

# KABUKI

## A vibrant and exciting traditional theater

*Kabuki* is one of the four forms of Japanese classical theater, the others being *noh*, *kyogen*, and the *bunraku* puppet theater.

*Kabuki* developed during the more than 250 years of peace of the Edo period (1600–1868). The tastes of the merchant culture that developed during this time is reflected in *kabuki*'s magnificent costumes and scenery and in its plays, which contain both larger-than-life heroes and ordinary people trying to reconcile personal desire with social obligation.

In contrast to the other forms of classical theater, today *kabuki* continues to be very popular, regularly playing to enthusiastic audiences at theaters such as Tokyo's Kabukiza, Kyoto's Minamiza, and Osaka's Shochikuza.

### History of *Kabuki*

*Kabuki* performers during the earliest years of the genre were primarily women. *Kabuki* is thought to have originated in the dances and light theater first performed in Kyoto in 1603 by Okuni, a female attendant at the Izumo shrine. The word *kabuki* had connotations of the shocking, unorthodox, and fashionable, and it came to be applied to the performances of Okuni's popular troupe and its imitators. Because an important side business of the *onna* (women's) *kabuki* troupes was prostitution, the Tokugawa shogunate disapproved, banning the troupes in 1629 and making it illegal for women to appear on stage. *Wakashu* (young men's) *kabuki* then became popular, but in 1652 it was also banned because of the adverse effect on public



**Portrait of Okuni**

Regarded as the founder of *kabuki*, Okuni was a shrine maiden at the Izumo Shrine.

morals of the prostitution activities of the adolescent male actors.

With both women and boys banned, *kabuki* became a theater of mature male performers, although before *yaro* (men's) *kabuki* was permitted to continue performing, the government required that the actors avoid sensual displays and follow the more realistic conventions of the *kyogen* theater.

The century following the legal mandating of male performers saw many developments in *kabuki*. *Onnagata* (female impersonator) roles became increasingly sophisticated, and Ichikawa Danjuro I (1660–1704) pioneered the strong, masculine *aragoto* (rough business)

acting style in Edo (now Tokyo), while Sakata Tojuro I (1647–1709) developed the refined and realistic *wagoto* (soft business) style in the Kyoto-Osaka area.

The *kabuki* stage gradually evolved out of the *noh* stage, and a draw curtain was added, facilitating the staging of more complex multi-act plays. The *hanamichi* passageway through the audience came into wide use and provided a stage for the now standard flamboyant *kabuki* entrances and exits. The revolving stage was first used in 1758.

In the merchant culture of the 18th century, *kabuki* developed in both a competitive and cooperative relationship with the *bunraku* puppet theater. Although he concentrated on writing for the puppet theater after 1703, Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653–1724) wrote some plays directly for *kabuki* and is considered one of Japan's greatest dramatists. Around this time, *kabuki* was temporarily eclipsed in popularity by the puppet theater in the Kyoto-Osaka area. In an effort to compete, many puppet plays were adapted for *kabuki*, and the actors even began to imitate the distinctive movements of the puppets.

The fall of the Tokugawa shogunate in 1868 resulted in the elimination of the *samurai* class and the entire social structure that was the basis for the merchant culture, of which the *kabuki* theater was a part. There were failed attempts to introduce Western clothes and ideas into *kabuki*, but major actors such as Ichikawa Danjuro IX (1838–1903) and Onoe Kikugoro V (1844–1903) urged a return to the classic *kabuki* repertoire. In the 20th century, writers such as Okamoto Kido (1872–1939) and Mishima Yukio (1925–1970), who were not directly connected to the *kabuki* world, have written plays as part of the *shin kabuki* (new *kabuki*) movement. These plays combine traditional forms with innovations from modern theater; a few of them have been incorporated into the classic *kabuki* repertoire.

While remaining true to its traditional roots, both in the staging of the plays and in the



closely knit hierarchy of acting families that define the *kabuki* world, *kabuki* today is a vigorous and integral part of the entertainment industry in Japan. The star actors of *kabuki* are some of Japan's most famous celebrities, appearing frequently in both traditional and modern roles on television and in movies and plays. For example, the famous *onnagata* Bando Tamasaburo V (b.1950) has acted in many non-*kabuki* plays and movies, almost always in female roles, and he has also directed several movies. In 1998, the *shumei* (name-assuming) ceremony in which actor Kataoka Takao (b.1944) received the prestigious stage name Kataoka Nizaemon XV was treated as a major media event in Japan. In 2005 another *shumei* ceremony garnered widespread attention when *kabuki* actor Nakamura Kankuro was named Nakamura Kanzaburo XVIII.

Kabukiza, Japan's main *kabuki* theater, was built in 1924, and in 2002 received the designation of a national registered tangible cultural property.

## Elements of the *Kabuki* Theater

### Plays

*Kabuki* plays are divided into three overall categories: *jidai-mono* (historical plays), *sewa-mono* (domestic plays), and *shosagoto*

### Kabukiza

The Kabukiza theater in Ginza, Tokyo.  
(Photo courtesy of AFLO)



(dance pieces). About half of the plays still performed today were originally written for the puppet theater.

Although historical plays were often about contemporary incidents involving the *samurai* class, the events were disguised, if only slightly, and set in an era prior to the Edo period in order to avoid conflict with Tokugawa government censors. An example of this is the famous play *Kanadehon Chushingura*, which told the story of the 47 *ronin* (masterless *samurai*) incident of 1701–1703, but which was set in the early Muromachi period (1333–1568).

The domestic plays were more realistic than historical plays, both in their dialogue and costumes. For audiences, a newly written domestic play may have seemed almost like a news report since it often concerned a scandal, murder, or suicide which had just occurred. A later variant of the domestic play was the *kizewa-mono* (“bare” domestic play), which became popular in the early 19th century. These plays were known for their realistic portrayal of the lower fringes of society, but they tended toward sensationalism, using violence and shocking subjects along with elaborate stage tricks to draw in an increasingly jaded audience.

Dance pieces, such as *Kyo-ganoko musume Dojoji* (*The Dancing Girl at the Temple*), have often served as a showcase for the talents of top *onnagata*.

### Actors and Roles

*Kabuki* is above all else an actor's theater, with the plays serving primarily as vehicles for highlighting the talents of the stars. While many *kabuki* fans undoubtedly have preferences with regard to the plays, most will come to the theater to see their favorite actors regardless of the role or play.

Each actor is part of an acting family, and each family has a specific style and approach to each role. The most famous of the *kabuki* family lines is that currently headed by Ichikawa Danjuro XII (b. 1946). An actor who inherits the Ichikawa Danjuro name must not

only master his predecessors' approach to a role but also add his own individual nuances. Other important family lines include those headed by Onoe Kikugoro VII (b.1942) and Nakamura Utaemon VI (b.1917).

Perhaps the most famous aspect of *kabuki* is its use of *onnagata*, male actors in female roles. The ideal for the *onnagata* is not to imitate women but to symbolically express the essence of the feminine. Attempts to introduce actresses into *kabuki* in the modern era have failed. The *onnagata* are such an integral part of the *kabuki* tradition that their replacement by actresses is extremely unlikely.

A central aspect of *kabuki* acting is the display of stylized gestures and forms (*kata*). These include dance-like stylized fighting moves (*tate*) and the special movements used during entrances (*tanzen*) and exits (*roppo*) made via the *hanamichi*. Arguably the most important *kata* of *kabuki* is the *mie* (striking an attitude). At the climax of a scene, the actor, after a series of stylized movements, comes to a complete stop, striking a pose characterized by a fixed stare. The more flamboyant *kata* are featured in historical plays but not in domestic plays.

### Costumes and Makeup

While the costumes used in domestic plays are often realistic representations of the clothes of the Edo period, historical plays often use magnificent brocade robes and large wigs reminiscent of those found in the *noh* theater. For *onnagata* dance pieces particular attention is paid to the beauty of the costume.

One well-known trademark of *kabuki* is the extravagant makeup style called *kumadori* that is used in historical plays. There are about a hundred of these masklike styles in which the colors and designs used symbolize aspects of the character. Red tends to be “good,” and is used to express virtue, passion, or superhuman power, while blue is “bad,” expressing negative traits such as jealousy or fear.



### **Kabuki Music**

By far the most important instrument used in *kabuki* is the three-stringed *shamisen*. Included in the musical genres that are performed on stage in view of the audience are the *nagauta* (long song) style of lyrical music and several types of narrative music in which a singer or chanter is accompanied by one or more *shamisen* and sometimes other instruments. The standard *nagauta* ensemble includes several *shamisen* players as well as singers plus drum and flute players.

In addition to the onstage music, singers and musicians playing the *shamisen*, flute, and a variety of percussion instruments are also located offstage. They provide various types of background music and sound effects.

A special type of sound effect found in *kabuki* is the dramatic crack of two wooden blocks (*hyoshigi*) struck together or against a wooden board.

## **Two Kabuki Plays**

Short summaries of a historical play and a domestic play are given below.

### **Kanjincho (The Subscription List)**

This *jidai-mono* (historical play) is considered by many to be the most popular in the *kabuki* repertoire; it was adapted from the *noh* play *Ataka*. The brilliant warrior Minamoto no Yoshitsune (1159–1189) is fleeing north to escape capture by his half brother, Kamakura-shogunate founder Minamoto no Yoritomo (1147–1199), who is unjustifiably suspicious of Yoshitsune's loyalty. Yoshitsune is disguised as one of the porters of Benkei, his legendary loyal retainer.

Togashi Saemon, the officer in charge of the barrier checkpoint at Ataka in Kaga Province (part of present-day Ishikawa Prefecture), explains in an introductory speech that the barrier was established in order to capture Yoshitsune, who is thought to

be traveling north disguised as a *yamabushi* (Buddhist mountain ascetic).

Yoshitsune and his men enter along the *hanamichi* ("flower path" ramp leading off stage). They do not have the necessary identification papers, but Benkei, acting as head of the group, tries to convince Togashi that they are collecting donations for rebuilding the temple Todajji in Nara. Suspecting a trick, Togashi confronts Benkei and orders him to read the subscription list (*kanjincho*) that they would be carrying if they were really soliciting donations. In a famous scene, Benkei takes out a blank scroll and pretends to read.

Impressed by Benkei's skill and devotion, Togashi lets them pass even though he realizes who they are. Then, however, one of Togashi's men becomes suspicious of the delicate looking porter who is Yoshitsune in disguise. Benkei strikes and berates Yoshitsune in order to convince Togashi that this servant could not really be his master. Again moved by Benkei's loyalty, the compassionate Togashi allows them to go.

Once past the barrier, Benkei begs forgiveness for striking his master, but Yoshitsune praises his resourcefulness. Once the other characters have left the stage, Benkei expresses his joy at their escape in a famous *roppo* exit along the *hanamichi*.

### **Aoto-zoshi hana no nishikie**

This *sewa-mono* (domestic play) is popularly known as *Benten Kozo* (*Benten the Thief*); it was written by Kawatake Mokuami (1816–1893), the top playwright of the late Edo period. Originally consisting of five acts, today acts 3, 4, and sometimes 5 are performed.

The play portrays the exploits of the rogue Benten Kozo Kikunosuke and the gang of five thieves of which he is a member. In Act 3, Benten, dressed as the daughter of a *samurai* and accompanied by another thief posing as her retainer, enters a kimono store, where he

pretends to steal some cloth. When Benten is falsely accused of shoplifting and struck by a clerk, he and his confederate demand compensation, but their extortion trick is exposed by a *samurai* bystander. Then in one of the play's most famous scenes, Benten exposes the tattoo on his shoulder and proclaims himself a criminal, in the process changing his speech and manner from that of a high-born young lady to a low thief.

In reality, the *samurai* who exposed Benten is Nippon Daemon, head of the gang of thieves, and it was all part of a larger plot to rob the store later.

All their plans go astray, and in Act 4 the five thieves flee to the riverbank with the police in pursuit. In another famous scene, the gang members, wearing beautiful kimono and carrying umbrellas, parade from the *hanamichi* to the main stage and introduce themselves while defying the police standing in the background.

While seldom performed, Act 5 includes a dramatic scene in which Benten Kozo flees alone to the roof of the temple Gokurakuji, where he first fights off the police and then commits suicide.