

Kabuki: a Sensory, Actor-centered Dramatic Art

By Jean WILSON

Nothing can impact the senses and transport you into the Japanese imagination as effectively as *kabuki*, Japan's traditional theatrical art.

Kabuki is a visual feast of color and texture: the exquisite costumes, to be enjoyed just as much for their beauty as for their significance in indicating the status of the character wearing them; the white or vivid make-up, a throwback to the time before spotlights when the actors had to be noticeable in a theater lit only by candles; the colorful backdrops of scenery and flowers indicating to the audience the season in which the action is taking place, and even the beautifully embroidered fire curtains, works of art in themselves, which are lowered between performances.

To the color and texture add sound and even smell – the exotic tones of various instruments which accompany the actor's intriguing speech patterns and impassioned exchanges, and in some plays the perfume or incense, which wafts hypnotically over the audience. *Kabuki* is also to be felt – in the tingling of your scalp, the stirred emotions, the held breath, and the collective tension of the whole audience as it joins the actor in the story.

The actor is the most important element in *kabuki*. Everything that happens on stage is a vehicle for displaying the actor's prowess, rather than for focusing on the story, which the audience usually knows already. Audience members do not go to see how the story turns out, as a Western audience might; they go to watch the aesthetic beauty of the actor performing a role in a series of stylized poses and forms.

Because the actor is central, props are used only as long as they show him to his greatest advantage. *Koken*, stage hands dressed in black symbolizing their supposed invisibility, come on stage to hand the actor props, make adjustments to his costume and wig, and bring him a stool to perch on during long speeches or periods of inactivity (the full ensemble of costume and wig for a historical play typically weighs 20 kg, but can be much heavier).

All actors in *kabuki* are men, and the *onnagata* female-role specialists portray a stylized feminine beauty. There is no pretense at realism, hence the actor's real age is irrelevant, and there is no incongruity, for example, in a 75-year-old actor portraying an 18-year-old maiden. The audience wants to see the beauty of the *onnagata's* stylized movements – which express greater femininity than that of a real female – not the realistic representation of a woman.

Every *kabuki* theater features a *hanamichi*, an elevated runway for the performers through the audience from the back of the theater to the main stage. This is used for dramatic entrances and exits, and contains a trap lift through which demons, ghosts and other supernatural characters can emerge. The proximity of the audience to the *hanamichi* creates an intimacy between the actor



Ichikawa Danjuro XII (center) as the "aragoto" hero in "Shibaraku"

Photo: Shochiku Co.

and spectators, and this mood is heightened by *kakegoe*, the shouting out of an actor's name by audience members to show appreciation of his adroitness in creating a striking image or moving moment through swordplay, poses or emotional delivery.

Kabuki's History & Repertoire

Kabuki is said to have been started in 1603 by Okuni, an attendant at the Izumo Shrine, and her troupe of entertainers, who also sold their favors off stage. However, in 1629 the Tokugawa government prohibited women from appearing on stage because their sexually provocative dances had begun to cause public disturbances. The women were succeeded by attractive young boys, but in 1653, they were banned for similar reasons, and it was decreed that actors of all roles should be adult men. This became the precursor of the unique art we see today, which employs the highly skilled *onnagata*.

Two different styles of *kabuki* evolved. In Kansai (today's Kyoto/Osaka/Kobe region), Sakata Tojuro (1647-1709) practiced *wagoto*, a softer style used to portray gentle, romantic heroes. By contrast, in Kanto (present-day Tokyo), the leading actor was Ichikawa Danjuro (1660-1704) and he developed a brash, bravura, bombastic style of acting called *aragoto*, literally "rough business." Both of these styles are still practiced today.

The word "*kabuki*" is made up of three Chinese characters: *ka* (song, that is narrative recitation and the use of *shamisen* three-stringed lutes, hand drums and wooden clappers), *bu* (dance and stylized fight scenes) and *ki* ([acting] skill). Early last century, under the influence of Western drama, *shin-kabuki* (new *kabuki*) emerged. These were *kabuki* plays without the song or dance elements, leaving only the acting, and they are still frequently performed.

A typical *kabuki* program features one dance piece, one *jidaimono*, and one *sewamono*. *Jidaimono* are historical dramas set in Japan before the Edo period (1603-1867) and usually feature melodramatic elocution, gorgeous costumes and colorful make-up called *kumadori*, which is painted along the muscle and blood vessel lines of the actor's face to indicate the nature of the character. Some *jidaimono* originated in the puppet theater and feature accompaniment from a chanter who relates the story line and emotions of the character while the actor expresses them in

movement, facial expressions or poses (*mie*). *Sewamono* are stories of the everyday life of people during the Edo period, and the story line, portrayal and presentation are more realistic.

The most common themes of *kabuki* plays are clan squabbles; revenge; corruption and justice; family, group or servant-master loyalty; conflicts between duty and personal feelings; complications of love; and the supernatural. But there are also comedies, and even serious plays may have comic scenes.

Kabuki Experimentation

Surprisingly, despite *kabuki's* rich history and polished artistic techniques, the majority of Japanese people have never seen it because *kabuki* has somehow gained a reputation with the general populace for being boring and difficult to understand. To remedy this, some *kabuki* actors have experimented with ways of reinvigorating their art.

In particular, since 1986, Ichikawa Ennosuke III has been producing "Super-Kabuki" spectacles. Ichikawa has sought to recapture the thrill of Edo-period *kabuki* by reviving various theatrical stunts from that period such as using cascades of real water on stage and flying on wires over the heads of the audience to the top floor of the theater. His productions feature hi-tech special effects, dynamic lighting, minimalist sets and stunning costumes, while actors use modern Japanese with sped-up delivery. His shows have proved hugely popular with people who would never normally set foot in a *kabuki* theater.

More recently, Onoe Kikugoro VII has produced a *kabuki* version of Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night" and Nakamura Kanzaburo XVIII has used open sets and incorporated elements of pop, rock and opera in his productions in collaboration with non-*kabuki* directors. Overall, the recent experimentation has been well received domestically, but one of Nakamura's January 2010 plays at the Kabukiza, incorporating a take-off of Michael Jackson's "Thriller" zombie video scenes, met with less appreciation. The principal reason was, I believe, because *kabuki* is an exquisitely beautiful art form and even scenes of suicide or murder are to be presented in as aesthetically pleasing a manner as possible; the *kabuki* zombies failed to follow that basic tenet.

The Kabukiza Closes

The doors of *kabuki's* most famous theater, the Kabukiza in Tokyo, closed at the end of April 2010. The closure was inevitable eventually. The Kabukiza was built prior to the latest anti-earthquake, building safety standards, and had cramped seating, insufficient toilet facilities, and no elevators or escalators. With the increase in the age of the average patron, many older people struggled to climb the long flights of stairs to reach the second- and third-floor seats. This was often in addition to the stairs they had already climbed up from the subway exit, which also has no escalator to street level.



Kataoka Nizaemon XV (left) as a "wagoto" character and "onnagata" Bando Tamasaburo V in "Kuruma Bunsho"

In 1921, the entire building was destroyed by fire caused by an electrical short circuit, and during the rebuilding work, the September 1, 1923, Great Kanto Earthquake struck, leveling the building again to all but its skeleton framework. Its replacement, a fireproof, earthquake-proof, ferroconcrete building many times larger than its predecessor, was finished in 1925. Its exterior was a combination of Nara (600-794) and Azuchi Momoyama (late 16th century) architectural styles, with three gables. The 27-meter-wide stage had an 18-meter revolving stage built into it, and the most modern facilities available were incorporated into the building, including lighting from Germany and the United States.

However, in May 1945, the building was firebombed in a huge air raid. Postwar recession prevented the theater from being rebuilt until January 1951, but it was a replica of its predecessor except for having two and not three gables. This is the same building that has just closed.

For many of us who have spent large periods of time at this theater, the passing of the Kabukiza feels like an old friend has died. However, the spectacular art of *kabuki* itself, rightly acclaimed globally as a World Cultural Heritage property, is still very much alive.



People take the last photo of Kabukiza before the dismantling.

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