

Kabukiza Gripped by Frenzy

By Masakazu HOSODA

This column is aimed at introducing various facets of Japanese culture, and so I have consciously taken up the subject of mass culture in contemporary Japan. My reporting activities as a journalist for many years have convinced me that calm analysis of movies, TV programs, novels, animations and fashion, which envelop the general public like air, is an important job in grasping the overall awareness and trend of Japanese people in the 21st century.

My conviction remains unshaken. Yet it is true, at the same time, that Japan's traditional performing arts are fully spreading roots in the present day, while being exposed to the current of the times and changes in civilization. I would like to report on one example of this trend on the basis of what I experienced recently.

It is concerned with the closure for rebuilding of the Kabukiza, a Tokyo theater located several blocks east of Ginza, the largest shopping district in Japan. The Kabukiza, as its name shows, is dedicated to the performance of *kabuki*, a traditional stage art Japan boasts to the world. Surprisingly, the Kabukiza building had a Western external appearance when it opened in 1889.

The theater was rebuilt in 1911 into a purely Japanese-style structure and had been rebuilt twice since after it was gutted by a fire and then destroyed in an air raid during World War II. The latest theater, restored in 1951, had an undulating gable above the front entrance, with its center shaped like a bow and its right and left edges curved.

As it became time-worn, the beautiful theater was closed at the end of April to be rebuilt into a modern structure. I visited the Kabukiza for the first time in several years to observe the April farewell performance which was drawing a large audience. I was surprised to find that all seats were filled even to the rearmost row on the third floor although it was a weekday afternoon. Members of the audience were mostly elderly women or elderly couples. There were not a few young women but few young men. The lobby was lined with bunches of Phalaenopsis orchid flowers probably presented to actors from their fans. Spectators in box seats were waiting for the curtain-up while taking box lunch with beer.

As the curtain rose, I was excited by a gorgeous cast of actors. In *Terakoya (The Village School)*, a famous *gidayu*-based play, the most popular actors including Matsumoto Koshiro, Bando Tamasaburo, Kataoka Nizaemon and Nakamura Kanzaburo were featured. One thing that impressed me during the performance of *Terakoya* was the sight of a young woman seated in front of me weeping without scruple at the scene of a loyal *samurai* lamenting the tragic death of his young son. Other plays also featured topnotch actors respec-

Photo: Kyodo News



People swarm the entrance to the Kabukiza for a glimpse at the traditional theater's closing ceremony ahead of its replacement with a new playhouse-cum-office building complex.

tively representing the Edo (Tokyo) and Kamigata (Osaka) styles of *kabuki*. When popular actors posed on the *hanamichi* runway leading to the stage, the audience burst into applause, while seasoned spectators in the gallery, known as *omuko*, bellowed actors' names for encouragement to enliven the atmosphere.

This frenzy undeniably resulted from people's grief in some respect at the disappearance of the time-honored theater they are familiar with. Yet, as I sat in the packed hall charged with fervor, I was moved by the enthusiastic support still extended to this traditional performing art dating back to the 17th century from people in the technology/information-ridden metropolis of Tokyo in 2010.

The new Kabukiza, which will open in the spring of 2013 after three years of construction work, will be a 29-storied modern commercial complex with four basement levels, consisting of the theater and office space. It will be equipped with elevators and escalators lacking in the old theater, and will be connected to a subway station. It will preserve the external appearance of the old structure by inheriting the atmosphere of a traditional playhouse.

It remains to be seen how state-of-the-art architectural technology will restore the traditional theatrical space. **JS**

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