



Shochiku

Presents Japan to the World

By Otani Nobuyoshi

TWIN boys were born to the Otani family in 1877 in Kyoto, a city that had been Japan's capital for more than 1000 years. They were born on Dec. 13, the day that pine and bamboo are used to decorate homes to bring good fortune to the New Year, so the father, Eikichi, and the mother, Shimo, decided to name the twins Matsujiro (Pine Boy) and Takejiro (Bamboo Boy). The character for "pine" can also be read as *sho*, while the character for "bamboo" can also be read as *chiku*. The twins later went on to establish the company, Shochiku.

Eikichi had obtained the right to operate kiosks at playhouses and *Hanazumo* (sumo events other than tourneys), and the twins helped their parents from their childhood. This gave them a chance to watch *kabuki* plays. When they were 13, they were fascinated by Ichikawa Danjuro IX who came from Tokyo to perform. They later said this had inspired them to enter the theatrical production world.

In 1895, Eikichi was asked to provide financial support for performances at the Sakai-za Theater in Kyoto's Shinkyogoku district. He declined because of his kiosk commitments, but had the younger twin, Takejiro, become financial backer and theater manager, which is something like a producer today. Up until this time, Takejiro had been just a kiosk agent but now he began to be called "*Danna*" (Master). Shochiku traces its roots to this year, 1895.

The older twin, Matsujiro, married into the Shirai family (which managed other theater kiosks) and became their heir. Takejiro was named to take over the family business one day. The two boys continued to work as a team promoting theatrical productions. In those days the theatrical world was still infiltrated with unsavory customs. Gangsters would stand in front of the entrance, looking for a pretext to extort money from theater managers. The twins took steps to eliminate underworld arm-twisting and improved the theater business, earning the respect and gratitude of actors and theater business people. Before long, they were managing not only their own theater but a number of rented ones as well. This led to stronger ties with actors, including the kabuki actor Jitsukawa Enjaku, a star of modern plays or New Wave dramas, Shizuma Kojiro, and a kabuki actor in Osaka, Nakamura Ganjiro I.

The business grew fast and from a New Year's day

Photo: Shochiku Co., Ltd.



Tatsunosuke II's *shumei* performance at the Kabuki-za Theater in 1991

newspaper article in 1902 which reported the opening of a new theater, the Meiji-za Theater in Kyoto (later called the Kyoto Shochiku-za Theater; the present movix Kyoto Minamikan), with the title of *Matsutake no Shinnen* (The New Year Belongs to Matsutake) dramas produced by the twins became locally known as Matsutake plays. It was around this time that Matsujiro and Takejiro established the general partnership company that would later become Shochiku.

Shochiku formed closer ties with Nakamura Ganjiro I, and launched productions in Osaka's most prestigious commercial district, Dotonbori, where it presented not only kabuki plays but contemporary comedies and Bunraku puppet dramas as well.

The next step was to expand eastward to Tokyo. The people of Tokyo tended to pay less respect to people from Kansai (the Kyoto and Osaka regions), so at first the twins opened with a contemporary comic troupe called Soganoya at the Shintomi-za Theater, leaving a kabuki production using Kansai actors later. Although there was a strong opposition from Tokyo's theater world, they eventually took over the Kabuki-za Theater's operations, thanks to support from Nakamura Utaemon V, a kabuki actor based in Tokyo. By the mid-1920s, Shochiku had become a major stage production company in Japan with two major kabuki stars, Onoe Kikugoro VI and Nakamura Kichimon I.

■ Kabuki: A Short History

Kabuki began about 400 years ago in Kyoto as dance performances led by a young shrine maiden Okuni, who serviced at the Grand Shrine of Izumo. The performances drew inspiration from ancient dance styles and introduced new elements, developing into an entertainment that combined drama with dance and music. In the early period, the main performers were either women or boys, and its popularity never wavered. In the mid-1600s, the Shogunate ordered that only adult males would be allowed to perform on stage and the most unusual genre in the world that the *onnagata*, or male actors playing female roles, were created. Kabuki continued to evolve, developing other unique artistic elements and aesthetic sensibilities. By the mid-1800s, with Japan's Westernization, the prohibition on female actors no longer applied, but the productions with only male actors continue even today.

For 110 years, Shochiku, as a private corporation, has had the honor of managing kabuki performances representing Japan's rich cultural heritage.

Other classical performing arts tended to attract the aristocratic class, the military, gentry and the clergy, but kabuki has always drawn its fans from among the merchants, artisans and working class. This is one reason that kabuki was once viewed as a lower-level entertainment. Since the Meiji period (1868-1912), kabuki promoters have done their best to raise its status, and through rave reviews of overseas performances it is accepted as Japan's most fascinating performing art today.

■ Kabuki's Crisis

Shochiku had taken great kabuki actors under its wing and managed a number of theaters. Aerial bombardments destroyed most of the theaters during World War II – the Great Kanto Earthquake had only damaged theaters in Tokyo, but the bombs ravaged Tokyo, Osaka and other parts of the country.

Peace was restored after the war, however, the US occupying forces censored kabuki plays because they portrayed feudal loyalty and idealized revenge. This greatly reduced the number

of kabuki plays that could be performed. Traditional kabuki could have died out, but Faubion Bowers, a member of the first occupying forces, saved it. His appreciation of kabuki astonished reporters when he asked upon arriving at Atsugi Airport in Kanagawa Prefecture if the kabuki actor Ichimura Uzaemon XV was still alive and well. Actually, Uzaemon had died in May, three months before his arrival.

Bowers obtained his knowledge of kabuki when he visited Japan in 1940. He had set sail from the United States for Southeast Asia to study local folk music. The ship made a port call in Japan, so he decided to stroll through Tokyo's Ginza district. There he came across the building which he described as a mixture of pure, refined elegance of the Nara period (8th century) and the magnificence of the Momoyama period (latter 16th century). This was the Kabuki-za Theater. He entered, thinking it might be a temple, and encountered a kabuki play being performed at that moment. It is assumed that Uzaemon was on the stage then. Fascinated at first glance, Bowers canceled his trip to Southeast Asia and decided to stay in Japan. He took a part-time job, stayed in a boarding house and enjoyed many performances.

He returned to Japan after WWII as General Douglas MacArthur's aide-de-camp. He soon learned that the occupying forces had censored kabuki performances, and talked about its meaninglessness by praising kabuki. He later resigned his position as aide-de-camp and joined the military's Civil Censorship Detachment, and worked hard to lift the ban on kabuki plays. Thanks to his efforts, all the scenes of *Yoshitsune Senbon-Zakura* (The Thousand Cherry Trees of Yoshitsune) could be presented in 1948, reviving the entire repertoire.

Bowers continued to support kabuki and helped to support performances in the United States until he passed away a few years ago.

■ Overseas Kabuki Tours

To date, kabuki has traveled to 102 cities in 33 countries. The first overseas performances were in Moscow and Leningrad in 1928. The troupe included the leader, Kido Shiro, and Ichikawa Sadanji II. While there, Sadanji met with the actor and director Konstantin Stanislavsky. Sergei Mikhailovich Eisenstein, the film director of *Ivan the Terrible* and *The Battleship Potemkin*, is said to have been greatly influenced by this kabuki performance.

Around 1935, when Yoshida Shigeru (later Prime Minister of Japan) was Japanese ambassador to the United Kingdom, there was a plan to send Onoe Kikugoro VI with a kabuki troupe to perform *Kagami Jishi* (The Lion Dance) in London. Shochiku filmed kabuki scenes, intending them to be shown



Photo: Shochiku Co., Ltd.

The troupe gave its first overseas performances in the Soviet Union in 1928. The leader, Kido (second from left at the front), Eisenstein (behind Kido) and Sadanji II (fourth from left at the front)



"Kagami Jishi," by Onoe Kikugoro VI

there to advertise the tour, but military campaigns forced the cancellation of the plan. The film was directed by Ozu Yasujiro, and is now a valuable piece of cinematographic history.

In 1955, a troupe led by Ichikawa Ennosuke II (later renamed En-o I) visited China, and Mei Lan-fang of the Beijing Opera visited Japan the following year as a reciprocator.

Successful tours in the United States in 1960 and in the Soviet Union in 1961 placed kabuki on track for many future overseas performances. In the United States, performances of *Chushingura* (The Treasury of Loyal Retainers) and *Kanjinchō* (The Temple Offering List) met with rave reviews. Greta Garbo is said to have telegraphed the words "Love, Love, Love" to the onnagata, Nakamura Utaemon VI. At the time, Japan and the United States were at a political impasse over the Security Treaties, and Brooks Atkinson, drama critic for *The New York Times*, remarked that the theater is more courteous than international politics. Reviews were translated and read daily to the troupe, raising or lowering their spirits, depending on the content.

In 1964, Otani Takejiro, at the ripe old age of 88, joined the troupe for their tour in Hawaii. He had always been keen to perform kabuki overseas, and his enthusiasm was taken up from the 1960s by Nagayama Takeomi, the current Chairman of Shochiku. In 1982, to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Japan Society, the dance piece *Sumida River* was performed by Nakamura Utaemon VI and Nakamura Kanzaburo XVII at New York's Metropolitan Opera House, to a highly appreciative audience. The actors also went to Washington D.C. to meet then-President Ronald Reagan.

Kabuki returned to the Metropolitan Opera House in 1985, at a time when Japan and the United States were at odds over

Photos: Shochiku Co., Ltd.



Kanzaburo XVII, Shoroku II and Utaemon VI at New York in 1960

another issue, the trade conflict. It was there in New York that Ichikawa Danjuro XV gave a special performance to announce his *shumei* (stage name-taking).

As early as the 1970s, it was apparent that kabuki was influencing theatrical art in the West. Some of kabuki's artistic sensibilities, its *kumadori* makeup styles, its costumes and its stage construction – the hanamichi runway into the audience and the revolving stage – began exerting an influence on operas, films and shows. Another adoption from kabuki was the use of child performers at the back of the stage, representing adult characters who are very far away.

■ Kabuki As Cultural Ambassador

Kabuki has been performed in many other countries as well, including South Korea, Germany, Austria, Italy and Egypt, and this has made it a traveling ambassador, as an Australian reporter wrote in 1978 when a kabuki troupe visited the country. It is now regarded in many parts of the world as a cultural ambassador.

Overseas tours receive the support of the governments of Japan and other countries, Japanese embassies, and organizations such as the Japan Foundation, and the sponsorship of corporations. Without this support kabuki could not travel abroad, and all of us connected with kabuki are grateful for this assistance. Two recent examples of this are the Heisei Nakamura-za performances in New York in 2004, and a joint special production with Louis Vuitton and AXA Life Insurance in Paris, to mark Ichikawa Ebizo XI's *shumei*.

Shochiku intends to continue promoting international interchange through theatrical productions, especially kabuki.



"Toribeyama Shinju" (A double suicide of Toribeyama) by Ebizo XI and Kikunosuke V at Ebizo's shumei performance in Paris in 2004

■ Cinema for International Understanding

By coincidence, it was in 1895, the year Shochiku was founded, that the Lumière brothers showed the world's first motion picture to an audience.

Shochiku started its movie business in 1920 as a latecomer. The new company, Shochiku Kinema, stressed at its inauguration that movies would enhance culture and promote exchanges with other countries.

The company created its first studio in Tokyo's Kamata district and began making silent movies. Although the early films did not go well, the company kept plugging away and picked itself up after surviving the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923. It was Shochiku that produced Japan's first full-scale talking movie, *The Neighbor's Wife and Mine*. The studio facilities soon proved to be too small, so production was moved to Ofuna in Kanagawa Prefecture. Shochiku now became a major player, producing and distributing films and managing a network of movie theaters.

WWII, however, severely limited the company's ability to promote cinematographic cultural exchange. Cultural exchange through movies was mostly promoted by film festivals after WWII. Kurosawa Akira's *Rashomon* (not a Shochiku production) was awarded the Grand Prize at the 1951 Venice International Film Festival. In 1956, Shochiku joined a French unit to make *Wasurenu Bojo* (Printemps a Nagasaki). Ozu Yasujiro directed masterpieces for Shochiku, such as *Tokyo Monogatari* (Tokyo Story) that are frequently shown and highly regarded in other countries even today.

The year 2003 marked the 100th anniversary of Ozu's birth, and screenings and related symposia were held around the world. At one time, Ozu's works were domestically thought to be too Japanese and their tempo were too slow to be shown abroad – It now proves those critics were all wrong. We hope to introduce foreign audiences to the films of other directors, including Mizoguchi Kenji, Kinoshita Keisuke and Nomura Yoshitaro.

Another Shochiku director, Yamada Yoji, is famous in Japan for his *Tora-san* series. His *The Twilight Samurai* was nominated for a 2004 Academy Award for best foreign language film, but unfortunately the honor went to another film. Even so, there is no doubt that this film, too, will contribute to international understanding. Yamada has participated in festivals and symposia in Cannes, Berlin, New York, Hong Kong and South Korea, and was awarded a prize at the Gwangju International Film Festival in South Korea for his contributions to the Asian film industry.

Shochiku's corporate integrity has also been awarded by prizes from film festivals in Berlin and Hong Kong, and this is a great honor, especially since corporations rarely receive such an award. To celebrate the 110th anniversary of the company's foundation, 45 films, including some of Shochiku's earliest works and the recent *The Hidden Blade* directed by Yamada Yoji, were screened at the 2005 New York Film Festival.

Shochiku also imports and exhibits foreign films, and has recently invested in joint productions with units in China and South Korea. In these ways, too, Shochiku acts as a cultural ambassador for Japan and the world at large.

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