

# The tradition of the onnagata



The Tradition of the Onnagata: Cross-dressed Actors and Their Roles on the Classical Japanese Stage Theatre History | Dr. Kevin Browne December 7, 2011 Japan, like most cultures, has a long history of men playing the stage roles of women. This paper, *The Tradition of the Onnagata: Cross-dressed Actors and Their Roles on the Classical Japanese Stage*, will explore the representation of male and female gender in Japan's highly stylized classical kabuki theatre.

I will look at the history of gender roles in Pre-modern Japan and how they influenced the development of the Onnagata, as well as the elaborate techniques and details by which a male transforms himself into the man's dream of the "perfect woman." 1. Gender Roles in Pre-Modern Japan To fully understand the allure of the Onnagata is to look at the attitude of women in Japanese Society. The Japanese have always had strict social traditions that men and women are expected to fulfill. Most of the gender codes were strong and conservative, which resulted in the gender oppression of women.

Interestingly, this was not always the case. In fact, in the early days of Japanese history, women had significant authority and power as shamans, chieftains, and empresses. Like many ancient cultures, there were a number of real and mythical female figures in Japanese mythology. Women were also respected in many aspects of life, some of which included politics, religion, and the arts (Henshall). However, women started to notably lose their power towards the end of the eighth century. Like most pre-modern societies, Japan developed through the years with the help of many outside influences.

These influences led to the decline of female status and the introduction of Chinese-style Confucianism, Buddhism, and Samurai based feudalism played the most important roles in doing so (Hamilton). The two new male-oriented religions, Chinese-style Buddhism and Confucianism, were introduced to Japan in the sixth century. These religions weakened the focus on fertility, which is something the Japanese once held in high regard. This caused the ideals towards women to become more inclined to negativity because of their strong association with fertility (Henshall).

Both religions also emphasized the supreme position of men over women. On one hand, they had the right to inherit property, but on the other hand, they were subject to their husband's authority. Of course, religion was not the only thing that determined the social position of women. The rise of the Samurai in the 12th century drastically changed how society viewed women, also. This warrior era commenced the change of marital residence from a matriarchal pattern to a patriarchal pattern, meaning that wives had to join their husbands' families. During this time, Japan was also fighting in a series of civil wars.

The consolidation of territory became a priority within society and women lost their inheritance rights over property (Henshall). Japan finally entered a peaceful state at the beginning of the 17th century. In 1603, Tokugawa Ieyasu was named the shogun, which marked the beginning of an era where military-style government ruled Japan. Since fighting was no longer a priority, many samurai turned into bureaucrats and administrators. This led the current regime to adapt a four-part hierarchy where the samurai

functioned as the ruling class, followed by peasants (farmers and artisans), and then merchants.

This societal division mainly served to keep the power within the samurai. The groups of people that did not fit into this, like performers and prostitutes, were considered outcasts. Each class also adhered to a strict patriarchal gender hierarchy, which meant that women, regardless of the class they belonged to, were basically considered second-class citizens (Kano). Very few women of accomplishment are known from this period. One of these women just so happens to be the founder of Kabuki theatre, Okuni.

## 2. The Evolution of Kabuki Theatre

Kabuki, which translates into ‘the skill of song and dance’, was originally called Onna (meaning woman) Kabuki. Okuni, a Shinto shrine maiden, is credited to this very popular type of Japanese theatre. Tradition tells us that around 1600, Okuni began Onna Kabuki by dancing in the dry bed of Kyoto’s Kamo River (Living Theatre, 94). Her performances were a unique blend of folk and religious dance. Though no detailed descriptions of her performances survive, we do know that most of these musical-dance dramas revolved around stories that were romantic and often erotic (Hamilton).

During her performances, she often donned articles of male clothing, a practice that was uncommon in Japan at this time (Lombard). By 1603, Okuni reached the height of her popularity and troupes, as well as playhouses, began to pop up throughout Kyoto. These troupes were mostly composed of women, however, many of them included men and children. Townspeople found this type of performance very appealing, mainly because Noh theatre

(popular theatre at this time) was strictly for the upper class. This led those in power to view Onna Kabuki as a threat to the aristocratic structure of society.

By 1608, Onna Kabuki was confined to the outskirts of the city. When feuds over the sexual services of women arose, the government saw Onna Kabuki as a social danger and, in an effort to protect social morale, banned women from performing in public in 1629 (Kano). Since boys and young men had played in Onna Kabuki, it didn't take long to build up a new company of performers. This new form of Kabuki became known as Wakashu Kabuki (Lombard). Eventually those in power felt that they, too, as sexual targets of older male audience members, were causing problems of social and class conflicts.

Thus, in 1652, Wakashu Kabuki troupes were also banned (Living Theatre, 95) However, Kabuki was something that refused to be destroyed. In spite of regulation, it had already made a place in the social life of the people and these people demanded satisfaction. After 1652, older men continued the Kabuki tradition, which was known as Yara Kabuki. These actors began, more generally than before, to train themselves for specific parts. In earlier Kabuki, men had often played the part of women; but now, it had become necessary that they do so for all occasions.

A professional class of womenfolk, known as the Onnagata, was born (Kano).

3. Acting Styles The Onnagata are 'female-impersonators', who invented their gender acts based upon the government's idea of the 'perfect woman' during the 17th century. It is thought that the Onnagata role was made in

order to represent women. However, this is not true; they simply performed their own vision of female-likeness. It has been said that the earliest Onnagata may have observed women closely and many male children were brought up as girls (Senelick).

During the Edo-period, when actors were starting to specialize in roles of one gender, Onnagata created their roles through stylization techniques: The traditional ways of performing are called kata, literally form, pattern, or model. The actor's vocal and movement kata are central elements of most kata, but production elements such as costuming, makeup, and scenic effects are thought of as extensions of the kabuki actor's technique.... Some kata are ephemeral and pass as quickly as they are created. But other kata of "patterned acting" have been polished and perfected over generations, and these form the foundation of kabuki performing art. -James Brandon As stated in the quote above, these techniques are achieved through the articulation of their bodies, voices, and costuming. The Onnagata skillfully played with their gender acts and created a variety of female-like role types. These role types, or Yakugara, are classified into seven major categories: Yujo (courtesan), Himesama (Princess), Musume (daughter or young girl), Jidainyobo (period wife), Sewanyobo (contemporary wife), Baba (old woman or grandmother), and Akuba (evil female). Each role contains their own specific set of postures, gestures, vocal patterns, and pronunciations (Invitation to Kabuki).

The most popular type of Onnagata of the Edo period was the Yujo. The courtesans were considered particularly attractive, both for the actors and the audience members. This was because these roles "maintained a 'selling

the body' relationship with the audience by enacting their own sensuality, emotions, and beauty on the stage" (Mezur). The goal of the Onnagata was to captivate the hearts of audience members and to portray the grace and charm of absolute femininity. According to acting manuals that survive from the 17th century, young Onnagata should not lose his sexual attractiveness. However, this was to be shown in the subtlest way possible: " The Onnagata must never deviate from the conduct of a virtuous woman" (Kano). If a love scene is being performed, the Onnagata must remain reserved; if the male character is actively pursuing the character, the Onnagata must resist him harshly. Becoming an Onnagata is considered to be a way of life, meaning the role stretches outside of the theatre. Many Onnagata followed the teachings of Yoshizawa Ayame (1673-1729), the greatest Onnagata of his time, and lived as a woman in their daily lives.

This was achieved through a female-like appearance as well as behavior. The men that practice Onnagata completely wrap themselves up in their roles and are extremely convincing. As Tomoemon, a famous Onnagata, stated: " Onnagata is a way of being as well as an art. One cannot only play the woman. One must be the woman, or else it is merely disguise. " Many Onnagata play their role for many years and it isn't uncommon to have an onnagata in his older years convincing the audience that he is a beautiful young geisha (Actors' Analects).

The kabuki stylization of female-likeness generally emphasizes smallness and a soft, graceful line of the body. Therefore, the actor's goal is to appear as small and delicate as possible. The bending of the knees while remaining

stationary and bending the knees together while walking achieve this. In order to appear narrow, the Onnagata sits at a slight angle, while keeping the hands, elbows, and arms close to the body. They also tend to have a diagonal face to enhance the line of the body and speak in a falsetto (Cavaye). An important thing to grasp is the fact that Kabuki actors do not perform realistically.

In Western theatre, the goal is to make the audience feel as though they are not sitting through a play, and with Kabuki, everyone is very aware of the performance aspect. Everything, from the acting to the costumes, is larger than life. The costumes of Kabuki are quite elaborate and beautiful.

Onnagata wear a kimono and obi (waist sash), a long band of cloth that helps to partially construct the female appearance. The actor ties the obi around the waist in order to give definition and shape of the body and dress. An important feature of the kimono is the wrapping direction, which must always be left over right.

Another important feature is the collar, which is either set lower or higher on the body, depending on the role type. The kimono and obi completely envelope the body; the only flesh that is shown is the face, fingers, back neckline, and sometimes feet. Any flesh that is shown is painted and powdered white. The exception of this is an Onnagata playing a person of lower social status because pure white skin is a traditional sign of refinement and status in Japan (Senelick). White skin is also associated with purity, which is why so many heroines have a general base makeup of pure white.



An interesting fact is that Kabuki actors apply their own make-up. They start with a pure white base called oshiroi, the goal of which is to completely eliminate the facial features. They then add definition around the eyes, paint on the lips, and add the eyebrows. Drawing the outline of the eyes in black and then highlighting the corners with either black or red achieve the sharp shape of the eyes. The shape and size of the mouth varies with role types. For example, young women make the shape of the mouth small and pouty in order to accomplish a delicate, feminine appeal.

The eyebrows are drawn in an arched position that is higher than normal. Some Onnagata do not even have eyebrows because it was fashionable for married of the Edo-period to shave them (Invitation to Kabuki). The wigs are a detailed part of the costume and give the audience a lot of background information about an Onnagata character. Things like age, social status and whether or not she is married or single characterize the wigs of Onnagata character roles. An oil-based dressing is applied to the wig that enables the actors to mold their hair in complex knots and styles, all of which reflect their status.

Decorative pins and ornaments are also essential parts of the wig (Cavaye).

4. Why Women Never Re-Emerged By about the mid-19th century, Kabuki stopped serving as the front-runner in innovative Japanese theatre. Theatre was just now starting to be influenced by Western-style realistic drama and, with women making up more than 50% of audiences, the question of allowing women to take over Onnagata roles came up. However, it quickly became clear that women, no matter how skilled they were at imitating the male Onnagata, simply could not do it (Kano).

It is too late for women to appear in Kabuki. A type of woman has been created and has become familiar in Kabuki. To change this would mean that Kabuki would lose its flavour. If women had appeared a hundred years ago they could have created their own kind of woman for the stage; now all they could do would be to imitate what men have created for them. –Koshiro IV

Kabuki tradition isn't the only thing that went against these women in favor of abolishing the Onnagata; they were physically too weak to take on the demanding role.

According to Laurence Senelick, moving back and forth for the entire length of a Kabuki production is equivalent to a ten-mile hike. The elaborate costumes are also too heavy, sometimes weighing up to fifty pounds. More importantly, as I've stated before, the Onnagata is a representation of female likeness. The Onnagata must not be a woman, because she is a woman physically: an Onnagata is merely a suggestion. A real woman is the conventional male's object of desire; an Onnagata is simply a dream or idea of desire.

5. Conclusion Modern Kabuki, unlike most forms of classical theatre, hasn't evolved much since the 17th century.

Kabuki remains true to its traditional roots, both in the staging of the plays and in the character role types, like the Onnagata. Before I started this research paper, I found it a bit sexist that the men are still the only part in Kabuki. After I completed my research, it's very apparent why. Not only is it tradition, it is way of life where men are the only ones physically capable of performing the roles. Kabuki today is an important part of the entertainment industry in Japan. Its position as a "traditional" form of theater often makes it seem stuffy, and people are not as familiar with the special peculiarities of

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Kabuki as they used to be. Still, popular actors continue to bring audiences into the theater and there has recently been a “ Kabuki boom” centered around young people. Kabuki continues to be a form of entertainment enjoyed by a wide range of people, just as it has been for 400 years. Works Cited: Cavaye, Ronald, Paul Griffith, Akihiko Senda, and Mansai Nomura. A Guide to the Japanese Stage: from Traditional to Cutting Edge. Tokyo: Kodansha International, 2004. Print. Hachimonjiya, Jisho, Charles James.

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