

Theatrical Thrills

Article by Elizabeth Kiritani and illustrations by Kiritani Itsuo

A hidden asset of Japan - and of Tokyo in particular - is that it is the theater capital of the world. Problem is, few people are aware of this. New York City is known for its Broadway and off-Broadway productions. Yet Tokyo is exploding with even more theater. Apart from its own Broadway and off-Broadway adaptations, avant-garde and experimental theater, a constant roster of Shakespearean and other Western classic performances, and its all-women Takarazuka group, Japan is home to the rich and spectacular traditions of Kabuki; Bunraku puppet theater; 14th century Noh and surrealistically modern Butoh. These last four provide a rainbow of unparalleled and sophisticated theater that thrives and blossoms quietly, tucked away in the nooks and crannies of Tokyo and other areas of Japan.

This country's centuries-old modesty - a reluctance to boast or self-promote - remains part of everyday manners for all but the very youngest, and this may be the reason Japan's theatrical riches remain largely unknown. But anyone traveling to Tokyo would do well to set aside a few days to experience its astonishing smorgasbord of theater.

Kabuki, in particular, has recently become accessible to English speakers thanks to ear-phone guides and the presence of a bilingual representative who serves the uninitiated at Tokyo's most colorful Kabuki theater, Kabuki-za. The efforts of this theater are a good example of the opening up of Japan to non-Japanese. It provides an excellent opportunity to understand the Japanese of today through the age-long traditions and values embedded in Kabuki theater that still form the vertebrae of the Japanese soul.

One of my first forays into Kabuki had me sitting next to a portly 60ish-year-old man. As the curtain drew open I was dismayed. He already had his eyes shut and I braced myself for some loud snoring. Suddenly a bellow shot forth from this lethargic looking figure, a call that shattered the silence and was echoed by several others emanating from the first and second balconies. "Kinokuniya!!" - it reverberated throughout the theater.

During the production of *Kanjincho*, a Kabuki classic concerning the flight of Yoshitsune from his suspicious brother Yoritomo, a verbal cacophony hurtled down from the balconies in loud, staccato shouts. It reminded me of New Yorkers hailing taxicabs. There is a difference, though. This calling out represents a clever and intricate form of audience applause. These are the cries of true sophisticates, aficionados of theater who pride themselves on their



knowledge of traditional art forms.

The word "Kinokuniya" is the acting house name, or the *yago*, of Sawamura Tanosuke, a veteran actor of female roles. This was injected in between the actor's lines in appreciation of a particularly adept line. The men who call out like this have memorized the scripts backwards and forwards and insert their carefully selected verbal applause at special split-second intervals. It takes an expert to pull it off.

Thrilled at being so close to a living tradition, during the intermission I started talking with Susumu Hirabayashi sitting next to me. A veteran caller of 44 years, Mr. Hirabayashi explained that "The real trick is timing. You have to catch a pause in the dialogue, so you have to know the dialogue well. Each actor has his own pace, so what may be an appropriate pause for one may not be for another. I learned through listening." I was impressed by this man who holds such a deep interest in the arts.

Much of the West attributes the development of abstract art to John Constable and the ensuing Impressionists, but a visit to Nijojo Castle in Kyoto uncovers an abstract tradition that dates back to 17th century Japan. The walls of the castle are painted in exquisite swirling abstract shapes that seemingly depict the weather of various seasons.

Similarly, Kabuki acting conventions, or *kata*, dating from the same century are rife with abstractions. A bloody battle becomes a quiet pantomime of flashing swords that never touch. Slain soldiers summersault into the air, land on their backs and lift their legs in the air with their arms crossed in front of them. They are dead. The acrobatic leap and ensuing crossed arms tell us so.

Smoldering emotions are symbolized by an actor biting on a scarf while pulling the other end. The audience sees this and understands the tragic emotions more clearly than if they had been



For help obtaining regular or one-scene tickets and general information in English, call Kabuki-za information desk at 03-3541-3131 and ask for Simon Yoshizumi.

explained with words. All Kabuki actors are men, but some are renowned for their transformation into ravishing, "more feminine than real females" on stage. The use of black on stage indicates invisibility and there are black clad "*kuroko*" men moving about adjusting kimono or makeup or handing out props that those who know the conventions eradicate from their visual field. The sophistication of this abstract code-language astounds.

The more one sees Kabuki and learns about it, the more interesting it is. And now with the rental of an earphone guide in English it is accessible. The different genre of Kabuki include historical and "contemporary" plays (Edo Period) and a newer form called Super Kabuki. Some show elaborate costumes and court rituals of earlier centuries, other are a razzle-dazzle of lightening-quick changes of flashy kimono and magical appearances and disappearances.

Kabuki sucks one into Japan's history and culture like a vortex, with each experience unfolding a deeper level of history, numerous musical traditions, period costumes and stylized make up. Just one glance at a wig can tell about the age and social status of the character.

These wigs are made of real human hair and are combed out and redressed into different styles every month.

Props are for the most part museum-grade objects. On stage real Edo period swords, netsuke toggles and geisha hairpins are used. Actually they are far more important than their intrinsic value because they have been used by generations of famous Kabuki actors and passed down in Kabuki families, making them even more precious. An army of artisans, including umbrella makers, lacquer ware artists, wig makers, hairstylists, kimono dressers and so on are employed by Kabuki theater. Like today's tea ceremony, Kabuki is doing much to support the ancient arts.

Mr. Hirabayashi, the applause-caller who I met at Kabuki-za, once said to me that Kabuki is the Rosetta stone of Japan. "How else," he commented, "can anyone learn to understand Japan? Modern high-tech doesn't tell you much, but Kabuki reflects the Japanese way of thinking simply, without much artifice." He added that you saw the rigid hierarchy of old Japan where the samurai were at the top followed by farmers, laborers and merchants at the bottom. The themes, curiously parallel to same-period Shakespeare plays, involve values of honor, loyalty, perseverance and sacrifice.

Another Kabuki aficionado and theater expert, Dr. Shinko Matsumoto, agrees. "Look at how the male and female characters relate to each other," she laughs. "The men just sit there passively and the women move around them, initiate the action, proclaim their love and so forth." She adds with charming irony, "After seeing Kabuki, I'm reminded of how little romance has really changed in this society." **JTI**

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