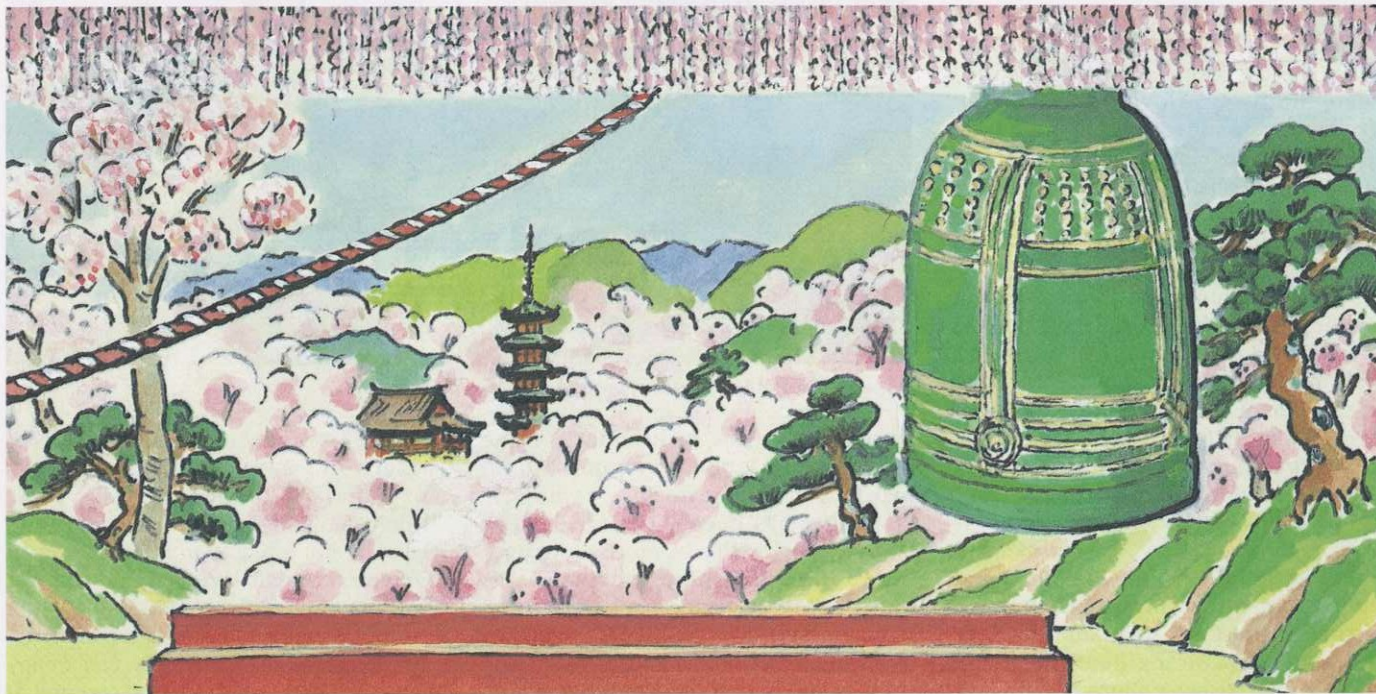


# Kabuki: Scenery and Props

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The scenery and props used in *Kabuki* plays today provide a combination of symbolism and realistic detail developed over some 400 years. In fact, some aspects of Kabuki seem so modern that it is hard to believe that they are products of such a long tradition of theater.

In Kabuki there are *odogu* ("large props" or stage settings) and *kodogu* ("small props"). Two independent companies handle each separately. The basic rule is that the stage-setting category includes anything that is non-movable or that the actors don't touch.

The categories, however, sometimes overlap. For instance, in one play, an actor plucks a branch from a maple tree. The tree itself is a stage setting, but the prop company, which doesn't deal in whole trees, provides the moveable branch that is fastened to the tree. Small things that provide atmospherics – rain, snow and tiny flower petals that flutter from the rafters – are part of the stage settings, not small props. Rocks, bushes and

water are also part of the stage-setting equipment.

Kabuki stage settings range from those of bright and colorful historical plays and dances to the drab grays of the *sewamono*, or "contemporary" plays. As the Kabuki stage is 87 feet in width and 67 feet in length (Kabukiza Theater in Tokyo) and today's lighting dazzling bright, the settings are a marvel to look at. Historical plays especially tend to use bright, almost clashing colors like pale green against salmon or orange against purple.

Kabuki is renowned for a variety of ingenious stage effects that are derived from special scenery. Some settings allow for a realistic destruction of buildings by fire or earthquakes. *Gandogaeshi* is a technique dating back to the 1760s, where the setting is placed on an axis that can be flipped backwards 90 degrees to reveal a new setting on the bottom of the first. A *hikiwari* set divides to the left and right while a trap lifts a new set into

place at the rear. Another quick scenery change technique, the *aorigaeshi*, involves a separate flap hinged from the middle of the set that opens like a book to replace the former set. And, of course, there is the *mawari butai*, dating from the 1750s, which is a revolving stage that turns the scenery 180 degrees to produce a new scene.

The Kanai Scene Shop Co. is responsible for Kabuki stage settings. This third generation company, run by Kanai Shun'ichiro, employs 200 people. About 20 people work at each theater setting up scenes, while 10 specialists, mostly artisans, create the structures and 10 artists paint the backgrounds at the company. The actual stage setting designs have been handed down from generation to generation and are preserved in a notebook called the *odoguchō*.

**Curtains:** Above the Kabuki stage hang multitudinous backdrops and curtains interspersed with lights and batons. It resembles an upside-down fill-



ing system completely stuffed with files.

Curtains have been an important aspect of Kabuki since around 1664. Kabuki theater probably uses more types of curtains than any other theatrical tradition in existence today. Apart from the usual drop and sliding curtains, many are exotic and unique.

The most well known curtain, the symbol of Kabuki, is the standard *joshikimaku* with its wide black, persimmon and green vertical stripes. This is the official draw-curtain for Kabuki used at the beginning of performances. It is positioned behind several gorgeously woven drop tapestries, called *doncho*. Donated to the theaters by various companies, they depict seasonal themes such as Mount Fuji in spring, flying cranes and autumn leaves, and display the donor's name prominently. One by one they are pulled up before the start of a production or during intermissions for the audience to enjoy at their leisure. The show doesn't start, though, until the official *joshikimaku* curtain is hand-pulled from behind by black-clad stage assistants who literally walk it across the stage to the accompaniment of wooden clappers.

Unlike other theatrical productions, the closing of a curtain in Kabuki does not always indicate the end of a scene or play. In *The Subscription Scroll* or *Kanjincho* for instance, the final scene takes place on the *hanamichi* (walkway extension of the stage) after the main curtain is closed. This caused a great deal of confusion when the play was first produced in New York City. Most of the audience got up and left before the last and most important part had finished.

The pulling of the *joshikimaku* once held great meaning in that most theaters were only permitted to use *doncho* or drop curtains. In the Edo period (1603-1867), the Shogunate officially licensed only three big theaters to be allowed to use *joshikimaku*. Smaller-scale playhouses were limited to using *doncho*. The phrase *doncho shibai* derived from the term *doncho* and is sometimes used as a pejorative reference to a local theater or production. Similarly, the term *doncho yakusha* is an insult to an actor's ability.

The occasional clattering sound at the

back end of the *hanamichi* comes from the *agemaku* curtain. This short indigo curtain carrying the theater's crest, hangs from rings. The noise from the rings as it slides open signals to the audience that they should turn around and watch for a dramatic entrance on the *hanamichi*.

A variety of specialized curtains help to create other diverse effects in Kabuki. A pale, blue sheet called *asagimaku*, for instance, is yanked down by assistants standing behind it, who then covered by it, whisk it offstage. This instantaneously reveals a tableau or a special scene, often with the actors in a frozen pose. Or it is used for a quick set change usually covering and then exposing dazzling scenery.

*Dogumaku* are curtains depicting mountains, clouds, ocean, streams and the like, which are dropped or pulled away to reveal the next scene.

Small red or black handheld *keshimaku*, or "disappearance" curtains, are used to cover things. They signal that the object, although still on stage, should not be considered visible. These are also used to clear "dead" characters from the stage. Black is ubiquitously used to represent "nothing" or "can't be seen" throughout Kabuki. Stagehands, called *kuroko*, dressed in black clothing, caps and gauze face-covers, move around on



*Kiseru (pipe) and intro (medicine carrier)*

the stage adjusting actors' makeup or pulling strings out of the sleeves of a *kimono* for quick-change routines. The audience knows from their black color that they are "not there." Part of the charm of Kabuki is learning these abstract forms and conventions.

Along with curtains, the stage scenery company also provides the *tsuke* beaters, men who beat wooden clappers on the

right side of the stage to punctuate dramatic poses, movements and events in the play. The timing and overall pace of the production depend on these men.

**Props:** Until the latter part of the 19th century, Kabuki actors owned and took care of their own props. Today, however, about 40 employees at the Fujinami Properties Co. handle them. Many of these props are genuine articles – real swords, *netsuke*, tobacco pouches, *hibachi* and so forth. They are priceless not only because of their intrinsic value, but also because they have histories of being used by famous actors such as Danjuro, Kikugoro and Kichiemon.

With little more than a glance, the Kabuki aficionado can understand the social circumstances of a character from just a tobacco pouch or *kiseru* pipe an actor is using. Each object is actor-family specific and most denote one of four seasons through designs on them.

Other props are custom made for actors: an umbrella, for instance, may be crafted extra large to make the actor using it seem smaller and more delicate than he is or vice versa. Yet even when the props are newly made, care is taken to use authentic materials by the master craftsmen who create them. Because of this, Kabuki supports the continuation of age-old craft traditions, many of which might otherwise die out.

For someone who wants to get involved with Kabuki, it can provide an endless study. Just becoming familiar with the swords used, the colors and decorative designs for specific actors, not to mention the history of the objects and their use in Kabuki tradition could take a lifetime. The deeper you look into Kabuki, the more there is that is rich in history, tradition and culture. The deeper one studies, the more new fields of interest come to light.

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