

## **Seki Sano and Popular Political and Social Theatre in Latin America**

**Michiko Tanaka**

### **Introduction**

More than a quarter of a century after his death, Seki Sano's name still resonates among men and women of theatre in Mexico, Colombia, and several other Latin American countries. In the perspective of the widening access to the world scenic culture, Sano's effort to combine the Stanislavsky system with the ideas of Meyerhold, Piscator and other theatre methods may be of renewed interest not only for theatre historians but also for artists. In time, Sano's role in the Latin American theatre movement may be better understood.<sup>1</sup>

Sano's theatre was a concerned theatre, committed to the people and to their emancipation as human beings. In his youth, Sano devoted himself to popular theatre as a means of fostering the socialist revolution which would, he believed, eliminate human oppression, suffering and ignorance. Later he had to moderate his political militancy on the artistic front under conditions of exile, and he abandoned any direct political commitment. However, throughout his life, he firmly believed in the social function of the theatre and its capacity for educating people. He remained optimistic about the human capacity for self-liberation, notwithstanding many disappointing personal experiences.

Sano arrived in Mexico in May of 1939 and stayed there until his death in September of 1966. His Mexican years may be divided into two periods: the first, 1939-1945, corresponds to his exile years in which he carried out direct or indirect political theatre activities. He prepared a good number of actors and directors who later gave impulse to popular political and social theatre in Mexico. During the second period, 1946-1966, the years of voluntary stay in which he opted for Mexico as his creative space, can be divided into two subperiods: 1946-60, the years of major creation, and 1961-66, the years of declining health and anxiety over his cherished projects.

In this piece, I discuss the circumstances of Sano's arrival and his theatre during the first period, especially his commitment to the Anti-Nazifascist Popular Front of the artists. A brief review of his personal, political and theatrical formation will help us to understand his views and activities upon his arrival in Mexico.

### **Sano's formation in theatre and politics**

The origin of Sano's commitment to the people was closely related to his commitment to the theatre. Both commitments were born under the impact of the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923 which was as much a political as a natural disaster. It was the moment in which the Japanese modern state, in trying to cover up its vulnerability, showed its most ugly face. Its faithful civil and military officers took advantage of the chaos to eliminate its "enemies" among those considered to be subversive or alien: the Koreans, the Chinese, the *buraku* people,<sup>2</sup> socialists, anarchists, and labor leaders. The state manipulated the masses by means of rumors and semi-official guidance of popular organizations such as ward self-vigilance brigades.

When the earthquake occurred, Seki Sano was a student at a public boarding high school at Urawa. Rushing back to Tokyo to help evacuate the relatives and the patients of his father's hospital which had burned down, he faced for the first time in his life human vulnerability. He was deeply affected by the helplessness of people struck by the disaster. Later, this impression was surely deepened as he became aware of the people's manipulation by official agents.

The impact was particularly strong since he belonged to the privileged minority in Japanese society. He was a favorite grandson of Count Gotoo Shimpei, a powerful and able statesman with strong charisma. His father was an outstanding physician of Western medicine from a family with a long-standing Confucian scholarly tradition.

During the 1910's a new liberal and humanistic trend emerged in Japanese thought. In society also there was an increasing tendency towards wider political participation and social rights. The years Sano spent in the new liberal Urawa Public High School constituted the high moment of the so-called Taisho Democracy in pre-war Japan.

After the Earthquake, Sano and fellow students founded the Association for Theatre Studies and became seriously devoted to the theatre, avidly absorbing all the currents at hand of the Western theatre: Irish revolutionary nationalist plays, Ibsen and French naturalism, Russian psychological realism along with formalism, German expressionism, Soviet constructivism and Proletcult. The students attended every play of the Small Theatre of Tsukiji<sup>3</sup> in order to assimilate the

group's techniques, to criticize their limitations and to overcome them in a very short period of time.

As a student of the Tokyo Imperial University Law Department, Seki became interested in scientific analysis of social and political reality as the basis for popular theatre. Among university students, the left movement was attracting more and more support, and he was soon introduced to Marxism and radical political activities. His uncle, Sano Manabu was a young Marxist economist who abandoned a scholarly career to found the Communist Party.

One of the first important political activities assigned to Seki was to support the Kyodo Print strike of 1926, which later became novelized by Tokunaga Sunao in *Street without the Sun*, a classic among Japanese proletarian literature. Sano's task was to help Sasaki Takamaru's Suitcase Theatre (*Toranku Gekijo*) to organize agit-prop brigades in order to maintain the fighting spirit of strikers and their families.

Sano and his Marxist theatre fellows studied hard both theories and praxis of Euro-American revolutionary theatre. One of the first experiments was to put on the puppet theatre *Who is the fooliest?* by Karl Witvogel, then a leading German Communist and Marxist historian. Towards the end of 1926, Sano achieved great success with *Don Quijote Liberated* by A. Lunacharsky, establishing himself as a proletarian theatre director. Sano and his comrades created the Vanguard Troup (Zen'ei za), and at the beginning of the next year they began to prepare new actors, directors and scenic workers. Following the Kharikov declaration of Profintern, their slogan was, "Art is a weapon!"

Until his departure from Japan in May 1931, Sano developed himself as a full proletarian theatre activist. He had numerous successes in theatre direction, getting his name registered in the chronicle of the Japanese Modern Theatre along with Sasaki Takamaru, Murayama Tomoyoshi, Senda Koreya and a few others (Kurabayashi). These writers not only introduced plays and theories of theatre direction by Western revolutionary authors such as Erwin Piscator, Ernst Toller, Upton Sinclair, V.E.Meyerhold, I.Erenburg and M.Gorky but also encouraged the creation of revolutionary plays by Japanese as well as Chinese and Korean authors and began to search for a new popular form of proletarian realism. This process was interrupted by official intervention.

In May of 1930, Sano and his fellows of the proletarian theatre and cultural organizations were arrested. Sano was released after one month or so, supposedly to leave the country for theatre studies abroad and renouncing any political theatre activities. He actually left Japan only after he received the invitation to go to Moscow as the representative of Japanese proletarian theatre organization PROT at the International Workers' Dramatic Union (IWDU), replacing Senda Koreya who was to return to Japan from Berlin.

### International Political Theatre Activities

Arriving on the west coast, Sano established contacts with revolutionary artist groups in Hollywood, Chicago, and New York and also with the Southern California Proletarian Culture Association constituted by Japanese-American and resident Japanese workers.<sup>4</sup> He denounced the political repression and thought control against Japanese artists, seizing every opportunity. He also lectured and published on achievements of the Japanese left theatres.

En route to Europe, Sano learned of the Japanese invasion of Manchuria which marked the beginning of 15 years of war which the Japanese military brought on the nation. Arriving in Berlin, Seki joined Senda in the Yanzi Flood Rescue Campaign with collaboration of the Jung Garde and Chinese students. Their intention was to denounce Japanese imperialism. Their agit-prop play was performed in many small workers' canteens which the worker's theatre (*Volksbuhne*) used to present their plays (Senda, interview). Through these activities, Sano met Erwin Piscator, Bertolt Brecht ( who was then experimenting with factory workers to make a play *on the spot* ) and Ludwig Renn who was in charge of cultural affairs of the German Communist Party.<sup>5</sup>

Sano settled in Moscow beginning November 1932 after attending the meeting of International Union of Revolutionary Theatre (IURT), formerly IWDU,<sup>6</sup> as a representative for Asia and America. He actively organized the International Worker's Revolutionary Theatre Olympiad and the International Theatre Conference in June 1933.

However, in the middle of these activities, Sano received one of the hardest blows of his life: the forced conversion (*tenko*) of Sano Manabu which took place on 10 June 1933. Since 1929, the Communist leader had led the judicial struggle from prison. When he abandoned the stance of international Communism adopting the thesis of "Socialism in one country" which admitted both Japanese monarchy and imperialist war, he was followed by the massive Communist desertion leading to the demise of the revolutionary opposition. Before long, the Social Democratic and Liberal oppositions would give up resistance to the fascist takeover of the government.

Seki survived the impact of these events with serenity.<sup>7</sup> His strong ego and also his close knowledge of the state bureaucracy made it impossible for him to surrender. Two years later, Sano and the so-called Red Marquis Hijikata published in Japanese a book entitled *Art Belongs to the People* which contained the famous speech of Hijikata and Sano's report on the First Conference of Soviet Writers which took place in summer of 1934. The book was addressed primarily to the Japanese residents in the States, and, in the preface, the *tenko* writers were criticized. It also pointed out the error of the Japanese Communists who had

given priority to politics in dealing with the arts and culture. Sano insisted on the need to address the wider masses of the population. Soviet authorities prohibited the distribution of this book, however, because it included pictures of Bukharin, one of the Conference's main speakers, and other opposition writers who were already marked by the Stalinist police.

Sano's Soviet theatre experience was rich and it needs to be discussed separately.<sup>8</sup> However, it is important to underscore that he was truly impressed that theatre was accessible to the entire population and that a high quality was maintained by professional repertory theatres. He met excellent actors of worker origin such as Igor Illinski or Erast Garin at the Meyerhold theatre. In a 1961 interview, Sano characterized the USSR as a paradise for theatre (López 9).

In 1937, Sano was included in a massive expulsion of foreign residents from the Soviet Union. Already in Paris, Sano received the news of the Meyerhold theatre closing in January 1938 after a vehement attack on Meyerhold in *Pravda* the preceding December. Sano lost contact with Yamamoto Kenzo, the Japanese representative in the Comintern who was also repressed. However for the intervention of the Japanese Embassy in Paris, Sano had difficulty obtaining a visa for the United States. Sano's plan of going to the States to work among the Japanese American community on the West Coast could not be carried out as originally designed (Naimusho 444-50). Sano spent about a year in Europe involved in the anti-Nazi theatre and film movement in collaboration with Erwin Piscator, Leon Moussignac, Herbert Kline and other old acquaintances of the IURT days. He also visited Praga, Czechoslovakia, twice under the Popular Front government period. The first trip was to collaborate with Herbert Kline for a documentary film about the Nazi pressure on the country, the second was to attend the anti-Nazi-theatre Conference and to get a US visa.<sup>9</sup>

When he finally arrived in New York, however, Sano was detained by the immigration authorities on Ellis Island, again by intervention of the Japanese government. He immediately appealed to the Board of Review of the Immigration Service with help from Attorney Bordwin, a lawyer of the American Civil Liberties Union. After a few weeks, he was able to enter the country for six months under the pretext of directing *Fuenteovejuna* by Lope de Vega.

The play was actually produced on 9 March 1939, but not for a public showing. It is possible that Sano worked with actors of the worker's theatre collective affiliated to the New Theatre and Film Union and the young members of the Group Theatre.<sup>10</sup>

Sano soon became involved again in the movement against the advancement of Nazi-fascism, the influence of which was suspected to be gaining some support among the American establishment and some ethnic communities. He immediately collaborated with the Theatre Arts Committee and its magazine.

Also he worked to obtain support for the Chinese anti-Japanese war. He collaborated with journals such as *China Today* and *Amerasia* and contributed an article to the latter, entitled "My People Cannot Forever Be Blinded".

Sano surely enjoyed attending great theatre productions subsidized by the Federal Theatre Project (FTP) of the Work Progress Administration (WPA). The New York area alone supported more than 1,000 theatre artists in 1939 before its budget was finally cut. Sano must have seen FTP productions such as *The swing Mikado*, a fabulous musical interpreted by Black actors, and *The spins and needles*, also a musical originally created by a textile worker's theatre group. These shows became Broadway successes of the time.

Sano was trying to have his stay in the United States extended. When it became clear that he would not get his wish, he began to prepare to go to Mexico. From past experience, he expected the Japanese government to intervene again. In anticipation he requested several letters of recommendation from Erwin Piscator to Mexican artists and cultural authorities such as Celestino Gorostiza and tried, without success, to obtain an official letter of invitation.<sup>11</sup>

Sano's determination to go to Mexico<sup>12</sup> was motivated by several circumstances. He shared with American and European refugee artists the conviction that it was an urgent task to organize an anti-Nazifascist campaign there.<sup>13</sup> He also believed that in Mexico the Revolutionary government was actively supporting cultural activities for the people. Mexico was also familiar and attractive to him through the images of mural paintings and Eisenstein's sympathetic reference to which Sano had many occasions to listen while collaborating in creation of Kinoburo or teaching at the State Institute for Cinematographic Studies.

### Anti-Nazi-fascist theatre activities in Mexico

The April 26, 1939 issue of *El Dictamen*, a local newspaper of Veracruz, announced the arrival of the Japanese businessman Seki Sano on board the steamship Mexico from New York via Havana. The port's immigration authorities denied him entrance because the Japanese Legation and the Veracruz Section of the Association of Japanese Residents in Mexico asked for Sano's extradition, accusing him being a dangerous terrorist. Nonetheless he was admitted to the country as a political refugee. On May 3, the same newspaper carried the headline "Es director teatral, no dinamitero"(p.6).

Sano was ready for this kind of reception. It is probable that he came prepared to "stage" the scene as dramatically as possible. His petition to President Lázaro Cárdenas was immediately supported not only by Mexican

revolutionary artists and labor leaders<sup>14</sup> but also by well known leftist theatre and film artists and personalities of the United States.<sup>15</sup> This effective organization of support for the petition and his subsequent activities in Mexico strongly suggest that Sano came to Mexico with a specific mission and support. As I suggest above, this mission was conceived in New York to promote anti-Nazi-fascist consciousness among the Mexican people.<sup>16</sup>

Sano was still in New York when news came of the fall of Madrid on March 18. The American Left and the refugees from Germany, Austria, and Eastern Europe became particularly worried about the influence and activities of German, Italian, Spanish and Japanese agents in the USA and in Mexico.<sup>17</sup>

After Sano, Erwin Piscator also visited Mexico by an official invitation in the second half of 1939.<sup>18</sup> In April 1940 when Sano lectured on the idea of popular theatre at the Worker's University under the auspices of the Society of Friends of Democratic Mexico,<sup>19</sup> he referred to Clifford Odets who also made a brief visit to Mexico City and gave a talk about "the popular theatre".<sup>20</sup>

In those years, there were close contacts between Mexican and American leftist artists who then occupied the main creative space in both countries. There were mutual artistic interests and influence.<sup>21</sup> The Mexican League of Revolutionary Writers and Artists (LEAR) and its counterpart in the United States maintained close connections, and they cooperated in support of the Spanish Republic and in helping to resolve migration and settlement problems of European refugee artists. Sano had many acquaintances among the members of these groups. Marco Antonio Montero, one of the first students of theatre direction along with Ignacio Retes, was an active and responsible contributor to the theatre section of *Frente a Frente*, an organ of LEAR (1934, n1, 12; 1935, n2, 6).

Less than three months after arriving in Mexico City, Sano proposed a complete project of Theatre of Arts (TA) to the Mexican Union of Electric Workers (MUEW), the powerful and very active in cultural field. The slogan of this theatre was: "Theatre of the people, for the people." In the Bulletin of TA, he declared that the group belonged to the Mexican people and announced the opening of a drama school for workers and employees. The heightened tone of this group's foundation declaration and the extended organization of artists and audience recall Sano's activities in the proletarian theatre movement in Japan. He received important initial support from the MUEW.<sup>22</sup>

Sano undertook this important project of theatre teaching and production in close collaboration with Mexican artists such as Silvestre Revueltas, Gabriel Fernández Ledezma, Blas Galindo and David Alfaro Siqueiros, many of whom belonged to LEAR and they all directly or indirectly supported the Spanish

Republic. The project also included several other sections of scenic arts, such as puppet theatre and dramatic dance.<sup>23</sup>

Sano prepared actors in the Stanislavsky method combined with *biomecánica* imparted by Waldeen.<sup>24</sup> He proudly announced that he brought the best of the contemporary theatre arts in the ideas of Stanislavsky and Meyerhold. In May 1941, he staged Clifford Odets' one act play *Waiting for Lefty* in the saloon of Tramcar Conductors Union in support of their strike (Yoshikawa, "Sano" 291). He encouraged activities of other sectors too, such as the puppet theatre developed by the Herrera brothers and other students of the acting course.

The first Mexican modern dance *La coronela* was a joint creation of Sano and Waldeen, with music by Silvestre Revueltas and Blas Galindo. The revolutionary epic in modern dance presented the heroine, *la coronela*, symbol of the Revolution, with folk patterns and Posada's characters. According to Alberto Dallal, it is considered to be the beginning of the modern dance in Mexico. José Gelada and Guillermina Bravo remember that all actors dressed in grey working uniform and accompanied the dancers with the mechanical movement of puppets or served as stage aides carrying signs or liquisits or enacting elements of scenery ( Yoshikawa, "Sano" 290; Gelada, Personal interview, 1987.) As proof of public recognition, the dance was performed at the Succession Ceremony of the President Avila Camacho and later it was taken on tour to the United States.<sup>25</sup>

The following year Sano staged *Rebelión de los colgados*, an adaptation of the B. Traven novel under the joint auspices of the University of San Nicolás, Morelia, and MUEW. He traveled with this play to Querétaro to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Mexican Constitution and to Morelia for the 400th anniversary of the city.<sup>26</sup> The original idea for the play may have been suggested by Ludwig Renn who was teaching at the University of Morelia.<sup>27</sup> He came to Mexico in exile after being the commander of one of the International Brigades of the Spanish Civil War, and he created the Anti-Nazi-fascist League in Latin America. The play underscored the conversation between two Tzotzil Indians about the hard working conditions at the coffee plantations owned by German colonists of Soconuzco, probably to discredit the social basis for Nazi propaganda.<sup>28</sup>

With swift scene changes by means of spotlights and a dynamic staging with excellent coreography and mass movement of up to two dozen actors, this political drama achieved great success and a favorable reaction from journalists. In November, Sano presented it at the inauguration of the new auditorium of MUEW, and later, at the opening of the First Congress of the Latin American Confederation of Workers at the request of Vicente Lombardo Toledano.<sup>29</sup>



After the attack on Pearl Harbor on 8 December 1941, the pro-imperial activities of the Japanese community in Mexico under the command of the Captain Hamanaka and the military personnel of the Legation were put under severe surveillance by the FBI.

Sano actively organized agit-prop mobile theatre with the students of the Theatre of Arts. At the mass meeting held in the Zocalo on May 25, 1942 to support the official declaration of war against the Axis countries, Sano directed an agit-prop play *Mexico de pie* on the sinking of Mexican vessels by German submarines.<sup>30</sup> Also Sano and his group mounted a tent or truck theatre to show plays with messages of struggle against oppression in and around Mexico City.

The anti-Nazi journal *Tiempo* referring the Herrera brothers' tent theatre travelling in the State of Sinaloa and other Northern states towards the end of 1942, with the support of the Mexican Anti-Nazi-fascist Front, suggested that Sano was involved too. It was reported then by the FBI that the Japanese military had been mounting pro-Japanese propaganda among the indigenous population in this region.<sup>31</sup>

In the beginning of 1943, Sano faced serious economic difficulties. For some reason, Sano lost support of MUEW, although the Theatre of Arts itself continued functioning with a new director. By then he had no support from the Mexican government, the Communist Party or any other sources. It is possible that the FBI intervention against the leftist refugees had some effect on his marginalization.<sup>32</sup> Also the new Comintern line imposed on the Mexican Communist Party probably influenced the Communist oriented MUEW leadership. Sano probably provoked professional jealousy among the closed nationalists within the cultural establishment. Also it is true that Sano was never good at administering his expenditures. After the rupture of relations with Waldeen, Sano's personal and professional supporter in the early years, Sano experienced real material hardship for the first time in his life. Totally cut off from his mother who had provided the necessary resources whenever he was in need, he experienced real privation. He talked about it later himself, and his students of those days concur.<sup>33</sup>

This experience was of singular importance in Sano's identification with the hard-working yet poor Mexican people, because he too was exposed to the needs of everyday living. Until then, his personal problems had been solely political or artistic and he had never experienced real need himself. By all accounts, he had been rather demanding for material satisfaction.<sup>34</sup> When he discovered that he could live without all the material comforts, he may have become confident about his own capacity to survive alone in Mexico.

Sano began to teach movie actors and to collaborate as an advisor on script arrangement and film direction,<sup>35</sup> to secure his daily living. However, Sano

continued teaching theatre to new students and setting up new plays. The rigor of the lessons increased, and he demanded total devotion to the theatre from his artists.<sup>36</sup> Sano and his group made numerous open air presentations in cities and villages around the Capital, including Toluca, Puebla and Iztapalapa with new plays such as *The Inspector* by Gogol, *The Moon is Down* by John Steinbeck, and *Invasión* by Rafael Villegas and José Gelada.<sup>37</sup> Making reference to the *carpa* tradition, Sano insisted on the importance of mobile theatre in Mexico in order to create an authentic popular theatre. He repeated this idea again and again.<sup>38</sup>

Under the conditions of restricted political militancy, particularly after 1947, Sano's main interest shifted from immediate political tasks to a deeper reflection on the causes of human oppression. By the end of the war, Sano was already strongly involved in Mexican reality and he became interested in making social and socio-psychological dramas to emancipate the Mexican people. However, throughout his life he was convinced that the theatre had a social function. He effectively encouraged and followed with interest and support the efforts of his close disciples and collaborators such as Lola Bravo, José Gelada, Jebert Darién, Fernando Terrazas of Chihuahua, Emilio Obregón (who went to Venezuela to found a theatre academy), Virgilio Mariel, Rodolfo Valencia and others who organized workers' and employees' amateur theatre groups. Others such as Marco Antonio Montero and Soledad Ruiz in the 1950's participated in the rural extension theatre of the CONASUPO warehouse promoted by Eraclio Zepeda. Felipe Santander, a playwright of peasant topics, acknowledges Sano's influence.<sup>39</sup> Today, María Alicia Martínez Medrano, a disciple of Virgilio Mariel and one of Sano's last students leads the movement of popular theatre studios (Laboratorio de Teatro Campesino e Indígena and others) in his tradition (Tanaka, "LTCI").

## Conclusion

Sano came to Mexico forced by circumstances. Objectively, there remained very few places in the world for him or for his theatre. However, he accepted the circumstances with initiative and arrived in the country with the mission of organizing the anti-Nazi-fascist theatre movement. With the experiences of anti-Nazi-fascist activities in Europe and the United States along the lines of the Popular Front, he counted on the support of the refugee and leftist artists of the United States and Mexico.

In Mexico he soon developed political theatre activities. However, the training he required from the participants was as vigorous as any method-theatre school. He never abandoned his efforts to make high quality popular, political or social theatre.

Sano was generous as much as demanding in transmitting the theatre resources he accumulated. He offered all the knowledge he had, even when he did not always receive an immediate positive response. Nonetheless, a few theatre people always received him enthusiastically wherever he taught or directed a play. They found their own way to continue his traditions through devotion to the mystique of the committed theatre.<sup>40</sup>

Sano might have created more plays had he returned to Japan, accepting insistent invitations from his numerous friends there. Instead, the Latin American theatre was the space Sano chose for his creations. The key to understand why he opted for Latin America is found in his experiences during the first years in Mexico. The generosity with which the people embraced him and other refugees, and the devotion of his students in his years of near misery, were instrumental in Sano's decision to settle in Mexico and to share his creativity with its people.

### *El Colegio de México*

## Notes

1. On Seki Sano's contribution to the theatre of Mexico and other Latin American countries, see writings and interviews of his close disciples or collaborators: Brun, 6-7, 20-32; 8, 12-25; 9, 38-49.; Azar, 165, and personal interview; Estrada, 2-8; Martínez, 93-94.; Cabrera, Personal interview; García, 4-5. Among Japanese authors, *Fukasaku, Mekishiko & "Sano"* and Tsurumi focus on the uniqueness of Sano's life as the Japanese who ended his life in exile, while Matsumoto, one of the students of Sano and theatre researcher, based on thorough documentation, underscores Sano's role in the Japanese Proletarian theatre movement (*Hachigatsu*); Okamura ("*Eru guran*" & "*Mekishiko*"); Yoshikawa ("*Maesutoro*," "Sano," & "Shiryō") and Fujita ("Sano") illustrate different aspects of his theatre activities. Fujita published the first biography of Seki Sano (*Biba*). It offers useful information on Sano's activities in Japan. Okamura wrote on Sano's Colombian experience. In articles included in *Escenario de dos mundos*, Yoshikawa emphasizes Sano's Latin American wide theatre teaching ("Magisterio") while Fernando de Ita underscores Sano's importance for Mexican theatre history. Also José Carlos Reyes mentions briefly Sano's impact on the development of the new Colombian theatre in the second half of the 1950's ("1955-1987"). In *Teoría y praxis en el teatro en México*, edited by Sergio Jiménez and Edgar Cevallos (Mexico, Gaceta, 1982), Sano's contribution to "Mexico en la Cultura" of 1959 was reprinted as "Apuntes de un director escénico," p.133-182.

2. A kind of untouchable associated with certain "polluting" activities such as executioner, butcher, tanner, shoemaker, etc.

3. It was founded by Hijikata Yoshi and Osanai Kaoru in June, 1924. As the introducer of the European modern theatre, Osanai staged plays of European naturalism and realism, while Hijikata, who returned from Berlin when he learned of the Earthquake in order to create a new theatre with all technical advances of the Western scenic arts, caught the attention of the young audience by his expressionist and formalist directions.

4. Ishigaki, "Aru bomeisha", 284-295, and also personal interview, March 1992; Yoneda, *Ganbatte*, and Karl Yoneda Collection, UCLA; *The New Masses*, July-October 1931.

5. On Brecht, Sano talked to his Guatemalan students in his class when a debate was initiated by the "Brechtian" to criticize Sano's preference to Stanislavsky method. (Flores, Personal interview.)

6. The *Izvestia* of 9 Oct. 1932 informs his arrival as the official representative of the PROT. Sano contributed to the renaming of the IWDU to the IURT with his speech which put emphasis on the importance of the combined efforts of professional and worker's amateur theatrer. See "Collaboration."

7. Nosaka Sanzo, Japanese representative in the Bureau of Comintern and probably only survivor among Sano's Moscow acquaintances, told me by means of his private secretary that they first learned of the fact by Japanese commercial newspapers. Later it was confirmed by the expulsion of Sano Manabu and others from the Party announced on *the Red Flag*, its organ. According to Nosaka, Seki was a fine comrad and he received the news with serenity.

8. I discuss his research on Meyerhold's theatre direction and actor training in the paper presented at El Cuarto Encuentro Nacional de Investigadores Teatrales in Guadalajara, 3-5 Dec. 1992 (Tanaka, "Investigador"). He learned Stanislavsky method mainly from one of the theatre directors of the Moscow Art Theatre but he also carefully analyzed the stage of the theatre. He studied and participated in the TRAM movement, "company" based semi-professional youth theatre which had brief but intensive presence in the early 1930's. His interests were versatile: he tried to study all outstanding manifestations of Moscow, Leningrad and other Soviet and foreign theatres of the 1920's and 1930's. He also got interested in the "national culture" school in the theatre and film represented by Sandro Ajmeteli of Georgia, Kurbis of Ukraina, the Moscow Jewish theatre, Alexandr Dovzhenko, etc.

9. Jorge Galeano helped me to receive confirmation of the fact by Chekoslovakian theatre people during his trip in 1987. Sano first visited Prague to help filming and on 14 July. returned to attend an anti-Nazi theatre conference. His collaboration with the TAC magazine, organ of the Theatre Arts Committee, to put a special issue on Chekoslovakian theatre and film in November 1938 also proves it. The description of the film Sano gave in the interview by López later in Havana, coincides with "The crisis" made by Herbert Kline, a strong tragic picture of the people who would see the Nazi invasion of Sudeden and Silesia a few weeks later.

10. At least one of the veteran members of the Group Theatre, Phoebe Brand, told me, in July 1991, that Sano impressed them so positively that one young actress went "down to Mexico" to take lessons from him. Perhaps that actress was Ruth Robesch who accompanied Seki Sano on his trip to Mexico. H.Kline was director of the organ of the New Theatre and Film Union.

11. Rufino Tamayo, for example, felt uncomfortable that Sano was pressing his request for an official invitation. His letter to Celestino Gorostiza, who apparently rejected extending such an invitation, described Sano as a talented but extremist artist. (I obtained access to this letter by courtesy of Edgar Cevallos). During the Cárdenas government, Mexico attracted the left-wing artists in exile like Erwin Piscator who approached to Mexican government offering his collaboration for theatre development. Sano knew of this project from Paris and with recommendation of Piscator, Seki tried to procure an official invitation (Erwin Piscator Collection, 1937-1939).

12. According to Lola Bravo, Sano was offered a choice between Mexico and one Caribbean country when his US visa was about to expire. Personal interview, July 1992.

13. In the pages of *New Masses* there appear many articles, prose and poems and letters to the editor which express such concern.

14. He carried the letters of recommendation of Erwin Piscator to such Mexican artists as Alfredo Gomez de la Vega, José Clemente Orozco, Carlos Chávez, and introduced him to the German speaking refugee community.

15. Among the American artists and left-wing organization leaders who sent telegrams to Lázaro Cárdenas asking for admission of Seki Sano in exile, there are such names as: Harold Clurman, Morris Carnovsky, Phoebe Brand, Ruth Nelson (The Group Thr.), Harold Johnsrud (Provincetown Playhouse), Dashell Hammett (President of Motion Picture Artists Committee), Theatre Arts Committee, Herman Shumlin (Film producer, Hollywood), Herbert Biberman (Screen writer, Hollywood) Frederick V. Field (Editor, *Amerasia*), Joseph Losey (Theatre director), Paul Strand (Photographer), Irvin E. Cline (Secretary, China Aid Society, Los Angeles) Philip Loeb (Guild Theatre), Alexander Golderweiser (Portland, ethnologist), Marian Thompson (Screen writer, Hollywood), Donald Ogden Stewart (Hollywood Section, League of American Writers), Martha Bliss (Secretary, Women's Committee of the American League for Peace and Democracy Los Angeles.)

16. On this account, Yoshikawa mentions Sano's connection with the Soviet secret service involved in Trotsky's assassination: Yoshikawa, "Sano," 292. Probably, one of her sources is Ignacio Retes who told me the same in the 1987 interview. Also Vlady, Trotskyist mural painter and son of Victor Sege, was convinced that Sano was a Soviet agent when I interviewed him in 1986. There is a reason to deny such a possibility, which I will discuss more fully in my book on Seki Sano.

17. On German propaganda activities in those years, see Schuler, *Cárdenas*. On Japanese effort to obtain war materials, particularly petroleum, from Mexico, see: Nichiboku Kyookai, *Nichiboku* and a series of articles published in August, 1989 on *The Asahi*.

18. Although he could not accept the tempting offer to work for Mexican theatre since he had already accepted to establish a drama school at the New School for Social Research in New York, he recommended Sano in his place ( Maria Ley-Piscator, Personal interview, May 1992).

19. In the archives of the American Union of Civil Liberty of 1939, there is a document which suggests that this society was created by the initiative of the anti-Nazi fascist movement in the USA.

20. Rodolfo Usigli did not hide his reproach to Odets who lectured him, on the first meeting, what Mexico should do for the theatre. 95-100. Notes on Odets' public lecture: *El Nacional*, "Columnas de Periquillo", April 14 and 21, 1940.

21. For example, there was the tangible impact of Mexican mural painting in the United States, while in the new field of modern dance and film art, American artists were contracted by the Mexican government.

22. Lux, July 1939 - Mar. 1942. Also Yoshikawa, "Sano" and "Shiryo."

23. The December 1939 issue of *Lux*, organ of MUEW, introduces Seki Sano and his TA project and during the following two years, a considerable space is dedicated to it. Beginning in June 1940, the journal contains four issues of "Boletín informativo" of TA.

24. An American modern dancer from Ito Michio Company who was contracted by the Department of Fine Arts to create a dance company (Tsurumi, 183-192.).

25. Sobre *La coronela*, Dallal, 267-278; Bravo, G., Personal interview, 1991.

26. *El Nacional*, 19 May 1941; 3 May 1942; Bravo, G., Personal interview, 1991.

27. Correspondence from Hanns Mayer to Ludwig Renn. Kiessling, 173, 295.

28. Friedrich Schuler in *Cárdenas Revisited*, examines the nature of Nazi propaganda and SS activities (so called quinta columna) in Mexico in this period. According to him, one of the principal means was cultural activities. According to Alfredo Zalce, leftist painter and co-founder of the Taller de Gráfica Popular, who collaborated in scenography of the play, there were rumors that the Germans had constructed "pistas de aterrizaje" in Soconuzco, Chiapas.

29. "Importante manifestación de Unidad nacional," *El Nacional*, 23 Nov. 1941, 1: Yoshikawa, "Shiryō", 105.

30. *El Nacional*, 25 May 1942; Yoshikawa reproduced the description of the stage based on *El Universal Grafico* of the same date. "Shiryō," 107-8.

31. National Archives, Civil Reference Branch, RG59, "Internal affairs of Japan. Japanese activities in Latin America. 1940-1944."

32. After the declaration of war, Japanese immigrants were concentrated in Mexico City and Guadalajara under soft surveillance. Except for a small minority, most of them were conservative followers of the Imperial government. Some of them actively supported the Imperial government's war effort. As a political refugee, Sano had no restriction on his movement, and he kept relations only with the anti-militarist minority. Notwithstanding the fact, for FBI Sano was doubly suspect as a leftist and Japanese. The FBI followed Sano's activities by means of a local agent and interception of personal correspondence between 1939 and 1945. One FBI document suggests that it adopted measures against L.Renn accusing him as a Nazi fifth columnist. There was a similar accusation by the FBI against Sano. (Sano, Seki files. National Archives.)

33. Personal interviews with Gelada, R.Fuentes, L.Bravo; Sano loved to tell about eating only bananas for days or grilling mice together with his starving students. It is difficult to verify the fact. But the story illustrates Sano's needy situation.

34. Waldeen, Hijikata Umeko who lived in the same department in Moscow, and his students of later years all concur.

35. Among his students of these years were Ricardo Montalban, Pedro Armendariz, Miroslava and others who later distinguished themselves in movie and TV. Also he established connections with Emilio(Indio) Fernández and Mario Morenóh (Cantinflas) who later provided him patronage and support.

36. A good report on his lesson was published by Adolfo Ballano Bueno in *Hoy*, Jan. 1946.

37. Ricardo Fuentes, Personal interview, January 1992; Fernando Benítez, "La Cultura en México," *Novedades*, 10 June 1945.

38. In 1952 he maintained, together with Dagoberto Guillaumín, one of his disciples, that it was necessary to make good plays including classic ones accessible to the people by reviving the carpa tradition. "Carpa popular para el teatro de categoría," *El Nacional*, ( 29 Aug. 1952 )

39. Personal interviews with them. María Alicia Martínez Medrano gave Sano's name to one of the scenic spaces of Laboratorio de Teatro Campesino e Indígena in Tabasco. Felipe Santander did the same to his theatre school in Cuernavaca.

40. What impressed me most while interviewing the theatre people of Mexico and other places was that they all reacted very vividly as soon as they heard his name. Almost all of them had no hesitation in calling him the teacher who urged them to make a lifetime commitment to the theatre.

## Works cited

Azar, Hector. *Funciones teatrales*. Mexico: SEP/CADAC, 1982.

Brun, Josefina. "Ignacio Retes, 40 años en escena," *Escénica* 6-7 (May 1984): 20-32; 8 (June 1984): 12-25; 9 (July 1984): 38-49.

Dallal, Alberto. "El nacionalismo prolongado: el movimiento mexicano de danza moderna, 1940-1955," *La danza en situación*. México, Gemika, 1985. 221-278.

- Escenario de dos mundos*. Madrid: Centro de Documentación Teatral, 1988.
- Estrada, Gerardo R. "Veinticinco años de Héctor Azar en el teatro mexicano," *La Cabra* 3er ser. 15 (Dec 1979): 2-8.
- Frente a frente*. México: LEAR (1934-1937).
- Fujita, Fujio. "Sano Seki kenkyu," *Higeki kigeki* No. 1 (1981): 86-92; No. 3, 76-82; No. 4, 84-92.
- . *Biba eru teatoro*. Tokyo: Orijin shuppan, 1988.
- Fukasaku, Mitsusada. "Sano Seki," *Higeki no senkakusha. Dokyumento nihonjin*. Vol. 2, Tokyo: Gakugei-shoin, 1969.
- . *Mekishiko no subete*. Tokyo: Kadokawa, 1967. 42-51.
- Hijikata, Umeko. *Hijikata Umeko jiden*. Tokyo: Hayakawa-shobo, 1976.
- Hijikata, Yoshi. *Nasuno yobanashi*. Tokyo: Kappa shobo, 1947.
- Kiessling, Wolfhang. *Bruchken nach Mexiko: Traditionen einer Freundschaft*. Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1989.
- Kurabayashi, Seiichiro. *Shingeki nendaiki. Senzenhen*. Tokyo: Hakusui-sha, 1972.
- Lux*, organ, MUEW. Dec. 1939 - Dec. 1941.
- Martínez Medrano, María Alicia. "Antecedentes," *Tramoya* 14-15 (1988): 93-94.
- Matsumoto, Kappei. *Hachigatsu ni kanpai*. Tokyo: Kooryuusha, 1986.
- . *Nihon shakaishugi engekishi. Meiji Taisho-hen*. Tokyo: Chikuma, 1975.
- . "Shingeki seikatsu booboo gojunen. 28. Mosuko no Hijikata Yoshi to Sano Seki," *Komedian*, 1 (mayo 1981).
- Naimusho, Keihokyoku. "Hijikata Yoshi no katsudo jokyo," *Showa jyuuroku nenchu ni okeru shakaiundo no jokyo*. Tokyo: Naimusho Keihokyoku. Dec. 1942. 443-450.
- New Masses, The*. New York: Aug. 1931-Apr. 1939.
- Nichiboku Kyokai. *Nichiboku koryushi*. Tokyo: PMC shuppan, 1989.
- Okamura, Haruhiko. "Eru guran aruchisuta komunisuta ekusupaturiado en mehiko Seki Sano," *Shiso no kagaku*, Jul. 1978, 36-47.
- . "Mekishiko engeki ni okeru Sano Seki," *Asahi*, Tokyo, 1983.
- Sano, Seki. "Apuntes de un director teatral," Sergio Jiménez y Edgar Cevallos, eds. *Teoría y praxis en el teatro en México*. México: Gaceta, 1982.
- . "My People Can not Forever be Blinded," *China Today* Oct. 1938.
- . "On the Collaboration of the Professional Revolutionary Theatre and the Workers' and Peasants' Mass Amateur Theatres in Japan," *The International Theatre. Bulletin of the International Olympiad of the Revolutionary Non-Professional Theatres*, 4 (1933): 14-20.
- . and Yoshi Hijikata. *Geijutsu wa minshu no monoda*. Moscow: International Worker's Publisher, 1935.
- Schuler, Friedrich. *Cárdenas Revisited*. University of Chicago. 1990.
- TAC magazine*. Nov. 1938.

- Tanaka, Michiko. "Seki Sano: investigador teatral. Experiencias con Meyerhold y el teatro ruso-soviético de las 1920 y 1930," a paper presented at El Cuarto Encuentro Nacional de Investigadores Teatrales in Guadalajara in December 3-5, 1992. *El Tiempo* Mexico D.F., 1942-1946.
- Tsurumi, Shunsuke. "Sano Seki no koto," *Guadarupe no seibo*. Tokyo, Chikuma shobo, 1976. 183-192.
- Yoneda, Karl. *Gambatte*. Los Angeles: California UP, 1987.
- Yoshikawa, Emiko. "Maesutoro Seki Sano no deshitachi ni kiku," *Higeki kigeki*, 352 (Tokyo: 2, 1980): 66-8.
- . "El magisterio latinoamericano de Seki Sano," *Escenario de Dos Mundos*, T.1, Madrid: Centro de Documentación Teatral, 1988. 95-100.
- . "Sano Seki to el Teatro de las Artes," en *Waseda Daigaku Bungaku Kiyo* (Tokyo: 1982), 285-294.
- . "Shiryō mekishiko jidai no Sano Seki," *Engekigaku* 24 (Tokyo: 1983): 99-114.

### Manuscripts collections and films cited

- Aerograd*. Dir. Aleksandr Dovzhenko. Ukrainfilm, Frontier Films, 1935. American Civil Liberties Union Collection. Princeton University, Princeton. Basilov Collection. TSGALI, Moscow.
- Crisis*. Dir. Herbert Kline. Frontier Films. Mar. 1939.
- Erwin Piscator collection, Morris Library Special Collections, University of Southern Illinois, Carbondale.
- GOSTIM collection. TSGALI, Moscow.
- Meyerhold collection. TSGALI, Moscow.
- Podolsky collection. TSGALI, Moscow.
- Sano, Seki clippings. New York City Library for Performing Arts.
- Sano, Seki file, G59, Civil Reference Branch, National Archive, Washington.
- Sano, Seki folios. Secretaría de Gobernación. Archivo General de la Nación. México D.F.
- Tamayo, Rufino. Correspondence to Celestino Gorostiza. March 1939.
- Yoneda, Karl collection, Reserch Library Special Collectios, University of California in Los Angeles.



---

**Interviews and correspondences cited**

- Azar, Hector. Personal interview. Apr. 1991.  
Bravo, Guillermina. Personal interview. Jan. 1992.  
Bravo, Lola. Personal interview. July 1992.  
Chavez Morado, José y Olga Kosta. Personal interview, 1987.  
Flores, Marco Antonio. Personal interview. 1989.  
Gelada, José. Personal interview. 1987.  
Ley-Piscator, Maria. Personal interview. May 1992.  
Martinez Verdugo, Arnoldo. Personal interview, 1987.  
Nosaka, Sanzo. Correspondence. August 1989.  
Retes, Ignacio. Personal interview. 1981.  
Ruiz, Soledad. Personal interviews. 1986.  
Santander, Felipe. Personal interview. January 1993.  
Senda, Koreya. Personal interview. March 1992.  
Valencia, Rodolfo. Personal interviews. 1981.  
Zepeda, Eraclio. Personal interview. 1991.  
Zalce, Alfredo. Personal interview, Dec. 1992.