

# Kabuki: Change in the Once Unchangeable

Article by Elizabeth Kiritani and illustrations by Kiritani Itsuo

The popularity of Kabuki has waxed and waned over the past 400 years. Once the entertainment of the lower classes, Kabuki is now that of society's elite. It is enormously costly to produce and requires a multitude of specialists in esoteric fields, such as wig dressers for styles no longer extant, artisans and musicians capable of playing instruments long out of everyday life – apart from specialized actors. As time wears on those conversant in Kabuki are thinning out and new efforts from within the Kabuki world are being made to attract and educate the young. Nevertheless, Kabuki is going strong in Tokyo. It is often difficult to get tickets to see popular actors and programs.

When Tokyo's National Theatre opened in 1966, one of its purposes was to train novices in the art of Kabuki acting. This represented a revolution in the Kabuki world where, up until then, all actors had either been born into certain Kabuki families or adopted by them due to unusual acting or dancing skills. Even today, Kabuki actors are born into certain roles and acting traditions handed down in their families.

Kabuki also involves many rich, important performances by supporting actors so it can't survive with only the main role actors of the existing Kabuki families. Filling the minor, less glamorous roles and the training of acrobats have become



a concern. The challenge for the school at the National Theatre is to train its students in only a year and 10 months.

Being brought up immersed in theater, sitting with their legs tucked under them, playing the *samisen* (three-stringed Japanese instrument) and dancing traditional dances from an early age, the sons of the mainline Kabuki actors have a dis-

tingt advantage. Acting skills aside, anyone performing Kabuki has to learn traditional Japanese manners – every gesture has to be taught because there is almost nothing in a modern upbringing that is appropriate for the Kabuki stage.

Once graduated, the fledgling actors must find an acting family to apprentice themselves to and work as hard as possible to hone their skills to a point where they can appear on stage. Some graduates have become mainstream actors; others stick with minor roles. Graduates can undergo exams, both written and acting tests, to become *nadai*, or main actors. It is difficult, however, to make this top grade.

Nakamura Kannojo is one such graduate. He says when he entered the first class at the National Theatre, many actors were against teaching Kabuki to outsiders, saying they didn't need more actors. Kannojo says that without the school, Kabuki wouldn't be in existence today. For instance, of the 304 active Kabuki actors today, 27% of them (81 men) are graduates of the school. Of these 81, 22 have made the top rank and 59 are minor role actors.

Another sign that Kabuki is expanding and changing can be seen in the performance of *kiyomoto* narrative by a total outsider – Mark Oshima. A Japanese-American, translator, interpreter and expert on traditional Japanese per-



forming arts, he doesn't particularly stand out as a foreigner on stage. In fact, if you weren't told that he is American, you'd never know by watching or listening to him. In March I heard him sing on the Kabuki-za stage the narration for Bun-ya, a humorous dance of a drunken man set in the elegant Heian Court. Oshima explained to me that Kabuki performances are punctuated by a variety of musical traditions that provide it with rhythm and form. In one sense, the music and sounds of the Kabuki stage are rich enough to be listened to as a concert in themselves.

Kabuki productions are frequently accompanied by narrative-musical forms using the samisen, called *joruri*, which are performed on stage. First used in the puppet theater, various schools of *joruri* developed over the years from the *gidayu bushi* of Osaka, *nagauta* and *bungo bushi* to *shinnai*, *tokiwazu*, *tomimoto* and *kiyomoto bushi* and others that developed later in the mid-18th century.

Differences between these styles are many, as they have developed over long periods of time, but basically they can be divided into two groups: lyrical as in *nagauta* where the singer sings words to music and *katarimono*, which Oshima is singing, in which little melodies are placed onto the words, in his case, in the *kiyomoto* style. Rather than simply narrating the plot, this type of accompaniment involves word play, and sensual poetic images conjured up from a series of words or phrases that create a mood.

Oshima's art is an exacting one. The singing is high pitched, timing is precise and the projection (no microphones) requires enormous energy. Being a professional, he must master the parts before a performance with perfect diction and pronunciation, a challenge even for the seasoned Japanese veteran. It sounds like a daunting task, although Oshima is modest about his achievement and place in history.

An earphone guide system in the Japanese language that was developed to explain what was happening on the stage was expanded to include English explanations in the early 1980s. The guides, which are rented from the theater, provide detailed information

about the plot, historical background, acting families, acting styles and stylized movements. Even Japanese have a hard time understanding some parts of the Kabuki language, but with the guide system along with the printed programs in English and Japanese, just about anyone can now enjoy a visit to Kabuki.

The development of Super Kabuki in the 1980s by Ichikawa Ennosuke represents still another type of opening up in Kabuki. Original Kabuki thrilled the commoners; it was pure fun and delight. An overall tendency to refine reigns supreme in Japan and behind the Kabuki curtains this is especially so. We end up with "classical" Kabuki, not at all the commoner's lively entertainment that it once was. Yet what we call classical Kabuki is in itself an altered version. The original special effects – the flying around, the quick changes and bewildering gimmicks – had been jettisoned or toned down to suit the more realistic Western theater standard of the Meiji period at the end of the 19th century.

Considered somewhat of a rebel, Ennosuke is behind the revival of old-style Kabuki. He explains the "pillars" of Super Kabuki as "three S's" – story, speed and spectacle – with which he is bringing back the original pizzazz and mass appeal to Kabuki.



His innovative stance is oddly traditional. Four generations before him, his great great grandfather Bando Santaro initiated the symbolic choreographed fighting scenes called *tachimawari*, found in most Kabuki productions. Thus, Ennosuke is continuing the fast-paced and acrobatic traditions of his forebear.

He is also trying to enliven Kabuki by circumventing the traditional *iemoto* system where some 12 acting families reign

supreme. In his Super Kabuki he provides actors from outside the Kabuki world a chance for advancement. Ennosuke is not only attracting a young audience with his fast paced, lively productions but also many of the young graduates of the National Theatre School. This is because he lets talent take its course. Unlike the regular Kabuki world, in his productions anyone who is skillful is given a chance to perform big roles.

Even the government is into the act of promoting Kabuki, in the hopes of luring in a broader audience for the future. One example is the Tokyo Metropolitan Government's Board of Education program to introduce junior high students to Kabuki while, at the same time, giving the main-family actors' young sons a chance to perform in major roles for the first time. Three times a year this "*Kodomo Kabuki Kyoshitsu*" is held in spring, autumn and winter to give youngsters a chance to see and enjoy Kabuki.

There are also Kabuki workshops, Kabuki study groups, including some that feature lectures and demonstrations by the actors themselves. Kabuki productions have been staged all over the world. National television, Nippon Hoso Kyokai (Japan Broadcasting Corporation), also shows full productions on a regular schedule, featuring interviews and specialized explanations.

Without a doubt, the real attraction of Kabuki comes with the understanding and familiarity that comes from attending many performances over time. Steeped in tradition, history, symbolism, music, *kata* (set forms of movement), poetry and more, the appeal and entertainment value of Kabuki increases with the audience's knowledge, making the performances more and more meaningful and interesting for the viewer. **JTI**

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