

Kabuki as Japanese Culture

By *Ichimura Manjiro*

HUMANKIND is set apart from animals in that we have developed culture; in this respect, nurturing and treasuring culture assumes great significance for humankind. Culture can be said to represent the way of life of a race of people or a region. Since ancient times, it has been influenced by geographical factors, including a region's climate and the clothing, food and housing that reflect those factors, as well as the peoples' customs, religious ideas and political thoughts.

Geographically, Japan is an island nation in the Far East. People and culture gradually drifted in from the north, through the Korean Peninsula, or from the south by sea on the warm ocean current that flows northeast off East Asia. Slowly digesting this imported culture through the centuries, Japan assimilated it to create its own unique culture. While readily accepting aspects of new culture, the Japanese have continued to treasure things from the past, even though they might not be needed in the contemporary world, skillfully bringing them out and using them when appropriate. Japanese culture is unusual in that it has been enormously influenced by geographical factors. Kabuki is no different. It also developed from performing arts and customs in Japan, accepting all that came its way in the

new environment of political stability in the early Edo Period (1603-1867), coming to inherit the soul of the Japanese as it evolved into the form we have today.

My first kabuki performance took place when I was five, and having my father as a kabuki actor, I was used to being backstage in a kabuki theater from a very early age. I learned traditional Japanese dance, and my early experience of the atmosphere of kabuki saw me commit myself to a life as an actor. As I grew older, I started learning the *shamisen* (three-string musical instrument); Japanese drums small and large; the *koto* (Japanese harp); *nagauta* (long epic songs); *gidayu-bushi* (ballad-drama music), dance and other things related to kabuki. For child actors, apart from appearing on stage playing a child's role, the norm was to learn from watching seniors' performances. From dance, I learned to appreciate the beauty of form; my study of musical instruments taught me musical rhythm; *nagauta* taught me how to vocalize, *gidayu* taught me how to express the ranking of acting roles, to depict character and to show emotion through breathing. By watching performances, I came to appreciate the use of color, stage props large and small, the positioning of the actors on the stage and their balance.



Onna-gata performed by the author, Manjiro in "Yoshitsune Sen-bon Zakura" (left), and "Gempei Nunobiki no Taki" (right) at the Kabuki-za Theater

Photos: Shochiku Co., Ltd.



A scene from "San-nin Kichisa Kuruwa no Hatsukai" by Manjiro. (left) His father, Uzaemon, at the center with Kumadori makeup in "Shibaraku." (right)

The first thing I was taught with regard to performing a role was to strive to adopt people's feelings or emotions. I was given the following explanation. Portraying sadness does not mean trying to look sad, but actually visualizing a very sad scene for oneself, something from one's imagination or personal experience. Those feelings or emotions are then adopted into oneself with the appropriate breathing. This allows you to naturally breathe in slowly through your nose rather than your mouth. If you breathe in slowly, you will always stop once soon without breathing out. Then you breathe out slowly. Only when an actor grasps this will they become able to add emotion to that exhalation in the form of their words. It involves just the slight emphasis of expressions of delight, anger, sorrow and pleasure. It is not a matter of creating a look to depict a character, but to express emotion through one's own heart, and by doing so, produce the desired look. My predecessors placed great importance on breathing, the timing of each actor's lines and human emotional energy.

In an attempt to introduce kabuki to people in as many countries as possible, I have organized "Kabuki for Everyone" (kabuki lectures for foreigners) since 1992, and even before that, I took part in overseas performances of kabuki. When giving these performances I came to understand that fundamental cultural differences affected the way an audience viewed what was happening on stage, and we felt that merely transferring what was performed in Japan to a foreign stage would invite a mistaken appreciation of kabuki. For this reason, I decided that rather than choosing plays that were either popular in Japan or supposedly representative of kabuki, it would be better to select ones that would be easy to follow regardless

of cultural differences, and to focus on explaining those differences, and not on the plot. I would like to have people get a sense of Japan by actually "feeling" kabuki rather than focusing on understanding its logic.

Kabuki's 400-year history means that it possesses a rich variety of aspects. *Kumadori* makeup illustrates these unique features with red representing forcefulness and justice; blue indicating authority and evil; and brown representing a specter. The bombastic style of performance known as *aragoto* combines with the makeup, costume, music and method of expression of the actor's lines to produce a truly larger-than-life character. *Wagoto*, or "gentle style," uses typical Kansai dialect and gestures to create a softer characterization, and the *onna-gata*, or female roles played by males, express female grace, kindness and the delicate turns of the heart to an even greater extent than a female would. The stage settings, the impressive use of large props and the diverse range of music produced by ancient Japanese musical instruments all help to set the scene and skillfully express the characters' sentiments. The audience is enthralled by the beauty of background picture props, the use of music in the dance scenes or the *tachimawari* fight choreography. The interpretation is truly diverse, ranging from aspects that go back through the ages to examples of modern technology, making it difficult to express kabuki in one word. Indeed, kabuki is a microcosm of the diverse nature of Japanese culture. I would like to continuously make an attempt to use kabuki like the table of contents of a book, as a doorway to Japan.

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Ichimura Manjiro is a Kabuki actor, and organizes "Kabuki for Everyone" lectures in English.