

THE THEATRE REFORMATION MOVEMENT
IN THE EARLY MEIJI ERA (ABOUT 1886) OF JAPAN :
A PRELIMINARY SKETCH

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With the Meiji Restoration in 1867 Japan began a deliberate policy of modernization. Modernization in this context was almost synonymous with Europeanization. Catching up with European standards of civilization was set as a goal to which, one might say, Japan's whole effort thenceforwards has been directed. As part of the first stage of this long process of modernizing or Europeanizing Japan, a movement to reform the Japanese theatre (the traditional Kabuki theatre), or to 'improve' it, if we use a more literal translation of the term which was then used in this connection, appeared in the early years of the Meiji era, or in the middle of 1880's. Although it is true that there had been some faint and isolated attempts made before that time to adapt the old theatre to the new era, it was in 1886 that the reforming spirit first appeared to be organized.

In summer of that year, 1886, a group of scholars, writers, government officials and businessmen formed a society called *Engeki-Kairyō-Kai*, or the Society for the Improvement of Theatre, and published its prospectus in the 687th issue (6 August 1886) of the *Kabuki-Shimpo* (*Kabuki News*). The leading member, or the virtual President, of the Society was Kencho (or Norizumi) Suematsu. He was a young government official (then aged 31), who had recently returned from England where he studied law, philosophy and literature. His direct contact with Western civilization had made him one of the warmest advocates of Europeanization of Japan. He was also son-in-law and *protégé* of Hirobumi Ito, the first Prime Minister of Japan, who had come into power in December of just the previous year when the position was created in Japan.

The prospectus of the Society for the Improvement of Theatre ran as follows :

We, whose names are subscribed at the end of this prospectus, after a deep contemplation of the general state of manners and customs of this country today, have decided to organize ourselves into a society, which we call the Society for the Improvement of Theatre.

The purposes of the Society are :

1. To improve upon the bad conventions of our theatre so that dramatic works of better quality than we have now may actually be brought forth.
2. To make the writing of plays an honourable profession.

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3. To construct a new performance hall that will be so structured and equipped that it can be used not only for dramas but also for concerts and recitals.

As these three purposes are, needless to say, all related and inseparable, the lack of any one of them would lead to a defeat of our hope. That is why we put up all these three items together at once as the Society's purposes.

The drama in this country today is very full of obscenities and vulgarities that respectable men and women should shun. This is perhaps due to a misguided notion, on the part of our men of the theatre who stick to old customs, that nothing but what is obscene and vulgar can delight the eye and ear of the audience, and also to their ignorance of the fact that men's taste changes with the progress of the times. Our theatre urgently needs to be improved and elevated, in such a way that it would be refined without being remote from popular sentiments, elegant without being contrary to the realities of life, graceful and pleasant without being voluptuous, convivial without being licentious: in short, so reformed that it would be good enough to be attended and enjoyed by men and women of the higher classes and of higher culture. That is the aim of this Society.

And then we believe that the beauty of the new experimental theatre we have in mind depends a great deal on the excellence of the plays that will be presented there. None of the modern playwrights of this country, however, are adequately furnished with learning or gifted with literary virtuosity: all of them are mere hacks who are only eager to provide amusements for the lower populace, making up their plays by patching their cheap ideas and common sentiments together one way or another. This is because in our country the playwright, just as the actor, is not cared for at all by gentry, and no matter how he might have toiled to produce a fine piece of work, it would bring him no honour from anywhere. There is a question of profit, too: that is, because there is no legal protection of the dramatist's copyright either for stage production or publication of his works, a real man of letters would not be properly rewarded for his toil even if he wrote for a theatre. It is necessary, therefore, that our theatre should be cleansed of all its harmful conventions; it must be made clear that the theatre is really a place for which men of good learning and literary culture are responsible, and that any glory they gain there is their glory just because they have gained it there.

But, even if we have secured a good play, if we do not possess a playhouse which is good enough for it, we shall lack the means to realize its value. The trouble is not restricted only to dramas: today, if we want to give a recital or a concert, we find no place whatever where we can do it properly. Nor can we hope to get a satisfactory result by using any of the existing theatres for those purposes. It is definitely better that we should build an entirely new performance hall. We are thus convinced that we are urged to find some appropriate means and build a new theatre, a theatre that will enable us to present our improved plays; that will enable us, if it so happens, to enjoy performances by Western actors or actresses who will be visiting our country; and that will enable us, now and then, to give recitals and concerts, too.

That is not all we have to do. There are many other things that require improvement along with the improvement of drama: for example, the stage settings, which are now very poor; the hours of performance, which are now too long and tedious; the business at the doors of a theatre, which is now so complicated that it causes congestion

in the flows of people getting in or out; and so on. These also this Society intends to improve.

After drafting reasonably concrete plans to carry out our project as described above, we submitted them to a number of distinguished personages of this country for their opinions. None have ever disapproved of our project; indeed, many of them have already agreed to join our Society as supporting members.

In short, this project of ours, which is to form a part of the whole campaign now in progress for the improvement of the manners and customs of this country, can not be strong enough to be effective unless it secures consent from a yet wider circle of the general public. Let us hope that you, who have kindly read this prospectus, will give us your respected favour and support.

August 1886

P.S. Correspondence concerning this matter shall be addressed to Kencho Suematsu (or, during his absence, to Yoshizo Fukushima, his deputy), 5 Nichome, Tsukiji, Tokyo.

To this prospectus of the Society for the Improvement of Theatre twenty-three subscribed their names as its regular members, and forty-seven as its supporting members. The list of the regular members included, besides Suematsu himself, Kaoru Inoue (then Foreign Minister), Nobushige Hozumi, Masakazu Toyama, Kenzo Wadagaki, Hyakusen Yoda, Ryokichi Yatabe, Fumio Yano, Genichiro (or Ochi) Fukuchi, Dairoku Kikuchi, Arinori Mori, and others. Among the supporting members of the Society were found such contemporary dignitaries as Hirobumi Ito (Prime Minister), Kihachiro Okura, Shigenobu Okuma, Kinmochi Saionji, Yonosuke Mitsui, Munemitsu Mutsu, Katsugoro Chiba and others (including a number of peers). The Society must have looked a very dignified one.

Suematsu, the central figure of the Society, was a man who had, as noted above, a special connection with Hirobumi Ito, Prime Minister of Japan. And Ito's Government had special reasons to be eager to promote any movement that would help to make Japan look like a modernized country. It had much to negotiate with some Western countries. In particular, there were some treaties Japan wanted revised, treaties which had been concluded previously and unfavourably to Japan. But, it was thought, before entering into talks with those Western countries about that matter Japan should give them an impression that she had now become a much more 'civilized' country than when those treaties were concluded. Ito and his colleagues thought that if they were to be successful in their transactions with the Western powers their country should, at least, look like a country with a degree of modern civilization that would qualify her to stand on equal terms with them. And in their thought the modern civilization was the civilization of modern Europe.

Bunmei-kaika, or 'Civilization and Enlightenment', was the catch phrase of the age. And, in that period of Japanese history, it simply meant Europeanization of the country: that is, importing European culture and civilization and reforming every part of Japanese society to European models, no matter to what extent. *Kairyō*, or 'Improvement', was also a term that had then come into vogue, reflecting the same aspiration of the Japanese people. The first record of the use of this term with this special historical implication seems to be found in 1877, in one of the May issues of a popular newspaper called *Maru-maru Chimbun (News From Somewhere)*, where they used the term in a compound *fuzoku-kairyō* ('improvement of manners

and customs'). Since about that time, for nearly a decade, the term *kairyō* flourished a great deal among the people of Japan, being connected with scores of things in their life and society. "From towards the end of 1884 to the winter of 1886," wrote a certain contemporary magazine for women, "cries were loud for the *kairyō* of women's education, of clothes, of the house, of the ways of social intercourse, of hairdo, of theatre, etc." A January issue of the *Maru-maru Chimbun* in 1888 gave in its 'Survey of Modern Proposals for Improvement' thirty-two items of things of which the 'improvement' had recently been urged. Some people even went to the extreme of propounding an 'improvement' of the Japanese race by 'mixing the native and the European bloods.'

When viewed against this general background, the character of the Society for the Improvement of Theatre becomes clearer. The members of the Society, especially Suematsu, wished Japanese theatre to be 'improved' as part of their more general aspiration for a modernized, or at least modern-looking, Japan. They wished Japan to become like a Western country as quickly as possible, and their awareness of themselves as cultured men and natural lovers of drama made them feel it also their duty to strive for a reformation of theatre. As a first step they desired a model theatre, a new theatre that would be like a European one. That would be a theatre where people of the higher classes, people just like themselves, might safely go, and, if so required, might take their foreign guests and entertain them with 'refined' Japanese plays. Behind all this was looming a national aspiration of the Japanese for a better status of their country in the international society, for political or other reasons.

The S.I.T.'s campaign for a new theatre was in line with the establishment of Rokumeikan House in Tokyo, and the notorious evening parties given there. The House, the first European-style club house in Japan, was completed in 1883. It was for exclusive use by the Japanese nobility and foreign diplomats, and many gala balls, masques and bazaars were held there, more or less under the auspices of the Japanese Government. It was a device of the Government to give a modernized look to the country. It would help to give to the rest of the world, they hoped, an impression (no matter how illusory) that Japan was not an 'underdeveloped' country any longer as foreigners were apt to make her out to be, but now was a country well entitled to demand a revision of any former treaty which had been concluded unfavourably to her because of her inferiority in civilization and power.

About the time the S.I.T. published its prospectus in August, 1886, the press was also taking up the problem of the reformation of theatre. The *Jiji-Shimpo* (*Current News*) was the most earnest newspaper, treating the problem in a number of its editorials, which were: 'Argument for the Improvement of Theatre' (July 1 to 3), 'A Renovation of Drama' (August 9), 'The Improvement of Theatre' (August 10 to 12), followed by its sequel (August 14 to 16), and 'The Management of an Improved Theatre' (September 22). The *Eiri-Jiyu-Shimbun* (*The Liberal, Illustrated*) discussed 'How to Improve a Theatre' daily for three consecutive weeks starting on July 22. The *Yubin-Hochi-Shimbun* (*The News Post*), we are told, published a very long article whose title was 'Scholars, Stir Yourself and Become Actors.'

On October 9, 1886, some hundred people met in a certain garden in the southern part of Osaka, and organized a society similar to the S.I.T. in Tokyo. Indeed, it called itself the Osaka Society for the Improvement of Theatre. It had as its notable members playwright Genzo Takeshiba, artist Beisen Kubota, actors Rukan Arashi and Sojuro Nakamura. The last named was a Kabuki actor in Osaka who was often compared to Danjuro IX in Tokyo

for his progressive views and activities. He had presented in the previous year at the Ebisuza Theatre in Osaka a play called *Sakuradoki-Zeni-no-Yononaka* (*Money Talks While the Cherry Trees Are All in Bloom*), which was an adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, the first time Shakespeare was performed on the Japanese stage.¹ The S.I.T. in Osaka was destined to be as short-lived as that in Tokyo was.

On October 3, 1886, two months after the S.I.T. in Tokyo published its prospectus, Kencho Suematsu, chief of the Society, delivered to an audience of literary people a lecture on the problem of the improvement of the theatre as proposed by his Society. He gave this lecture in the auditorium of the First High School, which was then at Kanda in Tokyo.² He spoke about two hours, explaining in greater detail than he had in the S.I.T.'s prospectus why he thought it necessary to reform the traditional theatre, and what he had in view to accomplish it. He concluded his long speech, we are told, amid a great storm of applause.

A synopsis of Suematsu's speech appeared both in the October 5 issue of the *Yubin-Hochi-Shimbun* and in the October 5 and 6 issues of the *Tokyo Nichi-nichi-Shimbun* (*Tokyo Daily News*). And the *Jiji-Shimpo*, as one might expect, printed the whole text of his speech as stenographed by its reporter, in its issues for October 6 to 12. The same text was reprinted serially in three numbers, Nos. 36 to 38 (all in October, 1886), of the *Bijutsu-Shimpo* (*Art News*). The text was then slightly revised by Suematsu himself, and was published in book form in November of the same year. The book carried the title *Engeki-Kairyō Iken* (*Advocacy of an Improvement of Theatre*), and its publishers were Bungakusha Co. in Tokyo.

Suematsu's speech centred, for the most part, on his ideas of a new theatre and his plans for its construction. He envisaged its outline as a three-storeyed structure of brick. In the new theatre the spectators' seats would be chairs (instead of the traditional matted floors to squat on). The restaurants and tea-houses attached to many theatres, things that had long been usual, would be abolished, and their special, profitable connection with the theatre would no longer be possible. The theatregoers would not be required to take off their shoes or sandals at the entrance of the new theatre, and so there would be no need of the room for keeping them. The lavatories would also be remodelled. He went so far as to say that the *hanamichi* (or the runway through the audience to the main stage, which is a characteristic and essential feature of a Kabuki theatre) would be removed in his new theatre. He claimed that the architecture was the very 'basis' on which his whole idea of theatrical reformation was to be realized. And in his new theatre refined and elegant plays, artistic ones, would be offered to delight cultured gentlefolks. Suematsu calculated the entire cost for his ideal theatre would be 150,000 yen in contemporary currency.

Suematsu's project was made more concrete two weeks later. On October 19, several men of influence, such as Eiichi Shibusawa, Zenjiro Yasuda, Kihachiro Okura, financiers, and Genichiro Fukuchi, theatre and press magnate, met at the Bankers' Club in Nihonbashi, Tokyo, where they discussed the scheme of establishing 'an improved theatre' in Kobiki-cho Street or somewhere near it. Their calculation of the expenses amounted to 250,000 yen in contrast to the 150,000 yen of Suematsu's. Of the needed 250,000 yen, they expected, 100,000 would be raised by contributions from the regular and supporting members of the S.I.T., 50,000 by Government aid, and the remaining 100,000 through a public loan in 1,000-yen

¹ Cf. My own essay, "The *Caesar Kidan*", in Vol. 4, No. 1 (March 1964) of this *Journal*.

² The school is no longer existing, though most of it has been absorbed into Tokyo University.

bonds. They agreed that Josiah Condor, a British architect, should be commissioned to design the theatre. But some primary elements of the architecture were decided upon among those who met at the Bankers' Club: the new theatre would be of brick, and three-storeyed; it would measure 108 feet by 250 in its exterior. The sad fact is that this theatre never came into being,³ just as the S.I.T. fizzled out in less than a couple of years.

Suematsu was not the only one to express reformist ideas concerning Japanese theatre. In September, 1886, a little before Suematsu gave his speech at the First High School, Masakazu Toyama, prominent educationalist, poet and scholar of his time, published through Maruzen Co. a book called *Engeki-Kairyō-Ron Shiko* (*Private Views on the Problem of Theatre Improvement*). He was a regular member, one of the most notable members, of the S.I.T., but the views he expressed in his book were "independent of the Society's." Indeed, his views were, on the whole, less radical than Suematsu's, less intolerant of the conventions of Kabuki drama. He had better knowledge of the theatre, which enabled him to show more prudence in distinguishing between what should be abolished or altered in order to improve the traditional theatre and what could not be abolished or altered without destroying it. But, in our eye, he was not quite free from mistakes, either. For example, he held a mistaken notion that the tradition of a man impersonating a female role should be done away with, the man-actress being replaced by a real actress, not only in Kabuki but also in Noh drama. He made much both of the *hanamichi* (or the runway) and of the revolving stage of a Kabuki theatre, but, on the other hand, condemned a Kabuki tradition of text-reciters, musicians, and prompters ('men in black clothes') appearing on the stage with actors.

In July, 1886, anticipating both Toyama and Suematsu, Sanae Takada, scholar, educationist, and a man who helped to found Waseda University in Tokyo, began to set forth his opinion concerning the reformation of theatre in serial essays published in several numbers of the *Chuo Gakujutsu Zasshi* (*Central Academic Magazine*). Takada's concern was not so much with the structure of a theatre as with the drama to be produced there. He claimed that Japanese drama is not inferior at all to European one either in abundance of types or in richness of design, but he admitted that it left much to be desired in respect of naturalness, and he saw its greatest faults in its 'inadequacy of psychological analysis' and its 'lack of philosophical profundity.'

Neither Takada nor Shoyo Tsubouchi, his close friend, joined the S.I.T. The fact that the Society did not, or rather could not, have those men among its members betrays the limitations of its capacity and function, and partly explains why it had to fizzle out so soon, before it could hardly achieve anything of what it purposed to do. In fact, it was not by the bunch of bureaucrats and stiff scholars, but by more liberal-minded men who, like Takada and Tsubouchi (particularly the latter), knew much more about the dramatic art and its close relation with national genius and tradition, that Japanese theatre was really put on the right path of its development, or its modernization, if you like.

As noted above, in the beginning of July, 1886, the *Jiji-Shimpo* newspaper carried a series of editorial articles under the title of 'Argument for the Improvement of Theatre.' In it we find the writer saying: "Choose some of the most suitable plays that can be found among the great variety of European and American ones, and translate them, more or less modifying

³ *Teikoku Gekijo* (The Imperial Theatre) in Tokyo, first Western-style theatre in Japan, was completed in 1911, a quarter of a century later. Suematsu must have found much satisfaction in it. Suematsu died in 1920.

them so that they may be adapted to the customs and sentiments of the Japanese today; and then it should not be very difficult to obtain fairly interesting plays." This was a suggestion of another way towards a reformation of Japanese theatre, a proposal that, in this business, contents should come before the container.

All the editorials that had appeared in the *Jiji-Shimpo* for the past three and a half months concerning the theatrical reformation were collected and published in book form by Osaka Publishing Co. in October, 1886. The book, *Shibai-no-Kusenaoshi (Ways to Correct a Theatre)*, contained, besides the collection of the *Jiji-Shimpo's* editorials, three separate essays. One of them, which was entitled 'Some Humble Views Expressed on Hearing of the Foundation of the Society for the Improvement of Theatre,' was accredited to Harunoya Oboro, that is, Shoyo Tsubouchi; for, Harunoya Oboro was a pseudonym of his. The two other essays, 'Some Requests concerning the Improvement of Theatre' and 'Woman Is Best for Woman's Role', are anonymous, though it is certain that the authors were two different journalists in Osaka. That the publication of the book was almost simultaneous with the organization of the Osaka S.I.T. seems to explain the motive of its publication.

Tsubouchi did not agree with Suematsu about what should be done first to improve Japanese theatre. Tsubouchi did not believe that the construction of a Western-style theatre was the 'basis' for it all. He held that creation of better plays was the most important thing to be done if Japanese theatre was to be improved. Not that he was blind to the faults of the traditional Japanese theatre; he also blamed it for its obscenities and vulgarities. But he was strongly opposed to making a theatre a place only for the priggish. "We, lovers of the arts," he wrote, "would be grieved to tears, if our theatre were to be made neat and pretty to look at but completely deprived of sweetness through a confusion of art and morality." He objected to enslaving a theatre to moral affectations. He rejected the idea of a theatre as "a school for the uneducated," claiming that it should rather be considered as "a nursery of the sensibility to the subtle and beautiful."

It was not Takada and Tsubouchi alone that objected to Suematsu's ideas. Ogai Mori, one of the greatest writers of the age, also disapproved of them. He published his opinion in the first number (October, 1889) of the *Shigarami-zoshi*, a literary magazine which he edited himself. In his essay, which bore a sentence as its title, 'The Prejudices of the Theatrical Reformist Have Amazed Me,' he said that the reformists' attempt to improve a theatre through a renovation of its architecture, instead of drama itself, was preposterous. "In an extreme case," he wrote, "all they want seems to be only an imitation of the European theatre of the present time." He continued his refutation of the reformists' theory in the third number of the same magazine. There, in his 'Second Discussion on Drama, in Reply to My Critics,' he elaborated one of his former theses that a simple stage, such as the Elizabethan stage in England, is preferable to a meretricious one.

Yukichi Fukuzawa, who published in the *Jiji-Shimpo*, in 1887, a conservative view, saying, "In this sort of thing there seems to be no means for progress but a gradual one," was another who did not agree with Suematsu. It is pretty obvious that the S.I.T. which could not induce either Shoyo Tsubouchi or Ogai Mori or Yukichi Fukuzawa to join it had to be limited in capacity and influence.

Yet another disapprobation of the S.I.T.'s project appeared in the form of a book, in October, 1886. The book called itself *Engeki-Kairyō-Ron Bakugi (A Refutation of the Theatrical Reformist Theory)*, and its author called himself Muichian Muni, using a pseudonym.

The book was prefaced by a person whose pseudonym was Hananoya Musei. The author of the book was, according to the Preface, "a scholar who has once been abroad in Europe where he studied philosophy, and, since his return home, has hidden himself among the men of the street," but his identity, as well as that of the writer of the preface, has yet to be known. But it seems hardly worth knowing, since in this book the author's main purpose was merely to snub Suematsu who had apparently provoked him by what he took to be his pride. Indeed, what he was engaged in in his book was not so much to present any argument as to lay hold of Suematsu's words by the heels, so to speak.

We can not say to what extent those unfavourable criticisms directed at the S.I.T. affected it, because it was too short-lived even to show any change in its attitude that might have been brought about.

On October 17, 1886, the S.I.T. held a meeting at a large restaurant called Daichinro, in Tsukiji, Tokyo, in order to listen to a recitation of a new play which was meant to be a model of 'improved' dramatic writing. Among the audience was seen the dignified figure of Premier Ito. The play, which was called *Yoshino-Shui Meika-no-Homare (Reminiscences of the Poetic Glory in Old Yoshino District)*, was a collaboration by Gakkai (or Hyakusen) Yoda and Hoshin Kawajiri, and at Daichinro it was recited by Kawajiri himself. The play told the story of Masatsura Kusunoki (1326-1348), a young warrior who fought and died for the cause of the 'Southern Dynasty' during Japan's Wars of the Roses. It was a kind of heroic play with special attention paid to historical facts and details, such as the manners of a medieval archer shooting his arrows while on horseback. We do not know for certain how the play was generally received by the audience at Daichinro. But it is said that there were some, at least, who were not completely satisfied with it, thinking that it was not yet sufficiently 'improved.'

In April, 1888, a change of Government occurred. Ito and his fellows left the seat of power. This precipitated the dissolution of the S.I.T., which had not been able to obtain from the public so much support as it needed to persist. And a month before its final dissolution, another society that intended to "correct the evils of the theatre of this country, and make our drama a true art, more refined and more graceful" had been launched. The new society called itself *Engei Kyofu-Kai*, or the Society for the Correction of Theatricals (designating its wider scope of interest that comprehended, besides drama, Japanese music, dances and various music-hall entertainments) and Taichi Tanabe was appointed President of the Society. It held its formal ceremony of inauguration in Rokumeikan House, on July 8, 1888. Many former members of the now extinct S.I.T. joined the new society, but the leading members were not those people, but such new men as Tenshin Okakura, Sanae Takada, Koson Aeba and Shoyo Tsubouchi. This society was re-organized the next year, in September, into a still newer one, *Nihon Engei Kyokai*, or Japan Theatricals Association. But to tell their story we need another paper.

The Society for the Improvement of the Theatre, headed by Kencho Suematsu, made its appearance in August, 1886, with its ambitious prospectus, and ended its short life about April, 1888, when Ito's Government resigned. Substantially, it achieved very little. Its motivation was compromised: it was as much concerned with politics as it was interested in art. It maintained a fundamental misconception that a nation's theatre can be changed by mechanical methods. It showed more interest in the superficial than in the essential qualities of Japanese theatre, demanding of it hastily a 'modernized' look rather than a true develop-

ment of its artistic possibilities and a refinement of its own traditions. In short, its purposes were wrong, and its emphasis misplaced. That is the fundamental reason why it petered out so soon. But a firework may awaken people from sleep. The S.I.T. stimulated the Japanese of the early Meiji era to awareness of the faults of their theatre and contemplation of ways to better it. In that, one might say, it performed a good service.