

An Interview with Jean Wilson, Theater Critic/Kabuki Commentator

# Kabuki Talk with Jean Wilson, Theater Critic & Kabuki Commentator

Interviewer: Naoyuki Haraoka Writer: Chaobang Ai

**Q: Could you please briefly explain how you got interested in Kabuki and started your work as an interpreter of Kabuki plays?**

**Wilson:** I came to Japan in May 1980, and saw my first Kabuki two months later, which was, I think, serendipitous: it was Ichikawa Ennosuke III, now called En'ō II, and his Kabuki was so wonderful. At that time there was no English language earphone guide, and I did not speak a word of Japanese, but still I remember tears pouring down my face watching *Yoshitsune Senbon Zakura*. He was playing the fox, Tadanobu, and I was so moved that I became a fan of that actor. If *Senbon Zakura* is your first Kabuki I think you're hooked for life.

I did not study Japanese before I came to Japan — there was no such opportunity in England at that time — so I decided not to attempt to become a specialist on Kabuki, but just to be a fan. So instead I went into the *enka* music world for the first 15 years, eventually becoming a theater critic specializing in *jidaigeki* (samurai dramas). I was asked to write a very large article on *enka*, and then another, on *jidaigeki* in the theater, but for that I wanted to research more to find out where *jidaigeki* came from. Because of that research, and because by then I knew how to get Kabuki tickets, I was going to the Kabuki theater sometimes up to 10 times a month. And I had a stamp card for the earphone guide, of which I was getting through about one every two months; and because of that, the earphone guide company invited me as a guest for their 25th anniversary party in 2000. I was the only foreigner as a regular patron of the earphone guide there, but there were some other foreigners, and I thought, maybe they are the commentators I hear every time in the earphones. I got talking to one of them, and she immediately scouted me to become a Kabuki commentator. So to cut a long story short, that was how I entered Kabuki.

**Q: Do you have any particular favorite Kabuki plays or authors?**

**Wilson:** My favorite play is *Ippon Gatana Dohyo Iri* by Hasegawa Shin about a failed sumo wrestler who becomes a gangster, which is *sewamono* (contemporary/domestic drama). I had seen that and other Hasegawa plays performed by non-Kabuki actors, including by *enka* singers. I loved that play so much, and thought, well here is the bridge that I was looking for: here are plays performed in the regular theater like the Enbujo or the Meiji-za by ordinary actors and actresses, and the very same play is performed in Kabuki, with

identical content, the same words, same set, same costumes, everything is the same — except in Kabuki it is all men. And of course the delivery, the way of speaking the words is a little bit different in Kabuki.

I liked the late Kanzaburo XVIII very much. There is one play that vividly remains in my mind, with a scene where he carried the beheaded head of his lover under his arm around the theater, and then went back on the stage, put the head on the table and fed it food. They created a real rainstorm using the sprinkler system; he used a waxed umbrella, and the raindrops were bouncing off it — you could hear a pin drop, there was not a sound in the place. It was extraordinary.

One of the interesting things about English commentators, even though there are only six or eight of us, is that we each specialize in or are passionate about something different. There is one who is passionate about Japanese dance, and he likes to do those plays. For me it is *kizewamono* (raw-life/gangster drama), so most of what I will talk about is gangsters, and the lower-life — including Kawatake Mokuami — plays. I also like *Migawari Zazen*, because of the visual humor: it is a wonderful play that I think can be enjoyed by almost any nationality of person. Even if someone does not approve for religious or other reasons of drinking or having an affair, the encounter between an angry wife and a drunk husband who does not recognize he is speaking to his wife when confessing can still appear a very funny thing.

## The Beauty of Death in Kabuki

**Q: I think Nakamura Kanzaburo was an amazing actor, as well as his father. He played a lot of roles in Mokuami's plays, which describe so well the dark side of society at the end of the Edo period. He seemed to capture a certain aesthetic beauty that is the essence of Kabuki. But the plays themselves are often based on feudalistic values such as *chugi* (staunch devotion to masters) or *bushido* (the samurai code). For example, in *Terakoya*, Matsuomaru has to kill his son out of devotion to his master. Do you think this can create difficulties in understanding Kabuki for young people today?**

**Wilson:** The only three differences I can identify between, say, my generation and the younger generation today are that first of all, the attention span is shorter; second, they may be bored more quickly

because the action is slow; and third, not understanding the references to Buddhism, such as the different Buddhist hells that you get in some of the plays. But these are not known by older Japanese people now either, and even in the 15 years that I have been an English commentator the length of the plays has been cut. They are cutting out shorter scenes, side scenes, references to Buddhism and Buddhist religious words that average people do not know. I find that very interesting, because in the West the script is sacrosanct. Shakespeare's plays stay the same: you do not cut some of the words out because you do not like them, or move them around, or give them to another character. But in Japan the actor is the center, and the script is flexible. It is very interesting as a non-Japanese to see that either Shochiku (the Kabuki production company) or the actor in charge can cut parts of the script or shorten the plays to suit the audiences.

The aesthetic side of Kabuki, the color, the sound, I think young people enjoy as much as anyone else. The stylized fighting may be a bit peculiar, to Westerners as well; Western plays must represent realism, whereas Japanese plays present a spectacle, and there is no pretense in a *jidaimono* historical Kabuki play that this is real. For example, you have a princess role, an *onnagata* female role specialist dressed in a red kimono, kneeling in the snow: I mean, who would kneel in the snow in a silk kimono? But it is beautiful. Similarly I think stylized fighting is one of the things Western people find disappointing, because they are waiting for the clashing of the swords, and it does not happen.

**Q: I believe this beauty of Kabuki represents the essence of Japanese values, which are aesthetic ones: presenting beautiful things in a beautiful manner is at the core of Japanese culture. What do you think about this, especially from a non-Japanese perspective?**

**Wilson:** I am not sure that non-Japanese people can understand all the aesthetic values on a one-time visit. I think Kabuki is like an onion to be peeled, and the appreciation of the aesthetics increases with each viewing. But there is one very unique aspect of the aesthetics in Kabuki, I think, and that is the beauty of death. In the West, death is not beautiful: it is ugly, terrible, sad, awful, never to be beautified. But in Japan, death can be extremely beautiful: the way a person dies in a Kabuki play is usually a scene of beauty. If it is *hara-kiri* ritual suicide they wear beautiful white kimono, and everything around them looks perfect.

A good example is *Natsu-Matsuri Naniwa Kagami*, which has this extraordinary scene where a man kills his father-in-law. The man

Photo 1: ©SHOCHIKU



appears wearing nothing but a red loincloth, with a tattoo on his back and down his arms. And he jumps astride the prostrate figure of his father-in-law lying on the ground, with his back to the audience and a sword in his hand, and stabs his father-in-law; and you have the sound of a summer festival going on in the background, on a very nice set, with the long black hair of the actor and the red and blue tattoo on his back (*Photo 1*); and then he rolls his dead father-in-law into a mud pool and pushes him down with his foot, and his leg gets covered in mud to the knees; and then he is shaking, he goes over to a well and pours buckets of real water on himself to clean off the mud. This whole scene is realistic, and stunningly beautiful; as a viewer I am trapped in this extraordinary situation of enjoying watching death and feeling terribly guilty about it. And then as the actor races, he hears the festival parade coming and quickly puts his kimono on, and he is shaking, and the hilt of the sword in his hand is loose — so you have the sound, you have this panic-stricken man, the color, the horror of the murder that has just taken place — and yet the whole thing is beautiful. This is a very extraordinary thing which you will not find in a Western drama.

Another example may be *Onna Goroshi Abura no Jigoku* (*Photo 2*). I saw that at the National Theater many years ago, and was sitting

Photo 2: ©SHOCHIKU



vary from culture to culture, but all of these emotions are universal, and Kabuki talks about those universal emotions.

I think what you referred to as feudalistic values in Kabuki can be more difficult for most people to understand. But again, there is a universal understanding of sacrifice; it is only the way that that sacrifice is carried out that varies. Even as recently as World War II, Japanese sacrificed themselves as kamikaze. That is a lot more recent than the Kabuki plays. There are stories of sacrifice I think in every culture. And while we may not understand sacrificing your child, there are a lot of plays called “head recognition plays”, where the beheaded head of a child or a person is presented and has to be recognized. But here we are, just recently Kenji Goto was beheaded by ISIS. These themes are very up-to-date: you don’t behead in Japan anymore, but there are still places where it happens and we are directly affected by it.

So of course, I would not want to do it, or live in a culture where it happens, but we see it happening today for different reasons. We also see people willing to die for their faith as martyrs; we still have very modern examples of sacrifice. We may find it hard to understand the way that the sacrifice is depicted in a Kabuki play, but we see different ways of people sacrificing even on our TV screens today.

near the *hanamichi* pathway through the audience. There is a scene where a man with a sword tries to kill a woman in an oil-seller’s shop, and a huge barrel of oil is knocked over, and the oil spills over the stage. And the two actors slip and fall over and over again in this oil, and they roll around in it, and their costumes become absolutely soaked to the skin; and then they run down the *hanamichi* and they stop at a certain point and do a *mie*\* ([Photo 3](#)), and the oil flies off onto the audience members. Of course it is something like washing-up liquid, not real oil, but it is an extraordinary scene. It is beautiful and breathtaking. The stamina of the actors, the horror of what is going on; and again, it is quite realistic.

**Q: Do you think the values created by theater can transcend boundaries and languages, and be transferred to anybody?**

**Wilson:** Yes, if by theater you mean dramas and plays. I think there is a universal understanding of good and evil, no matter what culture or country you come from. Every culture and country has some concept of good and evil, pathos, tragedy, love, and sacrifice. How you love, or how you express it, or in what way you sacrifice may



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Photo 3: ©SHOCHIKU

These are poses that punctuate the action and often create a scene of picture-like beauty when it is an important one or a character feels emotionally overwrought. In almost every scene, the characters widen their eyes and fix their gaze on the audience. The loud beats of the wooden blocks that usually accompany such poses add to the excitement. Sometimes the pose of the body has a special meaning, but the key is to concentrate the energy of the body in the head and face to draw the attention of the audience, like a close-up shot in a movie.

### Lost in Translation — the Word “Understand”

**Q:** What about the role of your interpretation in making Kabuki plays easier to understand for English-speaking people?

**Wilson:** I am actually very sensitive about the word “understand”. Frankly speaking, it is because over the years I have been told so

many times that because I am a foreigner there is no possible way I can understand Japan — and it drives me mad. Because for me, the word “understand” means “intellectually capable of grasping the meaning”. So what it means is I am being told I am stupid; and this happens not just to foreigners but to young people. But the only difference between understanding and not understanding is an explanation: I teach Kabuki at university to 19- and 20-year-old Japanese students, who have never seen a Kabuki play in their life, and if you explain, they understand.

Rather there is a big difference between understanding and accepting. I can understand that example of a samurai sacrificing his own son in order to save his master's son, or two people killing themselves in a double suicide because they see no other way out in their cultural context. It does not mean that I accept or approve of it or that I would do the same thing, but I can certainly understand it. All I need to understand the double suicide is to know that in those days people believed in Buddhism, with reincarnation and an afterlife, so they believed that by dying together they could be reborn in a better situation where they could be together. If you explain that to me, I then understand the play. It does not mean I then believe in reincarnation or approve of double suicide, but I can certainly appreciate the play for what it is in the context of the culture of Japan that it grew out of.

This is one of the jobs of the earphone guide commentator, I think. That is why sometimes when we are watching a double-suicide play, I will say people believed that by dying they could be reborn into a better situation where they could be together. And with that one comment, the foreigner can understand what is going on.

### A Promising Future

**Q:** When I watch the best Kabuki actors, I find myself crying after a few minutes even if I know it is fiction or cannot understand the values like sacrificing someone's life out of regard for authority. Perhaps this is the power and essence of their acting: they are successful in convincing people of the importance of such actions. Sadly, we have recently seen the deaths of some of the best of those actors. What do you think about the future of Kabuki?

**Wilson:** I do not think Kabuki will disappear. I think some of the younger actors are doing their absolute best to ensure that it continues, for example Ichikawa Ennosuke IV, and Kanzaburo's two sons, Kankuro and Shichinosuke. Ebizo is also trying something new, and we should include Somegoro and Ainosuke as well. I would

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say those six are probably the key to the future of Kabuki.

When I first began to watch Kabuki, the theaters were about two-thirds to a half full, and there were many empty seats. It was considered the enjoyment of a select few, rather than a popular art. Then Ichikawa Ennosuke III, now En'o II, introduced Super Kabuki, and re-introduced some of the *keren*, the Edo period stage stunts that had been removed in the Meiji period. The reaction was twofold: some people were wildly enthusiastic, while others called it *saru-shibai* or “circus Kabuki”. But he proved to be right. His policy was 3S: story, speed and spectacle. He realized this was what modern audiences needed. He sped up the action, made the language understandable without any kind of earphone guide, and made it gorgeous to watch.

Once this started, the theaters were packed. Very sadly, about 11 years ago he had a stroke and left the stage. The new Ennosuke is trying to carry on the legacy, and I think he is doing a good job of it. But I think we need another revolutionary in Kabuki, and I do not know who that will be. Kabuki is losing its audiences. It is not surprising because it has lost people like Tomijuro, Jakuemon, Shikan, Kanzaburo and now Mitsugoro; these were hugely skilled and popular actors, and their fans are not going to go as much, or at all.

But I admire these younger actors, they are doing their very best. What is happening now is that popular entertainment has taken the *keren* from Kabuki, while Kabuki is bringing in the video culture, the pop culture, and blending it. Ennosuke's next Super Kabuki II will be “One Piece”, based on a popular *manga* (Photo 4). Ennosuke is also combining with Uniqlo, and has made a new series of Uniqlo clothing that will be sold worldwide with Kabuki faces and crests all over them. Ebizo has been doing his Roppongi Kabuki, and Somegoro just performed in Las Vegas. I take my hat off to them: they are doing their absolute best to make themselves known outside of the Kabuki world, they are taking advantage of television, and video, and so on a lot more than former actors. This is necessary, because the young people do not know who they are. In order for Kabuki to survive, we have to expand the boundaries.

**Q: Do you think it will also be possible to attract people outside Japan to Kabuki, perhaps through this innovation?**

**Wilson:** In my opinion the best and only way is to educate and then let them see. So something like the National Theater does every June and July, which is give a 30-minute or so explanation about some aspect of Kabuki, and then a break, and then a short play that demonstrates the points that were explained. Last year the Zenshinza performed at the Japan Student Services Organization “Let's Enjoy Kabuki” for all of the international students here in Japan, and received an around 91% “excellent” response on the questionnaires. I think that is the key: you cannot expect non-Japanese people to understand without *any* explanation things like stylized fighting, or why somebody is using a high voice. It does not take a lot of comment, just one sentence. Or even do it hands-on; the Zenshinza actor all had us doing *mie* in our seats, and then we saw the real actor doing it in the presentation.

I think that is a very successful way: keep it short, do not try to cover the whole of Kabuki in one session, but pick out one aspect of Kabuki like the National Theater does — it may be animals in Kabuki, it may be *onnagata*, it may be something else — some point that you want to explain from the play you are showing, and then show them the play. I think that is the best way. **JS**

Naoyuki Haraoka is editor-in-chief, Japan SPOTLIGHT, and executive managing director, Japan Economic Foundation.  
Chaobang Ai is a writer, editor and blogger living in Tokyo.