

The Imperial Theater, also known as Teikoku Gekijo, is Japan's first Western-style theater. The original four-story building was designed in a Renaissance style by Yokogawa Tamisuke (1864–1945), a renowned architect and founder of Yokogawa Electric Co. Yokogawa spent time in the U.S. and the West studying theater design, and modeled the theater after famous opera houses in Europe. Its construction was prompted by a growing movement that wanted to raise the standard of theater in Japan. Prominent and influential people during the Meiji period (1868–1912) were aware of the importance of the modern theater and were eager to adopt the Western way of construction. The plan to establish a new theater in Tokyo was first conceived in 1906 by former Prime Minister Ito Hirobumi and by Shibusawa Eiichi, a prominent businessman. Soon after, Shibusawa approached many influential people of the time, who were all eager to open a new theater. This culminated in the establishment of the Imperial Theater Corporation in 1907. Yokogawa, the architect and designer, was appointed to develop a venue that would showcase traditional Japanese performance arts, especially kabuki, in a modern theater.

On March 1, 1911, the theater opened with a grand ceremony. However, just over a decade after its opening, the theater was partially destroyed by a fire following the Great Kanto Earthquake that struck the region on September 1, 1923. The theater was soon rebuilt in 1924, but it would undergo several more changes, including a change of management amidst the economic depression from the early Showa period to World War II.

In 1964, the Imperial Theater was closed due to the aging of the edifice. It took two and a half years to finish reconstruction, and it was reopened in September 1966 as a new theater, which still stands today. The present version was designed by Taniguchi Yoshiro, the father of Taniguchi Yoshio, who re-designed the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2004.

Since its first opening, the Imperial Theater has played a very significant role in modernizing theater and theater management in Japan. For example, the theater introduced a new ticket system in which tickets sales opened ten days prior to the performance. The theater also prohibited eating, drinking, and smoking inside the auditorium, instead building a lounge and dining hall inside the building. The Imperial Theater also fostered other types of performance art in Japan, including opera and ballet. For a while, it had its own opera company. The theater also invited foreign theaters, opera and ballet companies to come and perform. Finally, the Imperial Theater provided a cosmopolitan cultural atmosphere that, at the time, could not be found anywhere else in Tokyo.