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## The Old *Shibai*: Japanese Theater in Hawai'i

THE *ISSEI*, or first generation of Japanese in Hawai'i, traveled thousands of miles to a few isolated islands in the middle of the Pacific Ocean in search of wealth. Though far from home, they were not far from their theatrical roots. The *Issei* brought all kinds of Japanese performances with them. Theatrical presentations varied, ranging from professional to educational, from pure entertainment to political propaganda. Different types of theater could be experienced in the urban center of Honolulu or in rural plantation towns. Sometimes groups would come in from Japan. In all cases, the performances were an exciting even widely patronized by the Japanese community in Hawai'i.

Surprisingly, scholars have paid very little attention to this fascinating period in Hawai'i's theatrical history. For those who do not read or speak Japanese, most of the information about Japanese theater in Hawai'i is found in photographs, oral histories, newspaper clippings, and so forth. Piecing these bits of information into a comprehensive picture of the Japanese theater scene in turn of the century Hawai'i will be a challenge for interested academics, but I hope that this paper may be a small start. By identifying the performer, the audience, the venue, and the content of different performances they may be broken down into different types: professional, community, educational, and political. A brief overview of the types of Japanese theater in Hawai'i

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as compared to types of theater of the same era in Japan shows that, with the exception of state-supported professional companies, the range of performances available to Japanese in Hawai'i and Japanese of comparable socioeconomic standing in Japan were similar. The social and political functions of performances in Japan and in Hawai'i were also alike, although immigrants sometimes adapted old traditions to suit their new surroundings. Japanese theater in Hawai'i at the turn of the century was an important social activity whose primary role was to reaffirm the cultural identity and values of Japanese immigrants to Hawai'i.

#### BACKGROUND

Japanese immigrants to Hawai'i came at a turbulent time. In the late 1800s, both Japan and Hawai'i were experiencing social and political upheaval. In the 1880s, the Native Hawaiian population was shrinking due to disease and low birth rates. The Hawaiian government, under pressure from American business leaders, looked abroad for laborers to support a growing sugar industry. Hawaiian government recruiters toured Japan, giving public speeches to promote plantation labor in Hawai'i. Japanese farmers in the provinces were struggling in the unstable socioeconomic circumstances of the time, and so they were a receptive audience.

Japanese immigrants who arrived in Hawai'i as early as 1868 but increased in number between 1885 to 1908 had been mostly tenant farmers in Japan. Peasants in the provinces at this time suffered: the price of rice fell, soil conditions were bad, the number of farmers who had to lease land increased, and wages dropped. Different provinces handled these economic problems in different ways. Historically, some provinces preferred to concentrate on internal development, while others sent workers out to more urban areas to make money. Provinces that had a history of sending workers to the city in times of economic stress had higher rates of emigration.<sup>1</sup> Dr. Allan Moriyama of Yokohama National University summarizes:

from international events to local soil conditions, [factors] worked together to create a reasonable, logical option for these farmers, fishermen, and laborers. For perhaps the first time in their lives they saw

before them a chance to earn some money and better their lives, and many chose to do so.<sup>2</sup>

### PROFESSIONAL THEATER

The professional theater of Japan in the Meiji Era, in the late 19th century, was in a time of tremendous change. The opening of the country in 1854 introduced Western influence to all aspects of Japanese culture, and the theater was greatly affected. Several societies for the reform of the theater were organized. *Kabuki*, which had always been the theater of the common people, rose to be appreciated by the upper class and soon replaced *Noh* as the national theater. Current events became the basis for *kabuki* scripts, and women appeared in female roles on the professional stage.

It was customary for actors to tour provinces from time to time, often for financial reasons. According to Japanese scholar Toita Koji, a well-known *kabuki* actor of the Meiji Era toured “the provinces to pay off his debts.”<sup>3</sup> Conflicts within theater companies also prompted tours. In September 1879, Morita Kan-ya, a daring actor fond of new experiments with Western theater, sent two actors “off touring the northern provinces, largely, it is said, because of Kan-ya’s desire to keep those conservative actors at a distance.”<sup>4</sup> It is conceivable that a tour to Hawai‘i would be consistent with touring shows in the provinces—hard times with home audiences may have prompted a few companies to try to make a profit in Hawai‘i. Franklin Odo and Kazuko Sinoto assert that “there was considerable social and cultural interchange between Hawaii and Japan. Theater troupes, athletic teams, and entertainers routinely traveled from Japan to Hawaii.”<sup>5</sup>

Be that as it may, there are very few written records of professional companies touring to Hawai‘i. The *Hawaiian Star*, a popular English language newspaper of the time, records the first professional Japanese theatrical company to perform in Honolulu in 1893. The paper lists the name of the company as “Japanese Theater Company” and refers to the production as “the Japanese play” rather than by title. There were 20 in the company—seven women and 13 men. They returned to Hawai‘i in July of 1894. On February 4, 1919, the English section of the *Nippu Jiji*, a widely circulated Japanese language newspaper, contains an article titled, “Noted Theatrical Persons To Visit

Here Next Month.” The theatrical persons named are K. Okamoto and his stage manager B. Isaka, and S. Uyeyama and U. Yamaura of the association of modern plays. They were all en route to the United States and Europe to “make a careful study of the arrangements of the stage and other theatrical managements” and obtain “theatrical informations.” Unfortunately, there is no mention of any performances by these venerable visitors.

More can be ascertained from oral histories given by immigrant plantation workers. There are quite a few collections of oral histories focusing on Hawaiian plantations. These usually include histories of laborers from various cultural backgrounds. Information recorded in the oral histories of three Japanese plantation residents on different islands show that their theater-going experiences were comparable. Professional companies coming through Honolulu also toured plantation towns. Residents looked forward to these events, and the whole community would turn out to watch the *shibai*.

Mrs. Kiku Yoshida came to Hawai'i in 1916. She worked with her family on the plantation in Waipahu on the island of O'ahu. Mrs. Yoshida describes a “social club” that patronized the theater. Families paid a monthly fee to see movies and the occasional Japanese touring group. Tanji is the interviewer:

YOSHIDA: There was an outdoor theatre behind the Hongwanji. There was a small stage which also housed the screen. Twice a month there was a movie. Sometimes there were entertainers from Japan. Actually it was called a social club.

TANJI: Did you pay any dues?

YOSHIDA: The dues was 25c a month for a family. I used to collect that from the families in the neighborhood. On the day there was a picture, people would lay their mats on the ground early in the morning. . . . it was an event everybody looked forward to.<sup>6</sup>

Mrs. Kishi Mukaisu worked on the plantation in Pu'ukoli'i, on the island of Maui. Here she recalls the effort it took to attend a performance. Hara is the interviewer, and Tsubaki is a friend of Kishi's who assisted the interview:

HARA: Did you go to the theater in town?

KISHI: Yea, we walked down and we walked back (laughing) carrying our children. A play would come from Japan and where was it?

TSUBAKI: Wasn't it behind the Shingon Mission?

KISHI: Where was it?

TSUBAKI: The Japanese theater [was behind the Shingon Mission].

KISHI: The Japanese theater? Well, we would all walk and *oppa* (carry).

TSUBAKI: It was behind the Shingon Mission.

KISHI: Huh? That was the *mon picture*. The play?

TSUBAKI: The *mon picture* and the play.

(pause)

KISHI: To go down we would hurry and take the store car, but coming back was hard. (laughing) we would go down to the Daijingu Shrine. We'd all go down together but coming home, we'd have to walk all the way back.<sup>7</sup>

The Big Island of Hawai'i supported the largest Japanese population at the turn of the century. In Kona, a town where many residents were Japanese plantation runaways, Mr. Minoru Inaba describes his experience:

INABA: Every so often, the Japanese *shibai* used to come around. They had a stage there in Holualoa. Where the audience sat was on a grassy lot. We used to go about, oh, 4 o'clock in the afternoon and stake out the family's portion. During the show, we used to have chicken *hekka*. The elderly people, the adults, used to drink *sake*. And we used to have a grand old time. I still remember, when I was a youngster, the day after the *shibai* or show, I used to go there early in the morning to look around for money. You know, hoping that somebody dropped some money. By golly, we used to find, every so often, used to find money there.

INTERVIEWER: Who else went with you to do that?

INABA: Oh, all the youngsters in the neighborhood. We used to go there early in the morning. The guy that went there first was the lucky one, of course.

INTERVIEWER: How often did they come around?

INABA: *Shibais*, I would say, not too often. They used to come from Honolulu. I would say, maybe four or five times a year. Used to be the old, what we call, the *kabuki shibai*.

INTERVIEWER: Do you know about how much it cost?

INABA: Oh, gee, I don't recall. Was very minimal.

INTERVIEWER: How did they travel around?

INABA: Well, those days, we had cars there, 1910.

INTERVIEWER: Was it only Holualoa?

INABA: No. Used to be Holualoa, Kealakekua, Honaunau. Honaunau used to be a thriving community. There were a lot of Japanese people in Honaunau. Those were the three places that usually they performed. Honaunau, Kealakekua, and in Holualoa.<sup>8</sup>

Plantation residents' descriptions of their theater-going experiences sound very much like the "shrine plays" described by Koji:

[ . . . prior to 1868] there had been in addition to the three theatres prescribed by law small troupes playing in the busy parts of the city and in shrine precincts. They were known as 'shrine plays,' and, particularly when they were presented on the grounds of shrines and temples, they were considered beyond the control of the town office and left quite unregulated. They were somewhat vulgar, but they were cheap and very popular."<sup>9</sup>

As described in the oral histories, the cost of the *shibai* is minimal enough that a plantation worker could afford to bring the whole family a few times a year. The entertainments are popular, involving the whole community. Finally, the performances are held on or near religious grounds. In Waipahu, the theater is near a religious building, and in Pu'ukoli'i the performance is at the Daijingu shrine.

Descriptions of performance venues are also in keeping with descriptions of rural stages in Japan. Folk performances were often associated with religious celebrations, and stages were commonly built on the grounds of local shrines. In one example, a far-village stage, or *noson butai*, "is built on a slope within the grounds of a local shrine. Plays are given at shrine festivals, with the audience sitting on

mats laid on the ground under the open sky.”<sup>10</sup> The oral histories describe just such an arrangement in Hawai‘i.

Professional tours did not maintain a steady presence in Hawai‘i, and so local Japanese theater groups also provided entertainment. By the 1900s in Japan, Ibsen became a widespread source of inspiration, and Shakespeare was translated, studied, and performed. In 1912 in Honolulu, the Honolulu Japanese Dramatic Society performed a Japanese translation of *Othello*. It seems that this group was a community organization rather than a professional theater, although “the actors were said to have been ‘accomplished professionals of the local stage.’”<sup>11</sup> Apparently the production was quite successful, as it prompted the society to consider producing more plays, including Japanese classical plays. At least one other Japanese theater group was formed: Edwin G. Burrows writes of “the Japanese actor Zenjiro Hosokawa (stage name Shusui Hisamatsu) [who] came to Honolulu in 1918. In 1920 he organized “the *Shinsei Gekidan* or New Voice theatrical troupe, which played not only in Hawaii but also along the American Pacific Coast from Canada to Mexico. This one man . . . was the leading influence in the continuance of Japanese drama in the islands at that time.”<sup>12</sup>

#### COMMUNITY THEATER

Laborers coming to Hawai‘i at the turn of the century had little education. However, they would have been exposed to some form of folk theater in Japan. *Kabuki*, the theater of the people, was and is still performed by communities in Japan’s rural areas. Japanese in the country incorporated various types of performance into their social and cultural practices over centuries. “Performing arts, many of them done by professionals, were brought into communities from political and cultural capitals—mainly, Nara, Kyoto, Osaka, and Edo. Local residents subsequently developed them into ‘folk performing arts’.”<sup>13</sup> Folk performing arts vary from prefecture to prefecture, but performances pervade the fabric of every community’s life. Plays and dances are associated with shrine festivals and the agricultural cycle—there are even planting and field dances. There are large-scale performances such as the *bon* dance and huge parades where floats become

stages for plays and puppet performances. There are also many folk versions of *no*, *kyogen* puppet plays, and *kabuki*. In fact, most Japanese immigrated to Hawai'i near the end of "the heyday of folk *kabuki* and puppet plays in the mid- to late-nineteenth century."<sup>14</sup> It makes sense, then, that there would be a demand for such community performances in Hawai'i.

Indeed, Japanese in rural plantation communities put on performances of their own. Plays were put on for various reasons. One was simply entertainment.

INABA: You know, those days, whatever entertainment had to be provided by the local people, because there were very few of these people coming from outside. Transportation was a problem. Whenever they had a celebration, the local people would get together. They put on *shibais* like that.<sup>15</sup>

Performances also generated money. *Shibai* in Waimea were "the most successful fundraisers for the Honoka'a Hongwanji Mission, the Kamuela [Young Buddhist Association], or the Waimea Japanese Language School in the Japanese community where most farmers were not prosperous."<sup>16</sup> The English section of the *Nippu Jiji* often advertised fundraisers featuring entertainment given by community members: "The 'Kabuki' play entertainments will be given for two nights, Monday and Tuesday nights, at Asahi Theater on Maunakea Street by the members of the Nichiren Mission. The net profit, which may be realized by the entertainments, will be used for religious expansion of the Buddhist mission."<sup>17</sup> These events were often quite successful, and the funds raised were boasted about after the fact: "Three hundred fifty-nine dollars and twenty-five cents was the sum realized by the Palama Japanese school from the 'Naniwabushi' [recitation] entertainment recently given."<sup>18</sup>

Japanese performances provided opportunities for individuals to make money in the greater Hawaiian market, as there was some demand for them outside of the Japanese community:

INABA: I remember every time a ship came when I was a youngster that I would go down and dance for 3 years I went to classes, and I even go a stage name. I must have been pretty good because every time they'd have celebrations like the Emperor's birthday or when naval ships came



in they'd ask me to go and dance. And when I dance and the audience they threw half dollar silver on the stage. And I used to make about twenty dollars a dance. That was quite a bit of money you know in those days. So I never hesitated going. In fact, some of them I volunteered.<sup>19</sup>

Old photographs taken at Japanese social events give some idea of what a plantation community production looked like. In *A Pictorial History of the Japanese in Hawaii*, there is a photo of a group of men posing for a cast picture on a stage. (fig. 1). The Japanese immigrants from Fukuoka prefecture performed the play *Pistol Goto* (Robber with Pistol), Sadakichi Shimizu.<sup>20</sup> The cast is assembled on an outdoor stage maybe three feet high. The width of the stage is not shown in the picture. Banners hung at the foot, sides, and top framing of the stage creating a proscenium. The banner overhead displays a half sun, rising or setting, rays unfurled, at the very center. There is a banner behind this one with writing on it, but the writing is obscured. The banner at sidestage also has writing on it, as does the banner at the foot of the stage. The scenery behind the cast resembles a series of

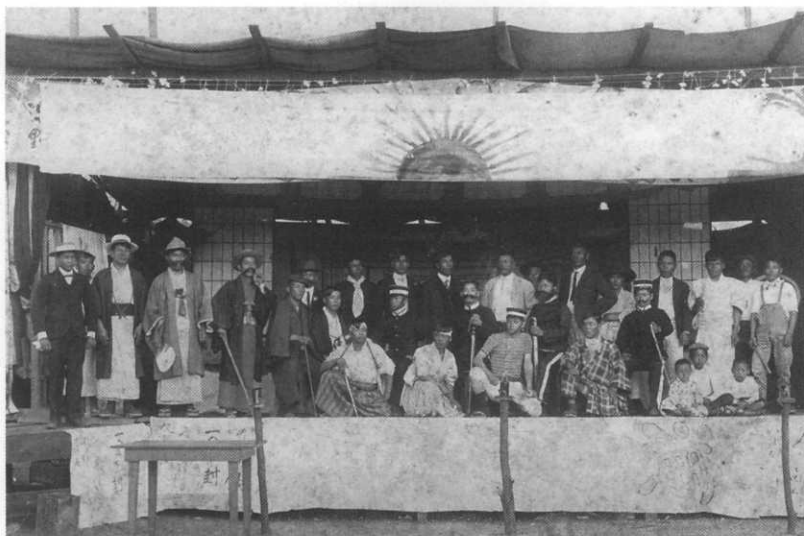


FIG. 1. Japanese play, "Pistol Goto [or Goto] Shimizu Sadakichi," by Kiyoshhi Tsubaki, performed by the Fukuoka Ken people, Kekaha, Kaua'i, Hawai'i, November 3, 1908. B. Takaoka, Bishop Museum.

*shoji* doors. A makeshift awning covers the acting area; the awning appears to consist of some cloth draped over a few two-by-fours and laid on top of the boxy frame of the stage, as light can be seen coming through the spaces between this ceiling and the hanging fabric making up the side and back walls. Also in front of the stage are three wooden posts, looking like trees that once grew in the spot but were chopped off at just above stage height and fitted with what appear to be metal cans at the top. Perhaps these functioned as lanterns in the evening, or perhaps they were an actual part of the show. A small block or crate stands on the ground stage right, likely used as a step up to the stage. There is a small table next to the step, with no apparent purpose.

The Kekaha stage seems similar in many respects to the description of a stage used for *Kowaka Mai* (a folk art from Fukuoka prefecture) narrative and dance presentations in Japan. As described, "The players perform in front of a dark-blue cloth backdrop that bears three large crests in white. . . . The wooden stage is approximately twenty-feet square and stands three feet above the ground. Thatched-roofed and enclosed on three sides, it is dark even at midday."<sup>21</sup> Though the roof on the Kekaha stage is not thatched, a similar effect is obtained with the awning overhead. There are cloth drops used for the side walls, which cause most of the stage to appear dark. The stage height is about the same.

*Pistol Goto* required a large cast: those shown in the picture include 27 men and three children. Their costume is mixed—some wear *kimono* and *geta* while others wear suits, overalls, and uniforms of various kinds. A few have very pronounced mustaches and fake-looking beards. Some carry swords, others sticks. One man carries a fan. Most of them are wearing or carrying Western-style hats. The costuming suggests that the performance was of *shimpa* or *shingeki*—it is quite Western for *kabuki*.

Simple observation of this picture shows that the play was of some importance. Effort was made to erect and dress a stage, a large number of people were cast and would have committed time to rehearsals and performance, some thought was given to costumes, and a formal picture documented the event. The stage and bit of grassy lot visible in the picture liken it to the shrine plays and folk performances discussed earlier.

There is also an account of a community *shibai* in Waimea, Hawai'i. The pictures of this *shibai* are dated c. 1938. This *shibai* was written and directed by amateurs who wrote their material based on scenes from traditional *kabuki* as well as contemporary Japanese drama. As in traditional *kabuki*, men performed in all roles, both male and female. The costumes were made by the wife of a Parker Ranch worker, and from pictures in the text they were quite beautiful. The set in the picture is a painted backdrop, and the actors sit around a low table set with props. Eleven actors are named as participants in the *shibai*, all *Nisei* (second-generation Japanese) ranch workers with no previous theater experience.<sup>22</sup>

The performing arts foster a sense of cultural identity and community. In modern Japan, the folk performing arts are protected by the law. Designating a type of performing art as *bunkazai* "signifies official recognition of cultural importance . . . *bunkazai* are the focus of official efforts to protect and conserve Japan's cultural heritage."<sup>23</sup> The emphasis on protecting *bunkazai*, or cultural property, is rooted in scholarly interest in Japanese folklore that developed in the 1910s. The strong ties Japanese immigrants maintained to Japan in the early part of the 20th century may have encouraged a similar interest in Japanese folk performances in Hawai'i. Further evidence of the importance of performing arts to the Japanese community in Hawai'i can be found in appeals made to members of the community to participate in such events as a part of civic duty: "American citizens of Japanese parentage can serve Hawaii by participating in the political affairs of the community in which they reside. This contribution consists in playing a part with interest in the game of community life involving consideration of such problems as: public health, good roads, adequate hospital accommodations, proper school supervision, law observance, *public celebrations*, and protection of individual right and properties."<sup>24</sup>

#### EDUCATIONAL THEATER

The Japanese in Hawai'i were very concerned with the education of their children, and Japanese schools were very popular in the Islands. The curriculum in Japanese schools included Japanese language, culture, and values. "The schools became centers of activities for the

Japanese community, including the celebration of Japanese holidays such as *tenchosetsu*, classes and exhibitions in the martial arts, and lessons in music and dance."<sup>25</sup> Theater was a part of the Japanese schools in two ways: as a part of the curriculum and as a valuable fundraiser.

In Meiji-era Japan the theater was rising in importance and became an educational vehicle in itself:

Some men became particularly concerned with the possibilities of using Kabuki as a means of indoctrinating the people. As early as March 1872 a Department of Instruction (*Kyobusho*) was established. . . . It was organized along the lines of a central temple with branch temples, and it had as its task the instruction of the common people. The instructors appointed for the most part were Shinto priests, Buddhist priests, and scholars of the Japanese classics, but in the provinces *Kagura* masters were also made instructors. . . . It was at the same time a task of the Department of Instruction to supervise the drama.<sup>26</sup>

Educational theater in Hawai'i was not taken to this extreme. It is clear, however, that theater was a part of the cultural instruction in Japanese schools. The performance skills taught at Japanese schools seem to have varied according to the expertise of members of the community who could serve as teachers. In Pu'ukoli'i, children were taught plays by a man who "used to work for the Maui Trading Company taking orders through the camp. Later . . . he started his own business peddling food to the camps."<sup>27</sup> In this excerpt from an oral history, Tsubaki is assisting the interviewee Kishi. Hara is the interviewer.

HARA: [ . . . ] could you tell me about any fond memories and reminiscences about camp life?

KISHI: I don't have any great memories.

TSUBAKI: There were plays in the camp by Mr. Hasuike.

KISHI: Who?

TSUBAKI: Mr. Hasuike put on plays.

HARA: Were the plays put on for some celebration?

KISHI: No, no, it wasn't for any special occasion but there was a Mr. Hasuike, who came and taught my younger sister and others every night, and we all [watched them perform] . . .<sup>28</sup>

Drama was not always included in the curricula of Japanese schools. Students in some schools learned traditional dancing, sword dancing, and other performing arts.

It appears that some productions of *kabuki* at Japanese schools were quite artistic. Odo and Sinoto include in their *Pictorial History* an undated black and white picture of a "Children's *kabuki* theater group, Ha'ikū, Maui."<sup>29</sup> The backdrop in the picture is elaborately painted in perspective to achieve the effect of a long hallway. There are 17 people in the picture, with no discernable instructor. The pupils vary in age and gender. They are in full makeup with hair done in various styles, and they are wearing boldly patterned *kimono*. All are barefoot.

Entertainments were often given as fundraisers for schools as well. In January and February of 1919, the English section of the *Nippon Jiji* contains a few articles promoting two programs to benefit Japanese schools. "The first program, consisting of 'Naniwabushi' recitation by famous Hototogisu, Japanese flute solo, sword dance, music and other entertainments" . . . was given by the Palama Japanese language school, in January of 1919. It was highly successful.<sup>30</sup>

#### POLITICAL THEATER

The *soshi shibai*, or political drama also known as *shimpa*, was "created by adapting the realism of the *Kabuki* to social themes." *Shimpa* were staged political propaganda, and its proponents viewed theater as "the ideal vehicle for spreading enlightenment."<sup>31</sup> *Shingeki*, another new form, started with the introduction of Ibsen's work in 1907. A whole new genre of "Ibsenesque social dramas" sprang up, containing "social and intellectual messages quite unprecedented in the Japanese drama."<sup>32</sup>

At least one example of a Japanese drama used specifically for a political purpose in Hawai'i has been documented. *A Play to Be Given in Formosa Fifty Years Hence*, by Motoyuki Negoro, was produced on Jan-

uary 15, 1909. The production, said to be at the Honolulu Theater, was meant to kick-start the higher wage movement among the Japanese plantation workers in Hawai'i. It opened with a depiction of the wage disparity between Japanese and Caucasian (mostly Portuguese) laborers working on the plantation, and the extreme financial difficulties many Japanese laborers faced. It then showed a group of laborers meeting to discuss relief measures, and proposed a movement for higher wages as the only solution. The play continued with direct references to the management of the Japanese newspapers of the day and an open criticism of one editor's opposition to the higher wage movement. This editor then suffered a nightmarish scene in which the ghosts of all Japanese laborers who died in poverty because of his opposition to the higher wage movement swarmed around him. The play concluded with the Higher Wage Association singing as they waved banners proclaiming their success—monthly wages of \$22.50.

The play was based on fact. In 1908, "about 14 persons met at the Asahi Theater to discuss means of translating the growing sentiment for higher wages into action."<sup>33</sup> Those supportive of the higher wage movement agreed that to ensure success all the Japanese newspapers should present a united front. However, Sometaro Sheba, editor of the *Hawaii Shimpō*, was receiving monetary support from the Hawaii Sugar Planters Association (HSPA), and would not cooperate.

Despite the schism among the editors of the Japanese newspapers, interest in the movement for higher wages grew, and on December 1, 1908, the Higher Wage Association was formed. Representations were made to the planters, but the planters "peremptorily denied the requests."<sup>34</sup> The Higher Wage Association finally called for a strike. The HSPA looked for any act of violence among strikers that might give them justification for arresting the leaders of the movement; eventually "... the authorities tried to shut down *Nippu Jiji* and break the strike by arresting the leaders on charge after charge.

Negoro's play was considered significant enough to be used in arguments to prosecute and jail the four leaders of the movement. "Terada, manager of the *Shimpō*, [a Japanese newspaper] testified that the play presented at the Honolulu Theater on January 15th had been written by Negoro—. . . that he, Terada, had heard Negoro drilling the actors, that the play had greatly excited the audience, which had cried, 'Sheba, Sheba! Kill him! Fix him!'"<sup>36</sup> The planters'

aim was to show that the play had incited violence. In fact, as the trial was underway and the Japanese defendants were successfully countering the prosecution, a young Japanese man attempted to murder Sheba.

The use of the play in encouraging the higher wage movement and the importance given to the play in the trial of the movement's leaders speaks to the power of political theater. The establishment of the theater as an institution within the Japanese community could only have helped the theater's political function.

#### VENUES AND STAGES

Japanese communities in Hawai'i had designated areas where performances took place, such as the Japanese theater behind the mission in Pu'ukoli'i and the outdoor theater in Waipahu. In Waimea, the platform-like store porch served as a movie theater and stage. "When the I. Oda Store platform was occupied, a *shibai* was sometimes held at the Japanese language school hall."<sup>37</sup> *A Pictorial History of the Japanese in Hawaii* contains two pictures of theaters, the *Asahi-za* in Honolulu and the *Eirakuza* theater in Hale'iwa. The strong presence of theaters in Japanese communities in rural as well as urban areas underlines the significance of the theater to the people.

The *Eirakuza* Theater in Hale'iwa, O'ahu, "was built in 1911 with modern facilities, including generated electricity and piped water (fig. 2). Tomitaro Aino from Yamaguchi prefecture was the owner." The theater rises three tall stories off the ground. There is a full balcony visible on the front facing side of the second floor, and three smaller awnings above the balcony protect what appears to be a large window. A few smaller banners hang above and near the entrance. Part of the roof of an adjacent building can be seen in the photograph, but there is no mention of its name or what type of building it is—another low building can be seen down the slope of the hill to the left of the theater. An open car is parked next to the theater.

The *Asahi-za* or *Asahi* Theater in Honolulu (fig. 3) may be meant to emulate the state-sponsored theater in Edo, Japan, of the same name. The picture of the *Asahi-za* in 1915 is impressive. It is a neat two-story structure with a formal entrance adorned with an American flag, a Japanese flag, and several tall banners exceeding the height of

the building. Japanese banners hang from the eaves of the building. The caption identifies the *Asahi-za* as the first Japanese theater in Honolulu. The theater opened in 1899, was destroyed by the Chinatown fire in 1900, and rebuilt in 1908.<sup>38</sup> The *Asahi-za* was not only a center for entertainment. Like the theaters of Japan, the *Asahi-za* served multiple social and political functions. It became the sometime meeting place of Japanese leaders organizing for political causes. In one case, "Frederick Makino of the *Hawaii Hochi* . . . held a mass protest meeting at the Asahi Theater on March 12, 1919 and sent the pronouncements made at the meeting to some of the more powerful members in the Hawaii legislature."<sup>39</sup>

In her discussion of the stage in the Japanese folk performing arts, Barbara Thornbury says:

Although the stages of professional *no*, *kyogen*, *kabuki* and *bunraku* are, for the most part, fixed, the folk performing arts are far less wedded to certain locations or to particular types of structures. . . . the kind of presentation, the occasion, and the requirements and desires of a community . . . determine where and what a stage may be.<sup>40</sup>



FIG. 2. Eirakuza Theater, Hale'iwa, O'ahu, 1912. Bishop Museum.



This does not mean, however, that structures are not built specifically for performance purposes. In Japan today, “community support for the folk performing arts [ . . . ] includes constructing local folk performing arts centers.” The presence of designated performance venues in shrines, plantations, and towns with large Japanese populations in early 20th century Hawai‘i might also reflect the importance attached to presentations given in these areas. The construction of Japanese theaters with modern conveniences in locations around the Islands further supports the value of the Japanese performing arts to the Hawaiian Japanese community.

#### PUBLICITY AND FUNDING

I found very little information on publicity for any of the types of entertainments discussed. Newspapers were commonly read among members of the Japanese community in Hawai‘i, and it makes sense



FIG. 3. Asahi Theater, Honolulu, O'ahu, ca. 1915. Bishop Museum.

that some publicity was achieved through advertisement in the Japanese language newspapers of the day. The *Nippu Jiji* in particular had wide circulation.

By 1927, the paper held three local branches on Oahu (Waialua, Waiau, Waianae), eight on Maui (Kahului, Hamakua Poko, Lahaina, Keahua, Kaanapali, Hana, Kihei), six on Hawaii (two on Hilo, Keala-kekua, two on Holualoa, Hawi), two on Kauai (Kapaa, Kilauea), and one on Lanai (Lanai City). News from Japan was gathered from the *Nippu Jiji* branches in Tokyo and Osaka. In 1920 the *Nippu Jiji* became a member of the Associated Press (English section only) to receive direct news from the mainland U.S.<sup>41</sup>

The articles on Japanese entertainments, the theater scene in Japan, and notable Japanese theater people contained in the English section of the *Nippu Jiji* indicate that it was a popular vehicle for theater publicity. It is also likely that events were publicized by word-of-mouth, as workers on the plantations would have common knowledge of community events and less access to news resources far from the plantation.

Information on funding for Japanese performances was also scarce. It is possible that local businesses helped to produce theatrical endeavors; "the *Nippu Jij* . . . sponsored various events including drama."<sup>42</sup> *A Play to Be Given in Formosa Fifty Years Hence* was produced by an individual named Tsukasa Saito. It is even possible that the plantations themselves subsidized plays in some form; plantations were known to support Japanese language schools financially. A deeper investigation into the financial history of Japanese theater in Hawai'i may reveal some interesting connections between performance and the community at large. It will also help to more clearly define the theater's social and political significance.

#### AUDIENCES

In general, Japanese immigrants made up most of the audience at a Japanese performance. It appears that in some cases the theater was patronized mostly by men, and that in most rural plantation towns a play was a family event. Audiences were not solely Japanese, however. In Waimea, "the *shibai* was always a big success, and no empty seat was

seen in the hall. Often it attracted many Hawaiians as well as Japanese as though the entire population in the community had gathered there.”<sup>43</sup> Japanese performances were sometimes advertised in the English newspapers as well as the Japanese newspapers, indicating that Caucasians also patronized Japanese theaters.

#### JAPANESE THEATER SINCE IMMIGRATION

In Japan, World War II “greatly affected the folk performing arts themselves—mainly by causing presentations to be suspended. After the war was over there seemed to be little interest in reviving local performances.”<sup>44</sup> Japanese performance in Hawai‘i suffered a similar fate. During World War II, people of Japanese descent living in Hawai‘i were not allowed to gather in public, and had to remain indoors from dark to dawn with their lights off. Prominent leaders in the Japanese community were put in internment camps, and these prisoners included principals and instructors of the Japanese schools and journalists from the Japanese language newspapers.

Today one can still find Japanese performing arts in Hawai‘i. There are annual festivals celebrating the cultural exchange between Japan and Hawai‘i. Bon dances are popular summer events. The Japanese Cultural Center in Mō‘ili‘ili provides an anchor for the Japanese community in Hawai‘i, offering classes in various cultural activities. Students taught by master teachers from Japan perform in productions at the University of Hawai‘i, and occasionally *kabuki* will be included in the seasons of other theatrical groups.

#### CONCLUSION

“By 1927, the divergent strains comprising the world of the Japanese immigrant had at last solidified into a permanent way of life. The spirit of community had been internally strengthened through religious and cultural institutions; the family and home had been established; values, beliefs, and customs had been largely transposed.”<sup>45</sup> Japanese theater in Hawai‘i was an integral part of the Japanese community’s development, and served the cultural, political, and social interests of the Japanese community. Both professional and grass roots theaters had places in the theatrical world of the time, and fol-

lowed trends of theater in Japan on a smaller scale. The unique circumstances of immigration probably caused differences in the evolution of the folk performing arts in Hawai'i and in Japan; the presence of an established field of study in Japan will greatly aid future study of the folk performing arts in Hawai'i by providing a theoretical framework wherein Hawaiian-Japanese performances can be examined and compared with their Japanese predecessors. Further research will illuminate more about the immense cultural exchange of this period and the significance of the Japanese performing arts to the people of Hawai'i today.

## NOTES

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