional house dramaturge was in peril, but even so, many of the independent and more educated playwrights still found that writing for the stage was sometimes a thankless task. Little honor or remuneration came from it; actors and managers changed what had been written at will, and the “stable” playwrights, already insecure, especially gave these new dramatists a hard time. Okamoto Kidō recalled how he and another shin-kabuki playwright, Oka Onitarō (1872–1943), were constantly bullied by jealous and insecure dramaturges requesting constant rewrites and even complaining in one case that an actor could not dance to the trash they had written.62 An attitude prevailed that theatrically satisfying drama could not be written by “amateurs.”

By the 1890s, however, kabuki had become almost by definition a thing of the past. Shōyō’s kabuki plays were a considerable advance over “living history” plays, but it was increasingly apparent that for the portrayal of modern life, kabuki was limited as a theatrical form. Nor were the “crop-haired” plays much more successful at this task. “Can traditional acting techniques
properly express modern Japanese lifestyles?” ask Brandon and Leiter in the introduction to their volume of translations of kabuki plays from the mid-to-late nineteenth century. “One unintended consequence . . . is that kabuki increasingly became identified with its pre-Meiji, traditional—that is feudal—repertory.”63 In contrast, by the 1880s, “Change had become the norm. . . . Surface reality could not mask the lack of connection between the daily lives of the audience and the inner life of the dramatic action, even if that action was set in the present day. One could easily accept stylized acting in plays set in pre-modern times. Such acting and dramaturgy that supported it, however, may have seemed alien to dramatic characters dressed in raincoats and bowler hats.”64 In the meantime, another type of theatre was emerging that seemed to catch the tenor of the times better than kabuki: the politically engaged but amateurish productions being staged by Sudō Sadanori and Kawakami Otojirō that would later become known as shinpa, or “new school.”65

As it wrestled with a new way of portraying the modern age theatrically, shinpa reflected the kind of debate that was going on in Meiji criticism on the proper function of drama and fiction in contemporary society, a debate that essentially revolved around what kind of theatrical realism would prevail. Traces of a nascent realism can be seen in Japanese literature and drama as far back as The Tale of Genji and Zeami’s theories of imitation (monomane) in the nō. To be sure, however, it is not until the Edo period that we see the establishment of certain social conditions—the rise of the middle classes and a consumerist popular culture that catered to their tastes—essential to the creation of a home-grown version of realism. The term sewamono, literally “gossip plays,” suggests a more colloquial, dialogic style, as well as the topicality of the subject matter of domestic drama. Actor Sakata Tōjūrō (1647–1709) predated his art on realistic acting, but he noted that because kabuki was a popular entertainment, it was necessary to make life look more beautiful than it really was.66 Though kabuki acting could be at times startlingly realistic, its dramaturgy was not, and verisimilitude alone was never the ideal.67

In many respects, kabuki could be more accurately characterized as a melodramatic theatre. It shared all or some of the following elements common to melodrama: a stress on musical accompaniment for emotional effect, sensationalism and extreme emotional displays, stereotyped characters presenting moral polarities, a narrative structure that featured outrageous coincidence and convoluted plotting, and deus ex machina resolutions (among others).68 Its heroes, heroines, and villains were presented scenically, as surfaces in a pictorial composition, as if painted in primary colors emphasizing their function as
types. There is thus a focus on simplicity rather than complexity in characterization, a metaphysical or semiotic, not psychological or humanistic, portrayal of people. In this respect, melodrama has been described as “monopathic,” as opposed to the “polypathic” nature of tragedy.69

As an expressive mode in both literature and theatre, melodrama both reflected and made intelligible (which is also to say inoculated people from) the shock of modernity. In his book Melodrama and Modernity, Ben Singer identifies two kinds of realism that were operative in the arts of the nineteenth century: “absorptive realism” and “apperceptive realism.” The former is a naturalist version of realism, an attempt to create a transparent and quasi-documentary mode of verisimilitude. The latter is a kind of verisimilitude that “does not create a strong feeling of diegetic immersion in the represented space.”70 Displaying a kind of apperceptive realism, melodrama thus occupied a middle ground between the romantic and the realistic modes—in Nicholas Vardac’s turn of phrase, a “romantic realism.”71 Its romantic element—a predilection for spectacle and strong emotional effects, its larger-than-life characters and its coincidences, its dreamlike plots of virtue vindicated after extreme suffering—was treated with all the realism modern stagecraft could muster. In both the West and Japan during the nineteenth century, the greatest efforts at producing realism were expended not on dialogue, dramaturgy, or acting but on the spectacle: staging, lighting, and sound effects. Whereas in Shakespeare and other playwrights of the past, highly figurative language was employed to conjure images in the mind’s eye, nineteenth-century melodrama employed technology to achieve the same visual effects. As Singer puts it, “Incredible sights were presented with credible diegetic realism.”72 Cinema, Vardac pointed out, grew out of a demand for such a “romantic realism.” In both the West and Japan, theatrical melodrama gave birth to, and was eventually upstaged by, early cinema.

In much the same way, shinpa melodrama provided the theatrical bridge between tradition and modernity in Meiji theatre. The instinct toward a more realistic art was reflected in both the topicality of the new plays and their focus on action and dialogue over dance and music. Borrowing the term from Ōgai, Kawakami Otojirō characterized his style of theatre after his company’s tours of Europe in 1900–1901 as seigeki, “straight drama,” focusing on dialogue, a less episodic dramaturgy, and actresses to play women’s roles.73 A more traditionalist camp would succeed, however, in defining the shinpa style as a kind of musical or lyric theatre (gakugeki or shigeki) that employed kabuki presentational techniques such as geza incidental music, the hanamichi, and, most important, the onnagata.
The transitional, hybrid nature of shinpa was literally embodied in the onnagata, who represented shinpa’s ambivalent stance between the stylization of traditional theatre and the “absorptive” mimetic mode of modernity. The shinpa onnagata Hanayagi Shōtarō commented that “80 percent of kabuki’s essence lies in the onnagata’s art,” which was devoted to the creation of a “weird beauty,” a consciously artificial image of femininity that had a homoerotic charge. In shinpa, the onnagata’s eroticism was downplayed, and its portrayal of women tended to be more naturalistic than kabuki’s. But realism was not the ultimate goal of onnagata acting for shinpa any more than it was for kabuki. Hanayagi used the metaphor of painting versus photography to compare the way an onnagata (as opposed to an actress) would play Ōtsuta in the “Yushima no keidai” scene in Izumi Kyōka’s Onna keizu. Hanayagi wrote that actresses were simply too realistic for the shinpa stage, “lacking the chiaroscuro of the onnagata portrayal. There is something unsettlingly carnal about an actress’s performance—one can practically smell her—as she exposes only what is real: her body.” Women are equated with realism; then both are rejected here. Ultimately what is most important is not the performer’s sex, Hanayagi claims, but the performance of femininity. Strict training (likened to that of the ningyōzukai, or puppeteers, in puppet theatre) is necessary to capture the “weird beauty” of kabuki heroines like Agemaki, Yatsuhashi, or Princess Tae-ma. The art of the shinpa onnagata, Hanayagi stressed, was essential in the classical portrayals of prewar women, who were almost necessarily associated with the kimono. By the same token, actresses could not play geisha until they learned how to “play onnagata.” In this respect, shinpa would remain the “moving painting” of kabuki, rejecting both the heightened realism of shingeki and the “moving photographs” (katsudō shashin) of cinema.74

Initially, shinpa plays were composed by the actors themselves, in much the same manner as in early kabuki, hastily improvised (kuchidate) out of rough plans sketched together before a production began but subject to constant change depending on expedience and audience approval. In its development out of a form of agitprop in the 1880s into a full-fledged art form, this theatre drew heavily for its material on contemporary news items and, later, novels, moving from the sensationalism of Kawakami’s earlier productions—titles like Shock! (Igai) and Shock Again! (Mata igai) speak volumes—to the sentimentalism of mature shinpa drama, much of it adapted from the popular fiction of the day. Hanabusa Ryūgai (1872–1906), who scripted many of the early shinpa adaptations, came from the traditional circles of kabuki stable writers, having apprenticed under the playwright Kawatake Shinshichi III (1842–1901).
Those who were most active writing plays or adaptations (hon'ian) of other works directly for the shinpa stage came from a school of writers, the Friends of the Ink Stone (Ken'yūsha), associated with Ozaki Kōyō (1867–1903). The Ink Stone writers had a special knack for writing vivid dialogue. During the 1890s and the early 1900s, fiction by Kōyō, his associates, and his students—men like Yamada Bimyō (1868–1910) and Izumi Kyōka (1873–1939)—was readily dramatized, often by other Ink Stone members, like Oguri Fuyō (1875–1926), Satō Kōroku (1874–1949), Hirotzu Ryūrō (1861–1928), and Yanagawa Shun'yō (1877–1918). The popularity of such fiction, which typically was serialized in the newspapers and magazines of the day, inspired stage versions, which in turn generated more sales of the novels in book form. Such a system pleased audiences and readers and to some extent provided royalties for the novelists, but—as was the case with the shin-kabuki playwrights—adapting the work of others only to see one’s script further adulterated by the actors was scarcely satisfactory from an artistic standpoint.

The shinpa adaptations of Izumi Kyōka’s fiction were brilliant examples of this stage art; many are still performed today.75 Kyōka’s fiction was exemplary of a style of literature popular before the rise of naturalism in the first decade of the twentieth century, with thrilling, highly melodramatic plots and language richly figurative and pleasing to the ears. Thus, in both narrative and stylistic terms, such literature harked back to an earlier time, one already on the way out by the 1900s, where the consumption of literature was still to some extent a public or communal event, where the pleasure of reading could best be captured by oral recitation and not by silent reading alone. In an essay entitled “The Rhythm of Sentences,” for example, Kyōka wrote the following: “I believe that literature should appeal not to the eye but to the ear, which is to say that I write prose that even an illiterate person could understand were it read out to him.”76 Kyōka continued, well into the Taishō era, to write works that in a sense memorialized this earlier stage of Meiji popular culture. The shinpa adaptation of his 1914 novel Nihonbashi is a case in point. Writing of the relationship between this novel and its adaptation for the stage (Kyōka later published his own dramatization in 1917), Saeki Junko has rightly pointed out that “dialogue from the novel has been transposed verbatim to his dramatic text, and narrative parts are lifted whole from the novel for the stage notes.”77 Passages of the novel were written to order for the shinpa onnagata Kitamura Rokurō, who would play Okō for the first stage production in 1914. (Kitamura also had a hand in adapting the novel for that production.) Kyōka, and shinpa, excelled in speeches like Okō’s address to Katsuragi on Ichikoku
Bridge: “It was the night after the Doll Festival, it was spring, and the moon was shrouded in clouds; there on the bridge we both set free our whelks and clams; and the policeman recorded our names, side by side, in his little notebook. He called me your ‘wife.’ We were both on our way to pay our respects to Jizō, who ties two lovers together, there on the West Bank; and if he can’t do that, the world’s a dark, dark place!”

Such bravura performances, akin to a kabuki tsurane (tirade), became meizerifu (literally “famous speeches”), showstoppers that simultaneously summed up the character, the play, and the whole genre of theatre in a few emotionally charged lines. The rhetoric of shinpa dialogue—highly rhythmic, sonorous, and figurative—remained close to the aesthetic of kabuki. Dramatists, actors, and audiences took pleasure in language for its theatrical effects as much as for its ability to delineate a character or advance the plot. Theatre scholar Dōmoto Masaki has remarked that the essence of theatre resides in moments when a character says or does something that defies our expectation and, hence, interpretation; the tirades and coups de théâtre of kabuki or shinpa epitomize this feature, but they are notably lacking in the modern theatre. The realistic, rational, and prosaic language of modern drama, which had fallen under the “sin of interpretability,” spelled the death of the meizerifu, he notes.

By the first decade of the twentieth century, shinpa was staging adaptations of Western drama too. After their American and European tours at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Kawakami Otojirō and his wife Sadayakko would produce some of the first Japanese versions of Shakespeare, Victorien Sardou, Alexandre Dumas fils, Maurice Maeterlinck, and many other European playwrights. Many of these adaptations would play fast and loose with the originals, often changing the setting of the dramas and names of the characters to make them more “Japanese.” Kōyō himself had adapted Molière’s L’avare and Le médecin malgré lui (Natsu kosode and Koi no yamai); the latter, Kinoshita argues, is one of the few plays prior to 1900 that was written in anything close to the vernacular. “Had he lived any longer,” Uchida Roan commented, Kōyō “would no doubt have distinguished himself more as a playwright than a novelist.” These experiments to naturalize European theatre by accommodating it to existing Japanese forms and conventions were the theatrical version of wakon yōsai (Japanese spirit, Western means). Shinpa therefore did not predicate its identity on a clean break with tradition but attempted to assimilate Western cultural products within the context of existent Japanese expressive forms. The cultural paradigms for Western influence, at least in the theatre, remained those of the hon’an and kyakushoku: dramatic
adaptations. In the first decade of the twentieth century, however, hon'yaku (translation) would become the greater force for change.

By then, a new drama instigated by playwrights like Henrik Ibsen was making its presence felt in Japan. Its radically modern and foreign dramaturgy could not be accommodated so easily into the traditional forms of kabuki or even shinpa. New ideas required a new language, new actors, and a new theatre. The status of drama in Japan by the first decade of the twentieth century thus represented something of an impasse. Producing new drama was not so straightforward as creating new fiction because its life was not meant to end on the page. To realize it on stage required an expensive outlay of financial and artistic resources not yet available in Japan: new playhouses and modern techniques of direction, acting, lighting, and stagecraft. Even more important, it needed a public who understood and appreciated it. New work was being written, often directly or indirectly under the influence of Western models of dramatic literature, but a theatre had not yet been created to produce much of it without resorting to various unsatisfactory expedients and compromises.