CHAPTER TWO

AN ORDERED SYSTEM: THE LATER EIGHTEENTH AND NINETEENTH CENTURIES

It used to be that a playwright prepared the entire play singlehandedly, from the first act to the finale. This changed in the Period of Resurgence with the appearance of assistant playwrights, or second and third-ranked playwrights. Scenes were divided up, and the play was written by three or four people. Generally, the lead playwright devised the plot, which was then fully developed by other playwrights. After a preliminary perusal, changes were made, and then the play was read to the actors during the hon’yomi. Nowadays, however, everyone contributes in adding new twists to the plot; they no longer simply follow the directions of the lead playwright as he provides the plot and its new twists. This is due to a decline in our Way. (Kezairokû)\(^1\)

In this chapter we move into Kawatake Shigetoshi’s Period of Greatness for kabuki playwriting. This period saw many changes, both chronologically and regionally. Following a gradual move towards more emphasis on playwriting, as opposed to just playmaking, we can understand Kawatake’s general summary of the period as a time when the script attained its form and function as integral to kabuki production. The growing presence of playwrights and the diversification of their work was evident in both Kamigata and Edo. An annual production schedule developed under a hierarchy of playwrights, with each member carrying out specialized duties. The preparation of plays became a many-stepped, all-troupe process of planning, writing, consultation and rewriting, before and after the rehearsal period.

The Tenmei Period (1781-1789), launched the creative burst of Kawatake’s Period of Greatness. It was the second period, following Genroku, of tremendous creative development in kabuki. While Tenmei itself covered only the short decade of the 1780’s, it lends its name to a broader cultural development, roughly the last third of the eighteenth century (much as the Genroku Period (1688-1704) also refers to a cultural period up to the 1740’s.) The innovations and

\(^{1}\) *Kinsei geidôron*, 517. Period of Resurgence refers to the period from Genroku (beginning in 1688) to Hôreki (1751-1764).
efforts toward commercial success in the years since Genroku had led to improved acting techniques, new inventions for the stage, and many other changes, thus setting the stage for Tenmei kabuki.

What makes Genroku and Tenmei look different to the modern eye is partly the difference in amount of extant contemporary records, which makes the latter more describable and thus more imaginable. Combing through these records as well as plays, we note salient points that distinguish Tenmei practices in kabuki history. Among them is the accelerated importation into kabuki of jôruri plays and techniques, a consequential influence on kabuki that helped lead the way to the greatness of Tenmei kabuki. Kabuki borrowings from jôruri date back at least to the 1660’s, but they increase substantially at this time. Jôruri developed from a narrating tradition -- katarimono 語り物 -- and the focus on the story and its recitation was maintained in the union with puppetry, the puppets functioning as illustrations, in a sense, to the story. With the story primary, and its development on paper the method of play creation, logical plots and beautiful words were understandably central to the jôruri tradition. Kabuki, on the other hand, began with short, ribald skits; the story did not matter so much as the showing of it. As kabuki practitioners increasingly paid attention to the plots of plays, they looked to jôruri for how to create them. They borrowed aspects of structure and language, often by adapting plays wholesale. In the case of Edo kabuki, increased efforts at play composition were also supported by importing Kamigata playwrights who had experience in creating plays of relative complexity and coherence.

Also important among the differences between Genroku and Tenmei kabuki were the playwright, his greater relative importance in the troupe, and a new respect for what he might contribute. As Hattori Yukio points out, from the Genroku Period we begin to find a distinction in yakusha hyôbanki critiques between yakusha atari (役者当たり), a hit actor, and kyôgen atari (狂言当たり), a hit play, indicating a new appreciation for the play apart from the actors who delivered it. This new consciousness grows over the eighteenth century and naturally leads to a greater appreciation of playwrights as well. As earlier stated, an important reason for the bigger foothold secured by playwrights from this time was the increased attention paid to plays as a crucial aspect of production, with the

---