

Shoyo Tsubouchi's Child Drama

Takeo Fujikura
Waseda University

Shoyo Tsubouchi (1859-1935) was a prominent figure known for his innovative activities in both literature and the theatre world in Japan. He was a revolutionary novelist; a critic who triggered the realism movement in Japanese literature; a playwright who initiated the genre of New Kabuki; a director and producer who introduced Western modern drama and acting to the Japanese stage; and above all, a renowned Shakespearian scholar who was the first to translate the complete works of Shakespeare to Japanese. In addition to these well-known achievements, Dr. Tsubouchi was the first person in Japan to acknowledge and endorse the educational value of drama by and for children.

However, despite these many achievements, there were huge gaps between his ideals and his practice throughout his lifelong pursuit of theatrical exploration. In all his endeavors, he struggled with persistent social prejudice against drama and literature, as well as the deeply rooted theatrical and literary conventions that were a legacy of more than 200 years of Japanese isolationist policy. He was also in conflict with his own artistic and aesthetic perceptions that had been drilled into him as a Meiji. As a result, very often his practice contradicted his original theories. Thus, by researching his struggles, both internal and external, we can observe the characteristics of Japanese values and aesthetics.

In this paper, I will show the value of the Study of Tsubouchi's endeavors as a means to unearth the unique Japanese mentality and values which dominated Japanese aesthetics, as reflected in both the literature and dramatic practice of Japan. First, I will examine the two primary competing impulses that played major roles in the formation of his value and aesthetic system. Then I will illustrate how these competing impulses affected his successive theorizing and executing processes.

Influence of Confucianism and Kabuki

Tsubouchi was born in 1859 toward the end of the Edo Era (1603-1867), only five years after Japan had finally opened its doors to the rest of the world. During the Edo Period, the spirit of Confucianism permeated all classes of Japanese people's way of thinking through more than 200 years of peace time, with minimal foreign influence. Although the actual effects of Confucianism had weakened toward the end of the Edo Era, Japanese ethics, morality, and sense of order and value continued to be infused with Confucian ideology.

Although Tsubouchi had received this Confucianist discipline from his father, he had also been influenced by his mother's love of theatre-going, especially to Kabuki plays. According to Tsubouchi's biographer, Honma, Tsubouchi had read *Tokugawa Gisaku Bungaku (Dramatic Literature of the Tokugawa Era)* and by age seven had immersed himself in theatre-going. Much of Kabuki drama glorified and celebrated such treasured Confucian virtues as filial piety, loyalty to the master, and self-restraint/discipline (Honma 99-100).

In a sense, Tsubouchi had become "doomed" when he was deeply influenced by the mode, style and philosophy of Kabuki Theatre. During the Meiji Era, there was considerable prejudice and discrimination against dramatic activity. Theatrical presentation was associated with corruption and degradation, and it often became the target of government censorship and the subject of public controversy.

Thus, as an educator, an ethics scholar, and a theatre lover Tsubouchi was destined to search for the reconciliatory ground wherein he would be able to mitigate public skepticism and introduce the significance of drama. His eventual emphasis on the educational aspects of drama and his process orientation could be interpreted as a conciliatory measure mediating these contradicting factors. It is clear that Tsubouchi's frequent contradictory stance toward Kabuki itself came from this fundamental conflict between his passionate love for Kabuki and hesitance as a moral teacher against the perceived vulgarity of Kabuki.

Tsubouchi and his child drama: "Kateiyo Jidogeki", or "Child drama for domestic presentation": A Struggle with Japanese Convention

In 1921, at age 62 and after a long career waiting for the "right" time, Tsubouchi finally embarked on his child-participation drama activity. Certainly the society had changed by the Taisho Era with both an influx of Western thought and the awakening of Japanese self-identity. Yet Tsubouchi remained cautious about the reception of his activity. Due to existing social prejudice, if the child-participation drama was to be realized, he believed it would need to assert a "new content and configuration that were totally different from the prevalent Japanese prefixed notion of drama" ("Engeki to Seinen" 490).

Therefore he developed a unique configuration called "Kateiyo Jidogeki" or "Child Drama for Domestic Presentation." This concept was of a child-centered drama process wherein children were encouraged to act in age-appropriate dramatic stories, using their own initiative and creativity in simple settings. This was to be facilitated by their parents (or elder siblings) within a closed environment, thus shielded from the public prejudice against drama.

No one in Japan had ever before encouraged any kind of theatre to be performed at home. By utilizing this strategy, Tsubouchi contrived to protect the purity and legitimacy of child drama not only from the censorship of the government but also from the negative connotations of adult drama.

In order to examine the essence of his domestic drama concept, attention must be paid to Tsubouchi's assertion in *Jidokyoiku to Engeki (Child Education and Drama)*. In Chapter 7, he anticipates the possible negative concerns about the conduct of child drama and provides detailed advice upon dramatic discretion wherein parents and other coaches would provide children's drama with a process-oriented focus. Here Tsubouchi's main rationale for his domestication idea was to prevent children's development of those traits which had been especially perceived as "corruption" and "vulgarity" of Kabuki theatre.

In support of his rhetoric on the domestication, Tsubouchi also warned parents against "infusing the conventional concept of acting and directing methods" ("Kateiyo Jidogeki ni Tsuite" 193). By emphasizing the importance of children's unforced creativity, he tried to avoid having parents interpret his dramatic activities in conventional Kabuki idioms. He continued to issue this warning to protect his drama from both outside criticism and the contamination of his ideal concept by the practitioners themselves. It is evident that he was aware that conventional Kabuki-based theatre concepts so permeated the contemporary Japanese culture that his idealistic goals could not be accomplished without such precautions. Thus Tsubouchi made every effort to establish drama as a valid educational tool by eradicating its negative image. However, as opposed to his premeditated theory of "Child Drama for Domestic Presentation," Tsubouchi's actual demonstration activities turned out to be incompatible with his theories

Beginning in November 1922, Tsubouchi embarked upon public demonstration of his "Child Drama for Domestic Presentation" theory, which eventually developed into major tours throughout Japan. His first experimental performance seems to have been spontaneous but it determined the form of those that followed. And since Tsubouchi's drama had not been designed for public performance, they were filled with many contradictory factors.

For example, a reviewer from Tokyo Asahi Newspaper remarked upon three contradictions: first, he pointed out that open performance in a theatre itself contradicted Shoyo Tsubouchi's initial insistence that child drama should not be performed on a public stage; second, Shoyo Tsubouchi had used understudies of professional actresses; and finally, the use of realistic costumes and elaborate settings for these experimental performances was inconsistent with the theory. (Tsubouchi, "Katei jidogeki wo Mite"). It is clear that these experimental performances were far from the ideal child drama on which Tsubouchi had originally insisted in his articles and lectures.

Six months later, in June 1923, Tsubouchi defended some of his choices. By then, he had argued that child drama performed on a large stage for the public must be handled quite differently from the child-participating drama which he'd originally designed -- that when a play is produced on a large stage it must be "an appropriately artistically rendered piece" and elements such as choreography, sets, and costumes have to be "enhanced so they stand out even from a distance". (Tsubouchi, "Kateiyo no Jidogeki wo Gekijo de").

In this somewhat ambiguous fashion, Tsubouchi stressed the importance of the artistic bearing of child drama when performed on a large stage. Considering the size of the Yurakuza Theatre, the sight of his first performance which seated 600, some adjustment to his child drama style was inevitable; however, those adjustments meant that Tsubouchi's ideal concept of child drama would be compromised. Consequently, artistry superseded educational significance in this first production as well as in later productions. Having acknowledged that Kabuki style was anti-societal and unacceptable, especially for child drama, he still was attached to the acting style and dramatic form of his public performances.

Examination of other contradictions reveals that Tsubouchi's essential motivation resided not so much in his interest in children, although that was genuine, but rather in the edification of children as an extension of the enlightenment effort of the Meiji elite. In spite of his well thought out concept of child drama, there is no record of his having worked directly with children during the process of devising it, nor did Tsubouchi see any other child drama performed by children throughout the development of his child drama endeavor. (Tsubouchi, "Jidogeki no Koen ni Tsuite"). Tsubouchi's child drama was based on a theory, not actual practice, with little consideration given to either the children's real world or to their autonomy. Thus, despite his original plan to incorporate children's initiatives, few child-centered elements could be detected in his demonstrational performances.

Contradictions also resided in the scripts themselves. Some of Tsubouchi's dramas were written in a formal language unsuitable for child players but, as Tomita contends, instead were "written in a style too old fashioned for children to play by themselves" or "written in Kabuki style" (Engeki Kyoiku 184). This tendency increased in his drama designed for older children which dealt with Japanese myths and Japanese historical heroes. Tsubouchi always attempted to use language based on the story's quality and background. Thus, his obsession with the language sometimes superseded the priority of the drama itself.

In addition to Tsubouchi's lack of experience with children's needs and child drama practice, other factors, derived in part from historical conditions, also contributed to his miscalculations and resulted in further contradictions in his endeavor. The most important influence on Tsubouchi was G. Stanley Hall's Recapitulation Theory in which he states, in part, that a child develops in certain predetermined stages, a concept which led to the belief that it was counterproductive to skip any of the

respective developmental processes. Tsubouchi clearly espoused the Recapitulation Theory, but there existed a contradiction between the theory and his own experience. Tsubouchi ignored this contradiction; perhaps he was not aware of it himself. But it became clear in some of his production concepts and conflicting statements about his ideal child drama.

The key to this important consideration lies in the activities he launched just prior to his child drama endeavor in 1920. He had already devoted much of his time to autobiographical writing as well as the compilation and documentation of the past Kabuki productions he witnessed in childhood. Tsubouchi described the meticulous aspects of past Kabuki productions in his home town as far back as 1869 when he was ten. He recollects, "It was such an exciting experience. Indeed I was amused to the degree of addiction" (Tsubouchi, "Watashino Terakoya Jidai" 24)

Obviously young Tsubouchi's overwhelming experiences of Kabuki theatre in terms of form and content were "age-inappropriate" from the contemporary child psychological perspective and thus "uneducational" according to Tsubouchi's later rhetoric of child drama. Although he later denounced them as a dissipating entertainment element of child drama, it had been the colorful, extravagant and, at the same time uniquely stylized elements of Kabuki that infatuated him as a child. Moreover, it was watching Kabuki that determined his life direction as a professional theatre practitioner; Tsubouchi himself had been heavily affected and "educated" by those elements of Kabuki theatre.

Yet, in his child drama activity, Tsubouchi attempted to incorporate Stanley Hall's Recapitulation Theory into his dramaturgy in child drama. Given Tsubouchi's lack of interaction with children and his strong advocacy of Social Darwinism, it is reasonable to speculate that this age-appropriate criteria based on genetic psychology was, in a sense, the only valid qualifying index he could resort to when creating dramas for children.

Somehow, though, he sensed the gap between his excitement for his childhood experience and his conceptually invented ideal drama as limited interest in his own child drama from which he had eliminated all those colorful and entertaining Kabuki elements that had mesmerized him as a child. Tsubouchi's concept was, after all, a vulnerable cultural product that had become much influenced by the dominant ideologies of the time. However, in the end, Tsubouchi proved more loyal to his personal reactions than to the theory he had intellectually conceived.

The contradictions found in Tsubouchi's dramatic endeavors clearly reveal his struggles against the social conventions of his time. His attempt to create new Japanese theatrical experiences, demonstrates the validity of Thomas Postlewait's notion that "Theatre is not a self-contained, aesthetic enterprise. It always occurs within the shaping, often determining, influences of political, economic, social, ethical, educational, and aesthetic systems and ideas" (165).

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