Presenting Kabuki to the Western Audience

By Faith Bach

THE first time I saw kabuki, Japan's traditional popular theater, was in 1973. I had only just arrived and spoke no Japanese, but was given a ticket to the second balcony at the Kabuki-za theater and told that arriving in the middle of the play was fashionable. I duly made the long climb up the stairs, slipped in through the center door, and was swallowed up by darkness. The high banks of seats on either side create a kind of tunnel, through which I inched my way in the direction of the music. All at once I emerged into a great blinding light, as the kabuki stage revealed itself far below, ablaze in cherry blossoms. Bright pink cherry blossoms hanging in a thick fringe from the flies, bursting from great trees on the stage, painted on the backdrop, cherry blossoms everywhere. This was the flash of glory that was my first sight of kabuki.

For some, the cherry blossoms are enough. Tourists were coming to kabuki long before the introduction of the English-language "Earphone Guide" commentary in 1982, and presumably were going home happy (and probably a lot less mystified than the Japanese assumed them to be). The bravura of kabuki stagecraft with its traps, lifts, revolves, and moving sets... the resplendent costumes and flamboyant faces..., the nimble stagehands moving props or flapping butterflies about on poles…, the two men inside a winsome horse-suit as the ideal stylized horse, or the gorgeous *onnagata* female role specialist as the ideal stylized woman… Such mechanics and devices, although new to the Western eye, present no real problem, since their function, as well as their appeal, is obvious. Indeed we had such things ourselves in the days of Shakespeare and the Baroque, and no doubt still retain some kind of atavistic audience memory. How else could we have put up for so long with a middle-aged woman on a visible wire playing a flying boy?

It is with the content of kabuki, rather than the form, that the Western audience runs into trouble. Taught to take our theater very seriously indeed, we do not always realize that theatrical content, to a large extent, exists to serve the form – the plot being primarily a vehicle to generate a series of delicious acting moments. Unlike modern Western theater with its content-heavy social conscience, kabuki is unabashedly an actor-centered theater, where the plot exists to serve the actor, not the other way around.

There is little historical evidence, for example, to support the frequency with which the *migawari* "head exchange" appears in classical kabuki plays. In this, the head of an innocent party, often a woman or a child, is substituted for that of a loftier personage whose execution has been demanded by the enemy. The feudal cultural underpinnings of the *migawari* are certainly more familiar to the Japanese than to the Westerner. But the practical issue for the Earphone Guide commentator, for *migawari* and other grisly events like ritual suicide and honor killing, is whether it is necessary, or even desirable, to explain the cultural ethos in order that the dramatic moment be accessible.

In the classical play *Terakoya* (The Village School), a perennial kabuki favorite, it is a seven-year-old child who provides the substitute head, and his father who carries out the pivotal *kubi jikken* "head inspection," wherein he must convincingly pronounce the false head genuine – without, it must be added, actually knowing whose head he will find in the head-box when he opens it. While all this is going on for the father Matsuomaru, the secondary hero, Genzo, has no idea that Matsuomaru is secretly on his side, let alone that he is the father of the *migawari* boy. Genzo's anxiety in the head-inspection moment is for the daring substitution to succeed, balanced with his guilt and sorrow over having just beheaded an innocent child. In addition, both Matsuomaru and Genzo have onstage wives who share their complex feelings; and to top it off, the house is surrounded by soldiers.

Of all this the Earphone Guide must make some sense. The Japanese audience have the advantage of already knowing Matsuomaru's true identity through familiarity with the legend. But to the Western audience, he really is the villain and it is vital that he

remain so for the whole first half of the play wherein Genzo and his wife confront their dilemma and reluctantly decide to sacrifice the boy. Genzo needs all the sympathy the Earphone Guide can muster up for him to ease the audience into his execution of a child. But if they do not know Matsuomaru's real identity and purpose before he opens the head-box, the drama will be lost.

Fortunately the acting geniuses of the past who set the traditional staging for this scene have given Matsuomaru a long cross from stage-left to center as he approaches the head-box. Into this tense silence the Earphone Guide intrudes "Head inspection scenes abound in kabuki and are supreme dramatic moments. For they almost always entail a substitution, of the kind perpetrated here, on which lives and realms hang in the balance. Furthermore, the inspector is himself invariably a creature of divided loyalties who, while opening the box, hopes against hope to find a head which should not, but must, be there. The moment requires a poker-face of profound emotive dimension, for the head he hopes but hates to find is that of his own parent, spouse or child. The head that Matsuomaru knows must be in the box is that of his own son."

The moment of Matsuomaru's opening the head-box and gazing on the dead face of his child is, it goes without saying, dramatic intensity of the highest order. Is it facile to suggest that no one on the planet would be likely to remain unmoved by this moment? A good kabuki actor (and they are pretty much all good) will rip our hearts out by the roots as he hoarsely pronounces the head to be genuine, then raises his voice and cries "Genzo! Well done!"

Not all kabuki is so dense or demanding. The *sewamono* "domestic" dramas are contemporary to their time and hence essentially modern. They are about the common people, so they are easily understood by common people everywhere. *Shinju* "love suicide" is comprehensible, as we have Romeo and Juliet. *Keiseimono* courtesan romances and *kaidanmono* ghost plays are familiar to any culture. *Shiranami* bandit tales are equatable with Robin Hood and other stylish outlaw myths. Realistic to their time and often based on real events, *sewamono* are populated by characters far more accessible than the legendary heros and aristocrats idealized in *jidaimono* "period" plays like The Village School.

Nonetheless, events in both genres adhere to a feudal line. *Jidaimono*'s lord/retainer ties are replaced in *sewamono* by bonds of obligation to family, neighborhood, guild, gang, teacher or mentor; but the fundamental principles of loyalty and reciprocity which power these relationships have their roots in feudal duty. In fact these principles still dominate Japanese society, which only officially dismantled its feudal structures relatively recently, in 1868. The West is so many centuries removed from its own feudal past that we need to be reminded how the system works.

Feudal protocol is not the only hurdle in the Western audience's path. The other is Buddhist philosophy, some knowledge of which can greatly aid appreciation of the dilemmas endemic to the characters. The two main aspects of doctrine operative in kabuki are "karmic retribution" (*inga*), inherent in the Buddhist worldview; and "renunciation" (*gedatsu*), which reflects the belief that salvation can only be achieved by transcending worldly passions and severing earthly ties.

Renunciation is not unknown in the West, but it is not the Western hero's usual response to difficulty. Kabuki, on the other hand, abounds with characters who emerge at the end of the play having suddenly shaved their heads as monks (or nuns), intent on spending the rest of their days cloistered in prayer. The transience of life, with its evanescent fortunes, is the primordial theme of all the Japanese classics, and provides the stage not only with beautiful poetry but also with fine psychological drama. To an audience unschooled in Buddhism, the psychology of renunciation may perhaps be understood simply as a valid reaction to the disappointments of worldly life. And it is certainly a neat way to drop out of the exacting web of feudal relationships.

"Karmic retribution" is not so easy, as it assumes a vast machinery of destiny in which the individual is but a cog. *Inga* literally means "cause and effect," the basis of the Buddhist doctrine of reincarnation. In the bandit epic *Sannin Kichisa* (Three Named Kichisa), a bandit's innocent offspring fall into calamities resulting in their deaths all because their father killed a watchdog during a robbery back before they were born. The children's tragic subplot provides excruciating drama and plenty of audience hankie-time, but has nothing to do with the rest of the story. It could never have been worked in without the karmic dog. Sceptics may regard *inga* merely as a handy dramaturgical tool by which any plot twist, however far-fetched, may be justified. It is possible that kabuki's creators agreed.

Recently kabuki has been reaching out to a wider audience, both abroad and at home. Japanese young people, introduced to kabuki actors via TV and cinema, are less conversant than their forebears with the traditional values which animate kabuki. In my kabuki class at university, a final paper is assigned on a play selected from a list of various titles. One serious young man chose a classical aristocratic thriller about a stalwart nanny to a little prince, who struggles to foil attempts on his life by political rivals. Her own small son, Senmatsu, deliberately eats a cake he intuits has been poisoned, in order to expose the villains, and dies a horrible death. Senmatsu's deed is laudable in feudal terms and audiences have accepted it for centuries. But my student wrote: "Senmatsu's mother cares more for the prince than for her own child, and only praises Senmatsu in the play when he protects his lord the prince. Senmatsu must be lonesome without his mother's love. He eats the cake to ensure that his mother will love him, and always hold him in her heart."

I was proud of my student for his sensitive analysis, and also proud of the play for standing up to such modern examination. Despite its exotic ethos, kabuki is psychologically sound, and perfectly understandable in human terms. For it is human psychology which is the source of drama in all times and all places. JS

Photo: Shochiku Co., Ltd. Matsumoto Koshiro IX as Matsuomaru

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