

KOMINZ, LAURENCE R. *Avatars of Vengeance: Japanese Drama and the Soga Literary Tradition*. Michigan Monographs in Japanese Studies, Number 11. Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, The University of Michigan, 1995. xiii + 282 pages. Illustrations, appendices, bibliography, index. Cloth US\$42.95; ISBN 0-939512-69-6.

Laurence Kominz's book offers us a fresh approach to the history of traditional Japanese theater by looking at how a single story has been dramatized over the centuries, mainly in the Noh, Kabuki, and puppet theaters. The story itself, a minor episode in the events of the Genpei wars of the late twelfth century, is that of the Soga brothers, Gorō and Jūrō, and their ill-starred vendetta against the Shōgun, Minamoto Yoritomo, who had ordered the execution of their grandfather. The Soga brothers failed: Jūrō was killed in an attack on one of

Yoritomo's deputies and Gorō was captured soon after entering Yoritomo's camp. Yet as Kominz shows, the Soga brothers lived on, and continue to live, on stage, but were radically transformed by the theater and the demands of audiences for novelty.

As Kominz explains in Chapter 1, "Introduction," his book is both a study of changes in plot and characterization over the centuries, and a study of the relationship between those changes and "the dynamics of change in theater" (2). He argues that he wants to use the long history of the Soga plays "as a way of breaking through the myth of tradition preserved to see artistic innovation at work in a constantly changing social and artistic environment" (9). The changes in the play reflect different and often conflicting value systems that changed over time. He divides these changes into "active transformations," which he defines as unprecedented changes in character and plot that inspired a wide range of imitation and refinement (10), and "passive transformations," which are changes in the story that reflect new social realities or artistic values (11).

Kominz traces the history of the Soga brother's story chronologically in seven chapters, from the earliest written account in the *Azuma kagami* (A Mirror of the East) in the thirteenth century, through to its performances on the Kabuki stage in the eighteenth. Chapter 1 provides an overview; Chapters 2, 3, and 4 cover the development of the story as text, in oral traditions, and in Noh. The remaining three chapters concern the story as it shaped and was shaped in turn by the popular theatrical forms of Kabuki and the puppet theater.

Throughout the book, Kominz presents a great deal of theater history, some of which is basic and thus well known to students of Japanese theater, but also much that, until now, was unavailable in English. Kominz also offers some stimulating interpretations of that history. For example, Chapter 3 deals with Noh and *Kōwaka-mai* plays based on the Soga legend. Kominz points out that this group of thirty-four Noh plays is noteworthy for its "non-adherence to every salient feature of Zeami's prescriptions for the writing and performing of Noh" (49), and suggests that these plays indicate the direction Noh might have taken without Yoshimitsu's patronage of Kan'ami and Zeami. Also interesting is his point that such plays were not based on any extant version of the Soga story, which was being written down at that time.

In Chapter 3, Kominz also examines two late Muromachi-period plays, *Hitsukiri Soga* (A Soga Slices the Packing Chest) and *Fumisaki Soga* (The Soga Letter) as "missing links" between late Muromachi Noh and Edo-period Kabuki because they include "(1) characters in outlandish and improbable disguises, (2) *shuko*—intriguing and often highly unlikely modifications of traditional story plots (3) stark juxtapositions of martial and romantic male heroes, (4) erotically appealing gender confusion, and (5) bombastic martial superheroes" (63). Kominz goes on to show how elements in these plays were incorporated into later Kabuki versions but notes that "These and other transitional Noh plays have been missing from theater histories because in the Edo period they were cut from the repertory of performed plays, and only a few manuscripts survived" (63). While admitting the difficulty of measuring their influence, he argues that they were dropped from the repertoire during the Edo period precisely because of their resemblance to the emerging Kabuki theater.

Chikamatsu Monzaemon's key role in developing the Soga tale for the theater is the subject of Chapter 5. Chikamatsu wrote thirteen Soga plays in which the brothers "could be dour, Edo period samurai, devoted singlemindedly to honor and family, or they might be profligate rakes who cared not a whit about avenging their father's death" (111). Just as important, the paramours of the two brothers, unlike their medieval versions, "became archetypal courtesans of the Edo licensed pleasure district" (111).

An important aspect of the Soga tale that Kominz tracks throughout his study is the role of religious beliefs, especially the belief in *goryō* (angry spirits of the dead) and the subsequent

impact on the dramatization of the Soga brothers' tale on stage, where the plays also function as a form of religious ritual to placate these angry spirits. The importance of this aspect becomes most evident in Chapter 6, where Kominz discusses the career of Ichikawa Danjūrō I, who created the *aragoto* style of Kabuki acting in his portrayal of Soga Gorō. The fascinating connection between Danjūrō, the religious cult centering on the Soga brothers, and the emergence of Danjūrō himself as a demigod and the center of a cult is a high point of the book.

The remarkable thing, which Kominz more than adequately demonstrates through his detailed analysis of specific plays and plot summaries of others, is that these transformations affected every aspect of the story, from the characteristics of the Soga brothers themselves, to their mistresses, indeed, to the story itself, until it seems only the names remained. Kominz's efforts to catalogue these changes might at times seem tedious, except to the specialist, but there is much of interest here even for the nonspecialist.

My only criticism is that for all his detailed thoroughness, Kominz did not take more risks by offering a broader theoretical view of his topic. For example, the story of the Soga brothers clearly belongs to a long tradition of narratives about heroes who achieved a special kind of lasting fame precisely because they failed to achieve their objective and died in the attempt, a tradition first presented in English by Ivan Morris in his *The Nobility of Failure* (1975). Kominz cites Morris's book in his bibliography but does not explore the Soga version of this theme though it clearly represents a significant variation on it. Kominz does offer what seems a rather tentative attempt to see the Soga story in terms of Western tragedy, but admits in a footnote that "a serious study of intercultural parallels" (30) is beyond the scope of the book.

Finally, neither religious beliefs by themselves nor the fundamental theme of revenge can account for the enduring popularity of this particular narrative "world" (*sekai*), or for why this story achieved the status of a cult object even in the fragmented form we see on stage today. Nor can they alone account for why particular scenes or plot situations became completely separated from the original story to take on a life of their own, to be dramatized over and over with variations.

In an essay on the movie *Casablanca*, Umberto ECO (1983, 198) sketches out the requirements for transforming a book or a movie into a cult object. He argues that the work "must be loved," it "must provide a completely furnished world," and its characters and episodes "must have some archetypical appeal." More importantly, "one must be able to break, dislocate, unhinge it so that one can remember only parts of it, irrespective of their original relationship with the whole." A movie "must be already ramshackle, rickity, unhinged in itself. . . . for only an unhinged movie survives as a disconnected series of images, of peaks, of visual icebergs." I would venture to say that the tale of the Soga brothers, like *Casablanca*, "must live on, and because of, its glorious ricketiness."

#### REFERENCE CITED

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