

# Shakespeare Meets the Buddha: Tsubouchi Shôyô, Osanai Kaoru, and *The Hermit*

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The trajectories of significant encounters between cultures create their own dimensions in time and space. The means by which practical knowledge is transmitted, or imposed, quite often speaks to relationships of nationhood and political power. In the case of the arts, however, the logics of attraction, adaption, and rejection, are more complex.

In that regard, there are certain trenchant similarities between Japan and the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In both countries, artists felt themselves on the periphery of the creative forces then centered in Europe. Both attempted to select, adapt, and adopt, European models for domestic use. The range of appropriations, from the style of French Impressionism in painting to Ibsenesque models in drama and Brahmsian orchestration in music, served both cultures well as strategies to develop forms of high culture considered to be sufficiently authentic by their indigenous audiences.

Such absorption and amalgamation occurs in disparate stages, until at last the foreign source appears domesticated. In the United States, this closure was generally accomplished by the early decades of this century, when, for example, a painter like Marsden Hartley had absorbed his European influences and reached a level of personal creativity, or a composer like Howard Hanson began writing works of distinction which incorporated European musical styles and techniques without being subsumed by them. and Ibsen, it might be said, begot Eugene O'Neill. But he was his own man.

In the cases of Japan, however, the length of time needed for this trajectory was longer, since the art forms chosen for adoption involved differed so substantially from the earlier traditions that a palpable gap in both technical skills and public understanding had to be closed, or at least satisfactorily bridged. Such was not an easy task. Some critics have suggested that a satisfactory closure was not obtained until after the end of the Pacific War in the early 1950s. Nevertheless, the history of these experiments can certainly be judged successful; modern Japan, in terms of its high culture at least, has long been at ease with itself.

In following the path of these various trajectories in Japan, however, it is also clear that some were more quickly accomplished than others. The links between European and Japanese fiction, for example, were relatively quickly made, so that even before the turn of the century psychologically-oriented fiction of high quality was already written by a writer such as Mori Ôgai, and his younger colleague Natsume Sôseki was to follow immediately after.

Westernstyle painting, because of the need for training in a foreign medium took longer; still, Kuroda Seiki, fresh from his studies in Paris, was showing his version of French academic Impressionism in Japan before 1895. In the case of music and theatre, however, the process of comprehension and assimilation took much longer. For in these arts, it is not merely a question of writing a drama or a string quartet. There must be performers capable of realizing these works for the public. Thus, these two forms of Europeanized culture, however much audiences may have been prepared to appreciate them, were understandably the slowest to develop.

In this present essay, I would like to examine that period in late Taishô and early Shôwa when a modern Japanese theatre was still in the process of formation, of creation. In this undertaking, two central personalities, Tsubouchi Shôyô and Osanai Kaoru, command our attention. Early in the century, they began by taking opposing points of view concerning the best way to develop an authentic modern theatre for Japan. Yet by 1926, the two were prepared to work together in order to create a production that was to be at once modern and Japanese. This collaboration, in many ways, represented the beginning of a new level of accomplishment. And if the ultimate significance of this partnership only seems crucial through hindsight, the importance of their working together was not lost on the consciousness of the two artists concerned. Both were remarkable men, and whatever the social and cultural forces involved during the confusions of the decade that preceded this collaboration, full cognizance must be taken of their own dedication and skill.

The first, Tsubouchi Shôyô (1859-1935), has become known to some extent in the West because of his important early theoretical writings on the nature of literature and his prodigious translations of the complete works of Shakespeare, which are still held up as models, even if now rather old-fashioned in style, of literary and rhetorical excellence. Shôyô's contributions as a writer of fiction and his accomplishments as a dramatist and a scholar of comparative theatre, however, are less well-appreciated abroad, possibly because none of this work has been translated. His erudition, wide capabilities, and common sense, however, did much to make Western-style spoken drama in Japanese a possibility during the first decades of this century.

The second of these men, Osanai Kaoru (1881-1928) was a generation younger. During his youth, the possibilities of exposure to contemporary European intellectual movements was considerably greater than when Shôyô was a young man; Osanai, who took himself very seriously, was determined to establish in Tokyo the same kind of theatre, with the same kinds of repertory — Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov — that already existed in other important capitals around the world. While Shôyô worked slowly, and with students and amateurs, in order to feel his way towards a suitable means to present spoken drama on the stage, Osanai, impatient and impetuous, issued his manifestos and opened his famous Free Theatre (modeled after Antoine's Théâtre Libre in Paris) in 1909, using professional performers. In one sense it was a rash undertaking, but many who loved the theatre said that Osanai's opening production of Ibsen's *John Gabriel Borkman*, translated into Japanese by Mori Ôgai, in November of 1909

represented one of the great cultural events of the entire Meiji period. At this period in their lives, the two had little if anything to do with each other in any professional way, for they had chosen opposite strategies for creating an authentic contemporary Japanese theatre. Osanai was the radical intellectual; Shōyō seemingly the careful scholar.

Thus it is true that the production in 1926 by Osanai's new company, the Tsukiji Shōgekijō (Tsukiji Little Theatre), founded two years before in 1924, of Shōyō's play *En no Gyōja* (The Hermit), first published in 1916, but as yet unstaged, represented the next crucial event in the creation of a modern and authentically Japanese theatre. It was this effort that brought together in a working relationship these two figures who, in one way or another, had been working at cross purposes for virtually two decades.

Shōyō had formed his own theatre company in 1905, which he called the Bungei Kyōkai (Literary Society). His idea of reforming the modern Japanese theatre, quite different from Osanai's more intellectual and flamboyant approach, was based on his conviction that the best way to proceed would be to combine elements from the traditional Japanese theatre, and from *kabuki* in particular, with the kinds of psychological elements Shōyō had discovered in his study of Shakespeare. Indeed, some of Shōyō's first attempts at writing drama, such as *Kiri no hitoha* (A Leaf of Polownia), written in 1894-5, were in many ways psychologized *kabuki* dramas, in which the main performers were given soliloquies and dialogue in which they could express the kind of inner feelings seldom expressed in *kabuki* texts. Shōyō knew that the majority of theatre audiences at the turn of the century remained relatively loyal to *kabuki*, and he felt that reform, not revolution, was the way to proceed. This was very different from Osanai's insistence on the fact that Chekhov and Ibsen should serve as models for the new dramaturgy.

Osanai worked hard to create an environment for an advanced, spoken theatre, and he felt that he had reached a major goal when, in 1924, a year after the Tokyo earthquake (which, incidentally, had destroyed most of the adequate performing spaces in the city), he was able to establish his Tsukiji Little Theatre, at that time the most beautifully equipped stage facility in Japan. In his early experiments, Osanai had used professional male *kabuki* actors, rather than male and female amateurs as did Shōyō, in his earlier productions. A trip to Europe and Russia in 1912, however, where he saw the work of many of the great theatre companies of the world, including the Moscow Art Theatre, led him to the conviction that Japan still did not possess the performers capable of successfully presenting modern theatre on the stage. Therefore, for him, the Tsukiji Little Theatre was to serve as a training laboratory for actors, directors, designers, and others. In order to learn the rules of Western-style theatre, Osanai decreed that the work of the company should be entirely dedicated to staging Western plays in Japanese translation, for only in this way, he was convinced, could appropriate acting and production techniques be learned. Therefore the Tokyo public was given a strict diet of European avant-garde theatre.

In 1926, however, Osanai changed his mind. He decided that it was time for the company to attempt a modern Japanese play. For this event, he chose Shōyō's *The Hermit*. Osanai's

sudden homage to his older contemporary, and, to some extent, his former rival, did, as will be clear, show a certain logic. What is more, the production of the play was sufficiently successful to permit a revival a year later, in 1927.

A reading of Shōyō's actual playtext suggests some of the reasons for Osanai's choice. In fact, Shōyō did bring quite a number of "new" elements, written, as it was, for performance as a spoken play in the context of an emerging modern Japanese theatre.

The subject of the text deals with a legend surrounding the quasi-legendary saint quite important in the early history of Buddhism in Japan, En no Gyōja (fl. 700). The stage picture presented of this shadowy figure, as conceived by the playwright, is reminiscent of Prospero in Shakespeare's *Tempest*; it is not so surprising, perhaps, that Shōyō published his own translation into Japanese of this Shakespeare work in 1915, the year before he published his first version of *The Hermit*, and so had worked closely with that text a year before. Along with Shakespearean magic, and perhaps more importantly, elements of the Nietzschean "superman" were layered in as well, no doubt by way of the one European author whom both Osanai and Shōyō consistently admired, Henrik Ibsen.

For his part, Osanai went out of his way to choose this play over other more obvious and possibly more glamorous possibilities by such up-and-coming younger playwrights as Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, Kishida Kunio, and others. In doing so, Osanai was criticized for turning away from the dramatic talents of the new generation, but he insisted on the importance of this particular first choice. Although Osanai never fully justified his convictions in print, the reasons, on the basis of the evidence of the production itself, may well have involved the fact that Osanai, as his views matured and shifted, was in fact beginning to pull back from his extreme position concerning the importance of using the Western theatre as the sole model for developing an authentic modern Japanese theatre. Indeed, it appears that he was beginning to see in the classical traditions of Japan certain techniques which, if properly adapted, might promise to create a certain Japanese authenticity for modern drama. It seems to me therefore, as I will attempt to sketch below, that this production of *The Hermit* was undertaken to verify for Osanai a certain stage in his rediscovery of his own culture, his own national dramatic heritage.

Others, of course, before and after Osanai, have made the same discovery of the staying powers of their own artistic heritage. The young oil painter Kawabata Ryūshi (1885-1966), on a trip to Boston in 1913, was so astonished at observing the skillful painting techniques visible in one of the great works of classical Japanese painting, the Scroll of the Heiji Wars, in the Boston Museum, that he decided to return to Japan and take up painting in the modern Japanese (Nihonga) style. The great philosopher Watsuji Tetsurō (1889-1960), not long after writing an important study of Kierkegaard, went on a trip to Nara and Kyoto in an attempt to discover the nature of Japanese culture, from which, as a modern person, he had previously felt only detachment. The results of his voyage of discovery and self-discovery, *Koji junrei* (Pilgrimages to Ancient Temples), published in 1919, chronicles with great poignancy his learning about his own cultural and spiritual past. And in the postwar period, Suzuki Tadashi,

the famous director, has written that it was only when he watched his colleague Kanze Hisao dance in Paris that he came to realize the beauty of the traditional noh theatre. In many ways, Osanai had embarked, possibly because of his own voyage to Europe, on the same quest for self and cultural discovery.

In statements made concerning his preparation for this production, Osanai stressed that the play could be “new” and “Japanese” at the same time. In the trajectory of Osanai’s thought *The Hermit* represented a crucial step which had a value above and beyond the simple text itself. True enough, the play possessed many new elements which owed their existence to European examples. But other aspects of the play derive from older Japanese traditions. Both were of the greatest interest to Osanai.

To characterize Shōyō’s play quickly is not a simple matter. Certainly, for a reader in the 1990s, the play seems rhetorically overblown and so far from contemporary sensibilities, be they foreign or Japanese. In its time, however, the play, which pulls together so many disparate elements with real rhythm and drive, did represent both an experiment and a real accomplishment.

The narrative threads connecting the various incidents in the drama together were apparently pieced together from various bits and pieces of information concerning En no Gyōja and his period which Shōyō had compiled from various sources, then combined together. Shōyō was careful to term the result a “dramatic legend,” rather than a play.

As translation of the play is not available in English<sup>1</sup>, a summary of the chief events which take place will facilitate the comments that follow. Shōyō revised the text on several occasions before Osanai chose it for production. The now “standard” version, chosen for the production, is in three acts. There are basically two sets of characters. The first group ostensibly represents the virtuous and heroic, and includes the Hermit himself, in his fifties, his two attendants Zenki and his wife Genki, his mother, and the problematic character of Hitotaru, in his late twenties, who identifies himself as the Hermit’s main disciple. The Hermit’s enemies, who form the second group, consist of the mysterious figure Hitokotonushi, half-man, half-bull, in his thirties, and his mother, the evil goddess Katsuragi.

The play is set in the valley near Mt. Katsuragi in the ancient province of Yamato, not far from present-day Nara. It was there, that according to certain legends that Shōyō unearthed, En no Gyōja, through his mystic powers, had been able to cause the demons who opposed him to build a bridge of rock in order to link two inaccessible areas deep in the mountains.

In Act I, we learn that the Hermit, by his subjugation of Hitokotonushi, has made the countryside liveable for the peasants who abide there. En no Gyōja has weakened his adversary and has confined him in this valley. En has temporarily left the territory, however, and Hitokotonushi’s mother, by feeding him live fetuses for their blood, is managing to bring back her son’s strength.

We next learn that the Hermit’s disciple Hitotaru has fallen into a nearby river; he is brought on stage in a palanquin. The farming family who lives there, loyal to the Hermit and

his disciple, promise to make every attempt to heal him. It turns out, however, when the details of his adventure become clear, that the disciple has brought these dangers on himself. Disregarding the orders of the Hermit, he entered the forbidden valley, thinking that he had developed sufficient powers to "control nature itself." There he confronted the monster, and, in fleeing, had fallen. Now, he believes himself cursed. Storms break out as Act I concludes.

In Act II, the evil goddess Katsuragi herself appears. She has learned that Hitotaru is acting as if possessed and has a high fever. The villagers and farmers, however, appreciate the sermons he has been giving and believe that he has the ability to eventually replace the Hermit when, eventually, he will leave for good. Now the son of Katsuragi, the monster Hitokotonushi himself appears. He makes clear his anger at having been subjugated to a mere mortal man, and an old one at that. He tells his mother that rather than remaining in this state of subjugation, he would prefer to die; yet, since he is no mere human being, he does not have the ability to do away with himself. Above all, he says, he wishes "liberty from my state of being." His mother replies with a similarly operatic speech, railing at human beings, those "insects of the globe" who have the pretension to attempt to pacify the awesome forces of nature for their own mundane purposes. It is not her son but the Hermit who must die, she decides.

In Act III, a number of these themes — the force of nature, the role of men in a larger world, the way in which nature and natural forces are personalized, the natural order of beings, and so forth — are brought into sharp and dramatic focus.

En no Gyōja has now returned to the valley. Unfortunate rumors have been spread about him: he is accused of using evil incantations, and he is said to be working against the benevolence of the Emperor and the Imperial Family himself.

The first of several climactic scenes follows. As the Hermit meditates, Hitotaru pleads for his master's forgiveness. He tells En no Gyōja that he himself has had a vision, in which he has learned the presence of another doctrine for humanity, one less austere than Gyōja's. It is one in which mankind can without discomfort combine both their animal and spiritual natures. Such should be the "easiest way" in troubled times. Indeed, Hitotaru insists, "the animal nature can be taken as the basis for the divine." Gyōja rejects such heresy in a forthright manner.

Zenki, the Hermit's faithful servant, now arrives to tell his master that Katsuragi, the evil goddess, has apparently appeared in the valley herself. She will stand as the temptress for En no Gyōja. Before this encounter can take place, however, Hitotaru himself must face his own temptation, in the form of a girl from the village who has followed him into the mountains. She pleads with him to marry her and to become a farmer like the others. "Give up your striving, which can lead nowhere," she pleads, for after all, she insists, the hermit is only an old dried-up stick.

Suddenly a beautiful and mysterious woman appears. She attempts to seduce the Hermit, telling him that Buddhism represents an evil force, since its doctrines decree that women are inferior and impure. En continues to mediate through her perorations; when he touches her,

she recoils.

En no Gyôja then makes a series of long, poetic speeches about the need to seek for the inner self, to abandon that self which is related to the world and its vain attachments. Suddenly, the Hermit hurls down the Buddhist image he has been worshipping. Asking the surrounding rocks themselves to transform themselves into protecting deities, he creates a vision of Zao Gongen, that ferocious aspect of Buddha which destroys all evil. A huge storm arises; En no Gyôja vanishes and only clouds remain among the mountains as the final curtain falls.

As a drama the text shows a number of provocative aspects. *The Hermit*, in terms of a literary exercise, could well be studied and reflected upon for a number of reasons. In the first place, Shôyô's skill in stage diction and poetic sensibilities have created within the parameters of modern spoken Japanese a language of impressive depth and grandeur. In this regard, the fantastic plot seems altogether appropriate when articulated with a vocabulary and rhetoric so suitable to a "dramatic legend." Secondly, Shôyô's attempts to recast these ancient legends in a fashion that can interest, even move modern Japanese audiences, represents an effective appropriation of traditional culture not unlike that undertaken by such a writer as Watsuji Tetsurô, whose *Pilgrimages to Ancient Temples* was mentioned above. Finally, the use of Western dramatic materials to aid in the construction of the narrative and the contours of the characters is both obvious and intriguing. Prospero with all his magic certainly appears here, joined by Wagner's Parsifal in his climactic confrontation scene with the sorceress Kundry. And Nietzsche's Zarathustra remains close at hand as well.

A number of Japanese critics and commentators have interested themselves as well in the fact that certain events portrayed in the text resemble important difficulties in Shôyô's own life at the time. In this context, the play is, more than anything else, a disguised autobiography. In 1913, the writer and actor Shimamura Hôgetsu, Shôyô's chief disciple in his theatre company the Literary Society carried on an astonishing love affair with the leading actress of the troupe, Matsui Sumako. They left Shôyô's troupe to found one of their own; Shôyô, deeply discouraged, disbanded his troupe and further productions of any plays. Indeed, these painful events, and his sense of distress at being "betrayed" by his chief disciple, marked the end of a whole phase in Shôyô's long career.

When the play was first published three years later in 1916, these parallels between the events of this incident and the central conflict between the Hermit and his disciple Hitotaru were widely remarked on. Shôyô, however, insisted that any such analysis was incorrect. Perhaps, it has later been suggested, if *The Hermit* has a direct connection to the years in which it was written, and rewritten, by its author, this congruence lies with Shôyô's sense of the difficulties of maintaining the standards necessary to create "high art" at a time when compromise was everywhere, inevitable. Whatever Shôyô's ultimate motivations may have been, the fact that he continued to work and rework the text for several years, even with no prospects of a production in view, surely serves to indicate the importance of the work to him at that time.

At the time when Osanai announced the choice of this play as his first production of a Japanese drama at the Tsukiji Little Theatre, he felt it necessary to answer to a certain extent the kinds of criticism he was receiving. In three related articles he wrote concerning the production,<sup>2</sup> he hints at several reasons. First of all, Osanai evidently found the text eloquent and stageworthy; secondly, he was taken with the way in which the author had recast traditional Japanese cultural and religious themes by means of a contemporary psychological slant. Lastly, the play allowed for striking stage opportunities. Osanai defended his choice by saying that a production of *The Hermit* could show his audiences that there could be many kinds of real Japanese drama, not just the familiar *kabuki*. Shōyō's play, he felt, could allow him to make use of material that concerned Japanese tradition, but in new ways.

First of all, [I believe], we must war with these old "traditions." We must work towards destroying the old forms, so that we can make a new, a free art which truly belongs to us in our time. Such was one of the reasons that I produced only foreign plays during the past two seasons. Here, now, is an example of what I have been standing for: our separation from *kabuki*. We do not give in to tradition. No dancing, but movement. No singing, but speaking.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps, he concludes, he has given too radical a staging to Shōyō's play, but he considered it a splendid vehicle to exhibit a new vision of Japanese modern theatre.

Despite his disclaimers, therefore, *The Hermit* sent Osanai on his path towards a reconciliation with the Japanese tradition.

In 1928, Osanai was invited to the Soviet Union, along with another writer of leftist sympathies, Akita Ujaku (1883-1962) and a scholar of Russian literature and translator of Chekhov, Yonekawa Masao (1891-1965), as guests of the state, to observe theatrical innovations put in place since the establishment of the Soviet government a decade earlier. Whatever specific effect that visit may have had upon him, he returned to Tokyo with an explicit desire to use elements from the traditional Japanese theatre in his productions.

Soon after his return, Osanai gave a celebrated lecture entitled "The Future of the Japanese Theatre." He prepared this talk during the time in which he was preparing, of all things, a production for the Tsukiji Little Theatre of Chikamatsu's classic *jōruri* drama of 1715, *The Battles of Coxinga* (Kokusenya kassen), and undertaking even more unusual than his production of *The Hermit*.

The lecture spanned a number of topics. Specifically, in terms of the value of the traditional Japanese theatre, Osanai freely admits that, in one way or the other, *kabuki* did best represent the accomplishments of the Japanese theatre until his generation's time. While he saw *kabuki* as old-fashioned, he admitted to its true beauty of form. He remained convinced, however, that this form was not directly usable for audiences in interwar Japan.

From the point of view of contemporary audiences, and especially for those who attend the theatre in Tokyo, they look on their experiences in a different fashion from the *kabuki* enthusiasts of the Tokugawa period. Now, audiences are too diverse. They no longer possess eyes trained to appreciate the niceties of the

*kabuki* tradition. Thus they are “realists.” And, since they are such, they seek an audience that can show them these realities.<sup>4</sup>

In other words, audiences have now come to seek out dramas that relate most directly to their own lives. Nevertheless, Osanai admitted, there might indeed be some way to establish a useful synthesis.

As concerns the Japanese drama of the future, one artistic task will be to continue on with the traditional work of *kabuki*. However, from the point of view of the living theatre, it will be necessary to create a theatrical synthesis of our various performing arts that have been developed within Japanese culture for so many hundreds of years. We must pick up from them only what can be made good use of, and, combining all this together, make of the results something new — whatever we may wish to call it. Indeed, it does not matter what name it may be given. We can find a name for it afterwards. At the least, we will be able to create a new form of national theatre. We must create a national drama in which we can take pride.<sup>5</sup>

Here, then, is a projection of the next step towards synthesis which Osanai was preparing to take.<sup>6</sup> His attempts to refine his strategies for mounting a traditional Japanese play were to be somewhat curtailed, however. Osanai did prepare a fresh script closer to the modern vernacular for his actors, but he was not able to direct the production. When Osanai made this address, he was already suffering from serious illness, and his death less than a year later brought his various important experiments to an end. Still, the shift in Osanai's attitudes, from a first embrace of Western models to a final, more reasoned and synthetic vision, suggests a trajectory familiar in the case histories of many important Japanese artistic figures in the earlier years of this century.

With Osanai's death, his company broke up into disparate parts, and many of his artists, who were of progressive political sympathies, were forced to stop working. Some were even arrested. It was not until 1949, twenty years later, that successful experiments to combine Japanese themes with a sophisticated use of psychologically-adept dialogue, were carried out by the playwright Kinoshita Junji, who in his 1949 *Yūzuru* (Evening Crane) and other works achieved a new and striking synthesis involving just the kinds of elements first hinted at by Osanai himself towards the end of his own career.

Japanese modern theatre is quite at home with itself now, and indeed, many elements of Japanese theatre, particularly in the area of the avant-garde, have entered into the patterns of contemporary world theatrical performance. If Shōyō's and Osanai's contributions to this process could only be fleeting and partial, they nevertheless represented a crucial step in closing the gap, so strongly felt at his time, between the glamour of the imported model and the reinvention of familiar tradition.

## Notes

- 1 Although there is no English translation, there exists a translation in French, published in 1920 by the Société Littéraire de France. The translation was prepared during a voyage to France by a younger colleague of Shôyô's at Waseda University, Takamatsu Yoshio, a professor of comparative literature, who was in Paris to study French literary texts. Takamatsu deeply admired Shôyô's accomplishments, and wanted to make the text of *The Hermit* available to his French colleagues.
- 2 These articles are contained in his *Osanai Kaoru engekiron zenshû* (Tokyo: Miraisha, 1965), pp.266-276.
- 3 See Osanai, "En no Gyôja no Daichiya o oete," *Osanai Kaoru Engekiron zenshû* (Tokyo: Miraisha, 1965), p. 271.
- 4 See Osanai, "Nihon engeki no shôrai," in *Gendai Nihon bungaku zenshû* (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobô, 1956), Vol. 17, p. 131.
- 5 Ibid., p. 137.
- 6 Examining the entire span of Osanai's career, it seems clear that he was working slowly, and perhaps largely intuitively, towards the creation of an authentically Japanese modern theatre. For him, the first step on the process involved his decision to obtain a thorough grounding in Western theatre. I have discussed this aspect of his work in an essay entitled, "Chekhov and the Beginnings of a Modern Japanese Theatre" in a volume concerning Russian and Japanese cultural relations which I edited entitled *Hidden Fire* (Stanford University Press, 1995). In the future I hope to examine the final phase of his experiments in an essay on the 1928 production of Chikamatsu's *Battles of Coxinga*, mentioned in the text of the present essay.