

Kabuki's Tradition is Passed On with Ebizo XI's *Shumei* Performances

By Kurosawa Tsuneo

THE Kabuki world is gripped by a frenzy over popular young actor Ichikawa Shinnosuke VII's succession to the distinguished stage name of Ichikawa Ebizo XI.

The gala performance celebrating Shinnosuke's name-taking, called "*shumei*," kicked off at Tokyo's Kabuki-za theater in May and toured Osaka and Nagoya. All the tickets were sold out in advance. The "*shumei*" performance will also take place in Paris in October and then in various parts of Japan through next year.

A total of 550,000 people are expected to see the Ebizo XI's "*shumei*" performances, and the new name-taking by the 26-year-old heir apparent of the Ichikawa Danjuro family, one of the most celebrated Kabuki families, is certain to touch off a Kabuki boom.

Ichikawa Danjuro Family: the Symbol of Kabuki

Ebizo XI was born in 1977 as a son of Ichikawa Danjuro XII and made his stage debut at the tender age of five. Since his teens, he has been one of the most popular young Kabuki actors, together with Onoe Kikunosuke and Onoe Shoroku IV (then Tatsunosuke). The trio was called "*sannosuke*" (the three 'suke's) of the Heisei Era.

As Shinnosuke, Ebizo XI's acting arena extended beyond Kabuki, appearing in contemporary plays and TV dramas. He starred in "*Musashi*," a prime time TV drama last year about Miyamoto Musashi, a great swordsman of the Edo period and a popular historical figure in Japan. His rugged acting charmed even those who previously had no interest in Kabuki.

In the world of Kabuki, which has a 400-year history, the Danjuro family is regarded as its symbol.

Danjuro I, the founder of the Danjuro family, made a meteoric appearance on the stage 300 years ago and quickly achieved stardom. His son Danjuro II solidified the base of Kabuki, then Danjuro VII established the family's acting style. In the Meiji Era, Danjuro IX greatly contributed to preserving Kabuki, which was almost swept away by Western civilization. Danjuro XI gave a traumatized Japanese people self-confidence after the defeat in World War II.

His son and new Ebizo XI's father, Danjuro XII, passed on the torch. The Danjuro family has produced memorable actors at times when Japanese society was in upheaval. Kabuki enthusiasts are keeping attentive eyes on the new Ebizo.

Changing Names as They Grow

In the world of Kabuki, actors change stage names as they grow. An actor gets his first stage name in infancy. The name is kept through boyhood before he succeeds to a new name while he is still a youth. In the prime of his life, he succeeds to his main name, which will be maintained throughout his life. Some actors hand over their main name to their sons and adopt a retirement name.

Each family has its inherent names, which are customarily inherited for generations. Since only males can appear on the Kabuki stage, a family without a boy adopts a son in most cases.

Ebizo XI got his first stage name "Shinnosuke" when he was a little boy and he succeeded to the prestigious name of "Ebizo" as he became an adult. All Kabuki fans know that Ebizo XI will eventually take the name of "Danjuro," which his father currently holds.

Looking Back At Ancestors

Not all Kabuki actors can succeed to their families' main name, which is one of the mystifying things about Kabuki. An actor cannot succeed to his family's main name unless the Kabuki world recognizes that he has the ability, dignity and character worthy of that name. Put another way, "*shumei*" testifies to an actor having grown to be one worthy of the greatness of the name. For Kabuki fans, their favorite actor's "*shumei*" is an occasion that can even be more pleasant than their own children's growth.

"*Shumei*" is more than just taking a name.

People in the Kabuki world say that Ebizo XI is a carbon copy of his grandfather, Danjuro XI, one of the greatest stars of Kabuki history who possessed both popularity and ability. Today's young Kabuki fans never saw Danjuro XI on stage, as he died 40 years ago, but they may be seeing in Ebizo XI the image of Danjuro XI that their grandparents saw. Ebizo XI may even be allowing them to imagine the legendary Danjuro I of three centuries ago.

Actors are reborn and mature by succeeding to their stage names. They owe their growth to their ancestors whose name they share. We can see in contemporary Kabuki actors what they have inherited from their ancestors, transcending both time and space. This is one of the pleasures of viewing Kabuki. **JS**

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Ebizo XI at a *Shumei* performance

Photo : Shochiku Co., Ltd.