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# How Can Popular Theater Survive the Age of Globalization? The Strategies of Performing Arts

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## Introduction

In the second half of the twentieth century, popular entertainment was greatly influenced by the explosive spread of the instrument of mass media, television. And while we might say influenced, it was only one sector of entertainment and entertainers whose careers took off through it. A great deal of entertainment, especially rural entertainment based on stage shows, was dealt a lethal blow. Television cannot be said to be the only cause, but most of the traditional street performers and those who performed from door to door disappeared from Japan between the 1960s and 1970s. In such a climate, it is truly astonishing that popular theater has hung on at all up to this day in the twenty-first century. I would like to consider why popular theater did not die out even though it did not receive public assistance as a traditional or national art, and in what way it will change in the future.

### 1. Popular Theater as a Genre

"Popular Theater" can be defined as small-scale colorful performing troupes formed around a leader and based on family labor. Troupes perform practically every day of the year without break, mainly in regular-performance theaters in the downtown area or outskirts of a city, or in regional hot springs, hotels, health centers, and health resorts. Performances consist of mainly historical dramas about honor and human nature, and song and dance shows. Often, the program changes daily. They often perform for as low as the 1000 yen range for regular-performance theaters, and the 2000 yen range at hot springs, which includes a boxed meal and drink. Among actors are people who jumped into the profession themselves, but there are also many who have continued their family traditions as members of the second and third generation (especially troupe leaders). In the past they were called *tabi-shibai* (traveling theaters), *yose-shibai* (vaudeville theaters), and *dosa-mawari* (exile-rounds), but this genre came to be generally known as *taishu-engeki* (popular theater) from the 1970s (Ukai 1996: 179–186).

It is not very often that popular theater is shown on

mass media outlets. Likewise, aside from a certain few, the troupe leaders and performers are not very well known. In places such as regular-performance theaters, regional hot springs, and health resorts, there are at most about 200 regular staff. From this, although it is called “popular theater,” it is in a situation where it cannot really be said to be receiving popular support.

Although some groups are trying to unify the industry, there are no statistics, so let me give a general outline of the scale of the genre called popular theater (as of July, 2011), although I can only make a rough estimate.

The number of troupes listed on the “by troupe leader and troupe name” performance information pages in the popular theater fan magazine “Engeki Graph” (“Theatrical Graph”) is about 120. If we assume there is an average of ten members in a troupe, that makes the number of people involved in popular theater nationwide to be about 1200. Of course not all people associated with a troupe perform on stage. However, I believe it fair to assume that at least 80 percent of those are performers. Doing so, we can estimate that there are approximately one thousand popular theater performers nationwide.

From the aspect of theater attendance, if we assume one troupe draws 200 people in a day, that totals 24,000 people nationwide who are going to see popular theater every day. This is only 0.002 percent of the population of Japan, and if we compare this to the number of people watching TV, we can see what a very slight market share of the general public is supporting them.

But if we see these figures as just one genre of present-day Japanese entertainment, it is not at all small. Let’s compare it with kabuki, considered to be tradi-

tional Japanese theater. There are about 300 kabuki actors. Aside from the number of actors, with only three theaters, there is a limit to how many kabuki performances can be put on at the same time. If so, if we calculate each of the three theaters (the (previous) Kabuki-za of Tokyo (1800 seats), the National Theater of Japan (1500 seats), and Osaka’s Shouchiku-za (1500 seats)) as being sold out for both day and night performances, the largest number of people who can see kabuki on a certain day comes to only 8600. In other words, in terms of both number of actors and amount of audience, current popular theater is three times the scale of kabuki. Incidentally, the number of entertainers registered with Yoshimoto Kogyo are approximately 700, the total number of sumo wrestlers is about 750, and there are 650 rakugo story tellers. There are very few entertainers involved in the arts of Japanese puppet theater, *kodan* story-telling, and *rokyoku* narrative singing.

## 2. Popular Theater in the Second Half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

### (1) From Post-War to the 1960s

Popular theater entered a golden age directly after the Pacific War.<sup>1</sup> Overcome by defeat in the war, popular theater pulled in people starved of amusement. Kaichiro Furukawa, writing on the people of the popular theater in Kansai, wrote the following.

“From two hours before show time, a double-line of customers stretched for 100 meters in front of the theater.

“More and more kept coming, and the doorman would throw their entrance fees into a wooden apple box by the entrance. When it started to overflow, he would

<sup>1</sup> Kaichiro Furukawa puts the first golden period of popular theater at the fifteen years between the end of the Taisho era (1926) through 1939, and the second golden period as postwar (1947) through the second half of the 1950s. (Furukawa 1980: 9)

stomp it down, then start throwing more in. There was a time when he greeted the customers covered in sweat.” (Furukawa 1980a: 10)

After that, until the first part of the 1960s, popular theater started to receive regular support from customers, even while being pressured by movies and striptease establishments. For example, if we look at the records of performances printed in *Kyoto Shimbun*, in the case of Tohji Theater, the predecessor of current striptease club DX Tohji, it was after 1958 that popular theater performances started to decline and the establishment started to rely mostly on striptease performances. And the 昭劇 that was in Otsu was remodeled from a movie theater, and from March 1958 through July 1962 was a small regular-performance theater used exclusively for popular theater.

## (2) The Spread of Television and Decline of Popular Theater

As mentioned in the introduction, television was an epoch-making form of media that fundamentally changed how we enjoy entertainment. Before television, entertainment was all stage shows, or live performances. That is to say, the performance could not be experienced without the performers and viewers sharing the same time and space. However, television made it possible to enjoy entertainment from one’s home. There was no longer a necessity to get oneself to the theater or music hall. It was therefore natural that with the spread of television, there would be a decline in the entertainment industry.

It is a fact that popular theater was greatly damaged. I can cite only fragmented pieces of data, but of

Kansai’s 55 regular-performance popular theater establishments in 1960, there were only 31 in 1963, 20 in 1965, 17 in 1966, 14 in 1968, and as few as five in 1973.<sup>2</sup> As Furukawa relates, one theater director’s words reflect these numbers: “We hit rock bottom in around 1972 and 1973, and at that time I thought the industry might even completely disappear.” (Furukawa 1980a: 10) However, popular theater has survived for almost forty years since that rock-bottom time, and still now exists.

### (3) The “Popular Theater Boom” of the 1980s

Entering the 1980s, popular theater entered a time of being what could even be called a fad. When the Mokuba-kan opened as a regular-performance theater in Asakusa, Tokyo and received way over the estimated number of customers, regular-performance theaters started opening up one after the other in metropolises and regional core cities such as Fukuoka, North Kyushu, Hiroshima, Okayama, Matsuyama, Kobe, and Nagoya.

Concerning this popular theater boom, two causes can be named.

One is the success of the troupe leader convention in Kyushu. In September of 1980, “The First Nationwide Troupe Leader Conference” was broadcast in the following October as a special entitled “晴れ姿！ 旅役者座長大会,” and its liveliness made a strong impression on viewers across the country. This program became the “ignition point” of the popular theater boom and “after this, business redoubled in the Kanto and Kansai regions” (Hashimoto 1983b: 88).

Another is the nation-wide popularity of Tomio Umezawa, known as “Downtown Tamasaburo.” In plays

<sup>2</sup> By the 1970s, remaining regular-performance theaters were only in Kansai (Osaka and Kobe) and Kanto (Tokyo and Yokohama). They had already disappeared from Kyushu, known as the home of popular theater. And, as of July 2011, there are a total of twenty regular-performance theaters in Kansai, located in Osaka, Hyogo, Nara, and Wakayama.

he played the foolish comic relief, and in dance shows he made an about-face into an alluring female. In 1978 he succeeded the name of the sub troupe leader of the troupe of which his own brother was troupe leader, but by that time he was already the most popular actor of the time in Kanto (Hashimoto 1983b: 114). What made his name and face widely familiar to society was the television series “You’re Not the Only Lonely One,” broadcast on TBS from June through August of 1982. The hit of the year, Umezawa played the part of a popular theater actor playing a female role. In October of the same year Umezawa released the LP “夢芝居,” and then went on to perform in NHK’s year-end “Kohaku Uta Gassen” in 1983.

As seen above, the driving force of the popular theater boom of the 1980s was television. Ironically, popular theater came into fad due to the television that had caused its decline.

### 3. Popular Theater’s Survival Strategies

So, how has popular theater survived in the face of television’s influence? This can be summarized in the following four points. (1) By basing themselves at health centers as venues, troupes were able to preserve their status as cooperative bodies of entertainers. (2) Although revenue from performances was low, gifts of admiration compensated and performers could live off of low salaries. (3) They targeted middle-aged women, their strategy being to draw in a small number of regular customers. (4) They had the charm of contact and exchange.

(5) Popular theater had the strong roots necessary to make survival possible.

I will look at each of these as follows.

#### (1) Health Centers and the Preservation of Troupes as Cooperative Bodies of Entertainers

As the regular-performance theaters where popular theater was performed started going under one after the other, a new public performance location surfaced. It was the health center. What is said to be the pioneer of health centers was the Funabashi Health Center (in Funabashi, Chiba), which opened in 1955. Around a central large bath house was an amusement park, bowling alley, swimming pool, and lodging facilities. From then on, places where families and group package customers could spend the day enjoying a variety of leisure activities were built in each region across the country. Health centers always, or to the degree that “always” is appropriate, were fitted with theaters with stages, performance areas, a great hall, and a concert hall, and large audiences were attracted by the shows of popular singers. However, such were only on special occasions, and popular theater performers were slotted as filler on ordinary days.<sup>3</sup>

However, health centers that are bringing in dinner-included group package customers bring in few who are serious about watching performances. Patrons who get drunk during the show and cause a disturbance can be seen. Because of this, over health centers, regular-performance theaters were recognized as being the main venue. Also, the fee was low at health centers.<sup>4</sup> How-

<sup>3</sup> Popular theater performers were not promoted at all health centers, as singers and folk song troupes, girls’ operas, and a variety of entertainment were shown. It is said that health centers that featured popular theater were often small-scale, low-budget establishments.

<sup>4</sup> The performance fees at health centers were sometimes so low that they could only be called illegal. Hashimoto gives examples such as the following. “Because there were fewer troupes than there were hot spring resorts, they regularly underpaid with a straight face, and in the worst cases performance fees would be about 83,000 yen, inviting a situation where each troupe would seal their own fate” (Hashimoto 1983: 56).

ever, according to a monthly performance contract, health centers furnished meals, and troupe members lodged in a dormitory. In other words, while a troupe was performing at a health center, their basic living needs of food and lodgings were guaranteed. Overall, troupe living was more stable than it had been before.

More important than anything was that by basing themselves at health centers, they were able to preserve their status as cooperative bodies of entertainers called “troupes.” Instead of, say, an individual actor making his way as a TV personality, by continuing as a troupe, they were able to adjust their performances to the needs of the audience with programs rich in variation, and pass down acts and techniques through blood and master-apprentice relationships, and through daily life together.

## (2) Financial Support through Gifts from Admirers

Actor incomes from popular theater are unbelievably low. When I myself was an actor in popular theater from 1982 through 1983, I received a mere 15,000 yen per month. This was not particularly low, as Furukawa, who in 1980 researched widely on the popular theater of Kansai, also accounts, “According to the data I have gathered, the amount was on the whole about twenty to thirty thousand yen” (Furukawa 1980b: 15). However, being single and staying in dormitories and dressing rooms, if I lived my life eating the food provided me, not purchasing any unnecessary clothing, and trying not to go out on the town, I did not feel any great lack.

However, naturally there would not be enough if one were to try to make costumes and wigs, support a family, or purchase cars and other consumer goods. What supplements the extremely low salary to allow one to prepare for oneself everything necessary for performing and to make a normal lifestyle possible, or even one above that level, is “*hana*” (gifts or tips).

At a popular theater show, a song and dance show

follows the play. Audience members *hand* these *hana* directly to the performers during the show. Performers are sometimes given items such as clothing and kimono sashes, folding fans, and food and drink. However, *hana* refers to cash, at most 10,000 yen. There are various ways of handing it to the actors: by folding it into a kimono sash, by pinning it to a collar, by tying it into a lei and putting it around the neck, and by simply throwing a roll of bills onto the stage.

Those who assertively support performers economically through *hana* are called “*hiiki*” (patrons), as opposed to fans. Considering it as a part of the show, there are many patrons who hand it over in a way that makes their favorite performer stand out. And there are some patrons who do not want to stand out, and hand the money to the performer backstage. These *hana* come to quite a sum when one becomes a star. For example, one troupe leader in Kyushu related the following in an interview in 1983.

“I once received five million yen in one shot, and (at one health center) one patron lodged there for forty days, and in total I received ten million yen.” (Hashimoto 1983a: 86)

In addition, patrons support performers in other ways. If you go out on the town together, the patron pays for the taxis and meals. On the town, patrons buy things such as clothing and shoes for the performers. They also pick up the tab for costumes and wigs, or even pay off performers’ car loans. In this way, if you have a wealthy patron, you can live a considerably good life without digging into your own pocket.

However, in order to attract patrons one must have technique, talent, looks, and resourcefulness, and patrons are not something that every popular theater performer has. In my own case, I had fans, but I did not have any patrons.

*Hana* are the barometer of a performer’s popularity

and ability, and attaining a patron can be said to be a rite of passage for a performer. Only performers with patrons survive in the world of popular theater. And it's to survive that popular theater performers make themselves up, dress up, and polish their acts.

### **(3) Drawing in Middle-Aged Women as Regular Customers**

Even if one secures a place to perform at a health center and even finds patrons, if performances do not draw in an audience, the theater itself cannot continue. There is a necessity to narrow down the target audience, and draw in a constant flow of viewers.

The viewers that popular theater targeted were middle-aged women. Not only that, to speak frankly, they targeted dowdy aunties and old ladies who were of a class with neither high income nor high education, but had the means and time to be able to go out to a show on a weekday afternoon.

These women had been ignored by mass marketing and the mass media during that period of high economic growth. For example, until the second half of the 1960s, there were hardly any television programs that claimed the interest of this class.<sup>5</sup> Popular theater was targeting a niche market that was outside the field of vision of mass media.

However, large halls in city centers also targeted middle-age women in just the same way that popular theater did. But the tactics of popular theater regular-performance theaters was different. The strategy of large halls was to bring in unspecified numbers of people through group packages. Group package customers can also be called high-volume one-time customers. On the other hand, regular-performance theaters had a strategy

of bringing in zealous repeat customers of a specific number. To put it simply, different from a kabuki theater having people come once a month for 10,000 yen per show, popular theater regular-performance theaters had people come every day for 1,000 yen per show.

First, this marketing strategy is visible in the form of the performances. The format of a daily-changing, low-priced program at popular theater regular-performance theaters is a prerequisite for having customers who visit every day.

Second, in order to draw in regular customers, they have demonstrated a spirit of thoroughness of service. Not only the troupe leader, but down to the regular members of the troupe change their costumes and wigs and appear several times on the stage every day, for plays and dances and singing. And after the final performance, the performers get ahead to the exit and see off the customers, bowing and saying thank you.

The performers learn the names and faces of regular customers, and speak to them individually as they leave. Being recognized by the performers is also part of the process of becoming one of the core fans.

### **(4) The Charm of Contact and Exchange**

I'd like to describe the charm of the actual popular theater.

The charm of popular theater, said by both performers and customers, is "contact" and "exchange." It's the feeling of oneness given off by a performance at a small theater. It's the frank communication between the stage and the audience during the play. It's the everyday feeling that pervades a humble stage. It's the conversations about private life during send-off. It's running into the performers out of costume at the local marketplace. It's

<sup>5</sup> The first "wide show" (variety talk show), "Norio Kijima's Morning Show," started in 1964, the afternoon wide show "Afternoon Show" started in 1965, and "You at 3:00" started in 1968.

the gossip and exchange of snacks that happens between members of the audience sitting near one another. What the words “contact” and “exchange” indicate is this connectivity between performers and audience due to the lack of distance between them, and ideal communication that is characteristic of popular theater.

I do not mean to say here that a humanity lost in modern society is alive. However, it is a fact that this kind of connectivity and communication cannot be created by mass media.

Also, the fact that this charm cannot be taken up by mass media in itself becomes a point in favor of popular theater. Performers of popular theater became “regional specialty” and “known by anyone who’s anyone” stars within each of the blocks of Kyushu, Kansai, and Kanto, and within a limited number of regular-performance theaters and health centers. Not on the big screen or television, audiences can come into contact with these stars live, and so close that they could touch them if they reached out their hands. Such conditions give fans a special sense that “I’m the only one who knows him.” And, having “my star,” produces strong support for the performers. People cheer on performers, and using more contemporary terms, they back the performers as “supporters” more than “fans.” Their status as professional local entertainers came from the nature of popular theater, but we can say that the fact that they are not taken up by mass media simply increases the scarcity factor.

But this charm relies on the fact that popular theater is a minor genre. I want to note that it is something that is lost once a performer starts performing in big halls or makes a break into mass media.

#### **(5) Strong Roots**

And finally, I’d like to say that the survival of popular theater we have seen above is due to the fact that it was not a calculated project developed by industry professionals. We can’t really say that it was engaged in purposefully through public relations or market pioneering. It would be more accurate to say that both as an industry and as individual troupes, they did not purposely act so in order to survive, so much as because they were pushed into a niche market by the passage of the ages, and ended up surviving.

But, when spreading out roots within the niche, it takes a special strength to survive. Popular theater had such strength. And with roots, people who have a certain sense of smell, such as the auntie and old lady class as well as patrons, are attracted, approach, and become hooked.

#### **4. What Will Happen Next to Popular Theater?**

After that, popular figures have been taken up by the mass media, it rode through the “lost age” of post-bubble Japan, and now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, popular theater is in good health. We can no longer use the phrases “disappearing art” or “just getting by”; popular theater can be said to be a full genre of its own.

Entering the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the rising of the third generation of the public theater world has been striking. Those who debuted in the post-war golden age and survived the decline due to the spread of television (born in the 1940s) can be called the first generation.<sup>6</sup> We can call the second generation those who rose as the younger generation of the boom of the 1980s (born during the second half of the 1950s and the 1960s). Now, those born in the 1980s and the top of the

<sup>6</sup> I am calling this generation the “first generation” to simplify the story. However, in popular theater at that time there had already been one or two generations before them.

1990s are just now starting to become the troupe leaders and star performers.<sup>7</sup>

This change of generation in a troupe often takes the form of a succession of troupe leader. Performers of the past generation take the parts of villains, old people, and troupe managers<sup>8</sup> supporting the troupe leader, and it is not a system where there is strife between the generations. Due to this changing of the generations within the troupes and preservation of the troupe as a cooperative body, as a minor performing art it seems that we can say that there will be no concern over successors for another fifteen years.

The popular theater world is also taking part in dissemination of information through web sites, blogs, and video upload sites. However, up until now, this has not made a significant change to the popular theater world. More than bringing in new customers, they are no better than tools to preserve and maintain current relations.

Rather, to the extent that the digital age has made it easier to make copies, it can be said that the fact that the experience of public theater cannot be copied has made that experience even more important. This is a strong point of popular theater, which emphasizes performance as being a live event.

We could also say that the marketing of AKB48, the “idols you can go and meet” who started out mostly performing live in their own small theater in Akihabara, stole the business model of popular theater’s targeting a specific small segment and offering the charm of contact and exchange. Or, can’t we say that popular theater, which at a glance seems to be behind the times, is in fact one step ahead of the fads and topics that have come up since the turn of the century, such as deflation period culture, the “wa” (Japanese-style) boom, the come-back

of Japan and of local districts, underground idols, local idols, and B-class gourmet?

The key to the future of popular theater is the tendencies of the target market of middle-aged women. What worried me when I became involved in popular theater in the first half of the 1980s was what will happen after the aunties and old ladies coming to see us at that time stopped coming. However, now, that worry was unfounded. The reason was that after them, a new class of aunties started frequenting theaters.

However, there is no guarantee that from here on, the auntie sector will provide a stable supply of audience. Previously I wrote that there are no worries over successors for the next fifteen years, but even with successors, the genre will die out if supporting customers disappear.

Concerning this point, there are two possible theories, as follows.

One theory is that young women will someday become aunties, and because they will come to enjoy popular theater and Enka, and so from now on there will continue to be a stable supply of customers. This is a view of the future of popular theater based on an extension on the fact that popular theater has been supported by a fixed number of customers since the 1980s. And as has been seen with the Korean boom of the 21st century, we can say that there is groundwork for that.

Another theory is that as the local aspect of popular theater becomes diluted, it only seemed that the auntie class was attending at a stable number because at the time the population was increasing. So, in real numbers, the number of women becoming aunties is actually decreasing. In the past, there were enough aunties who lived within walking distance to fill the theaters, but now

<sup>7</sup> From this third generation of performers, names known in the mass media include Daigoro Tachibana and Taichi Saotome.

<sup>8</sup> This person is responsible for the management of the troupe.



many aunties come by train, bus and car from further away. This has been made possible by improvements in transportation, and supports the theory that the population of people who are moved by the charm of popular theater is decreasing.

The future of popular theater branches depending on which theory you take.

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