

# Kabuki theatre: japan's national treasure assignment

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Aliya Crochetiere Mrs. Crass Theater History April 11, 2011 Kabuki Theatre: Japan's National Treasure Kabuki Theater has captured the hearts and minds of the Japanese audience from its beginnings over four centuries ago to the present day. In Kabuki wild spectacles of song and dance transpire, different from anything familiar to the Western observer. Its color, drama, and richness of costumes and characters contrast wildly with the simplicity and functionality of which the Japanese people live their lives.

Kabuki Theater seen today has been shaped by historical tensions about women, religious influences in Japanese society, and is considered to be the people's theater filled with unique styles and ideas. In order to understand this wild spectacle and its unique techniques of staging and characters, one must look behind the make-up and understand the drama's widespread roots deeply intertwined in Japan's popular culture. The word kabuki, as shown in the history of name, is a type of acting based on the arts of singing and dancing (Miyake 11).

However, mixed in this display is a variety of hidden aspects such as make-up, costumes, and special effects that make a Kabuki performance unlike any other. Kabuki is a very complicated, highly refined art involving stylized movement to the sounds of instruments such as the Tsuke that takes many years to master (National Theater of Japan). Unlike Noh Theater it does not use masks, but incorporates a vast variety of styles and effects, from the realistic to the grandiosely extravagant through cosmetics (Leiter 18-22). The colors used have symbolic meanings.

For example, blue usually indicates evil and red is used to express strength or virtue. Wigs are utilized to inform the audience about the characters age, occupation, and social status and are worn by all characters in Kabuki (The British Museum). In the theater, each character has a defining moment, called a Mie. The Mie displays the characters personality. The actor assumes a position significant to his character and experiences his climatic moment (Binnie and Wanczura). It usually involves a movement of the head, a crossing of eyes in a powerful glare, and shaking.

In this artistic spectacle there are two main styles of acting involved, Aragoto and Wagoto. Aragoto, the rough style, contains heroes who are physically strong, impulsive, fierce, and martial (Brandon). This is reflected in the actors' dramatic, stylized make-up and costumes, and in their exaggerated poses. In contrary, Wagoto features softer, young playboys in more friendly stories. The main manner of Wagoto acting is tender, romantic, or humorous (Encyclop? dia Britannica). Although the styles differ, Kabuki will always be a form of theater that requires a mastery of technique, especially when playing a woman.

Unlike Western Theater, Kabuki in the present day features no females on the stage. One feature that sets Kabuki apart from other theater is the Onnagata, a male actor who plays the parts of women. Kabuki was founded in 1603 by Izumo no Okuni, a Japanese princess, with her troop consisting of mostly females (Spencer). The women entertainers, many of whom were prostitutes, performed exotic dances and risque skits causing an instant sensation in Japan with the common people (The British Museum).

The idea of women exploiting themselves while creating public messages was preposterous and as its popularity grew, the government was quick to take control of the situation (Lombard, Allen, and Unwin). The prostitution within the theater was believed to be corrupting society and from the 1620's onward, the government attempted to bring them under control. In 1692, women performers were banned from the stage. It soon became necessary for males to take the part of the females and the art of the Onnagata was formed. The Onnagata does not aim to imitate the behavior of a real woman.

Rather, he becomes an artificial and idealized symbol of female characteristics as seen from a man's interpretation (Binnie and Wanczura). Those who have mastered the art of the Onnagata have the ability to transform a potentially grotesque situation into an emotionally moving truth. The Onnagata does not rely on facial beauty but the talent and skill to make a room full of people believe the authenticity of a teenage girl played by a 70 year-old man. Today, as a result of issues of women corrupting society and the upper class, females have yet to re-appear on the stage.

However, because Kabuki is directed at the common people of Japan, it is believed that women will once again grace the stages of Kabuki (Matsuda). Though Kabuki today is generally more accepted as a National Theater of Japan, it originated from the middle class, the common people of Japan, as a way to express their suppressed feelings under restrictive social conditions (Lombard, Allen, and Unwin). At the time when Kabuki was developed, distinction between the commoners and the upper class was more rigid than

ever before, so Kabuki acted as a safe means of protest against dramatic and social conventions.

Multiple times it was banned from the inner cities because it threatened with dangerous thought and popular freedom (Lombard, Allen, and Unwin).

Kabuki was charged with undermining the morals of the warrior class, yet the government was unable to outlaw the theater completely. It had made its way into the social lives of the Japanese people as it developed eclectically from other art forms. As the people's theater, Kabuki has a very unique relationship between the actors and the audience. The most celebrated feature of the Kabuki stage is the hanamichi, a long extension from the back of the audience to the stage (Scott 18).

This symbolizes the close connections that the actors have with the viewers. A continuous interplay of shouts from the audience and reactions from the actors take place in the Kabuki Theater. The show is often interrupted for an actor to address the crowd, which is responded to with praise and encouragement (Encyclop? dia Britannica). The audience hollers the name of their favorite actor, showing a much closer connection to the actors than the directors (Matsuda). For the first time, the actor is in a position of control of his own actions and originality.

Because Kabuki programs run from dusk till dawn, in the theater one can find restaurants, lunchboxes, and snack shops. The audience will eat, drink, and talk all during the performance, treating it much more like a social gathering than a trip to the theater (Miyake 25). Unlike western theater a trip to Kabuki is supposed to a social gathering. The audience enjoys the whole

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day's event, not just the individual performances. This is in sharp contrast to Noh Theater, a much more serious and formal theater of Japan that incorporates slow, meditational movements under extremely rigid rules (Matsuda).

The Noh performance is in slow motion and is much more popular with the military class than the common people of Japan (Mitchell and Watanabe 1-5). Buddhism, Shintoism, and Confucianism have all had a weighty effect on Japanese philosophies of life. This in turn is reflected in Kabuki drama in an innumerable number of ways. Action in Kabuki plays usually revolves around Confucian notions of filial piety duty and obligation, and the Buddhist traditions such as the impermanence of things or the law of retributive justice (Scott 28).

The religious part of the drama is expressed through actions and characters, such as the komuso, who wears a large basket-like head covering and plays a flute (Scott 28). The komuso, who appears in multiple plays, is a religious figure in Buddhism, a priest of the Buddhist sect seen preaching about the religion with his flute. During the Edo period when Kabuki was developed, Confucian philosophy defining the hierarchy of social relations was recognized as official thought and caused an uprising of the common townspeople expressed in Kabuki Theater (Ernst 14).

A favorite Kabuki technique is to have a dying man recall and regret all past misdeeds and return to his innocent state by time of death (Scott 28).

This extends to the Buddhist philosophy that man is fundamentally good and all sins committed during his lifetime are purged upon death. This as well as

many other examples shows strong Buddhist influences in Kabuki. Shintoism shines through the drama as well. As one of the most common religions in Japan, Shintoism was also the religion of Kabuki's founder (Spencer). Many religious ideas and themes are apparent in both historical and domestic Kabuki plays.

Kabuki Theater, flamboyant and spectacular, has evolved into one of Japan's cultural treasures. The drama has developed from controversial ideas of women in society, the religious influences of Buddhism and Confucianism, and from the heart of Japan, the common people, as a free way to express themselves. Although some may argue that Kabuki has lost some of its connection to the general public, Kabuki drama is an irreplaceable aspect of Japanese society that will continue to entertain audiences and influence contemporary drama and Japanese history for years to come.

The flashy, colorful spectacle filled with music, movement, and emotion has the ability to take the audience on a journey to a new world. Works Cited  
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