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Kabuki Goes Hollywood

THE POPULAR WESTERN VIEW OF THE JAPANESE KABUKI THEATRE is that it is a pure, elevated classical form having nothing to do with modern society, performing mythical plays in an archaic style that is quaint and timeless. This is false. For one thing, it is not all that old, dating only from the early seventeenth century. (The age of Shakespeare! Was there a benevolent spirit of popular theatre affecting the whole world?) Furthermore, unlike the Noh theatre, the much older traditional Japanese form associated with the elite Zen Buddhist religion, Kabuki has always been raucous popular entertainment. The odd, chanting style of speaking, for example, is not some sort of ritualism, but simply reflects the fact that the early Kabuki players performed in the noisy marketplace and needed to make themselves heard.

The very name *Kabuki* is the noun form of the verb *kabuku*, off-centered, which implied unorthodox, strange, newfangled. It was commonly written with the ideographs for song (*ka*), dance (*bu*), and prostitute (*ki*), the last reflecting the common sideline of performers, who originally included women. In the late nineteenth century, as Japan reconnected with the outside world, another final ideograph was substituted, simply meaning skill; this helped clean up the image, but not the substance, of this dynamic performing art. For as the distinguished Japanese theatre scholar James R. Brandon notes in *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre*, Kabuki “was always up-to-date, adapting its plays, music, dance, acting, and staging styles to the taste of the times and always striving to be new and fashionable.” After World War II, however, this changed. The occupying American forces under General Douglas MacArthur were trying to censor aspects of Japanese culture suspected of glorifying militarism. Faubion Bowers, an aide and interpreter to MacArthur, convinced the general that Kabuki was merely an antique, ageless style of theatre with no political or military influence. In fact, as Brandon shows in a forthcoming book,¹ Kabuki was very much a living theatrical form, glorifying modern Japanese conquest as far back as the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95. Like the great repertory companies of Europe, it alternated traditional plays (which could themselves be adapted to comment on current events) with constantly changing modern ones, even drawing on contemporary Western sources. (When Ulysses S. Grant visited Japan in 1879, he saw a perform-

¹ *Kabuki's Forgotten War: 1931–1945* (Honolulu, 2008).

ance glorifying his life, which included seventy women dressed in American flags.) It is as if Shakespeare's theatre had continued into the twentieth century with panoramic blank-verse plays performed outdoors, depicting figures like Oliver Cromwell, Queen Victoria, or Winston Churchill.

Thus Bowers, the man who "saved" Kabuki, actually tamed it. Performances in the postwar period avoided contemporary material, and certainly avoided controversy. Traditionalists found them as marvelously theatrical as ever, but younger people found them simply old fashioned. A bright young student from Japan taking one of my courses at the University of California, Riverside, recently admitted that he had never seen a live Kabuki performance, though he had some time ago seen one on television. This was a student *majoring* in theatre! The aging of audiences for live theatre is a problem almost everywhere—the spectators at a Broadway show form a sea of gray heads—but it is exacerbated when a theatrical tradition becomes static. Artists cannot ignore tradition, but neither can they merely repeat it, at least not in dynamic modern cultures like that of Japan.

Forty years ago the Kabuki actor Ichikawa Ennosuke² formed his own company (an iconoclastic step on its own, since companies are usually long-standing families) with the idea of modernizing Kabuki. He was reported as saying that the average Japanese feels "it's boring, I don't understand it, and it puts me to sleep." To change this negative image, Ennosuke trimmed dialog, sped up the delivery of lines, and alternated fast-moving action scenes with slower ones that reveal emotion and characterization. He employed modern set, costume, and lighting designers, and revived theatrical trickery like quick costume changes, cascades of real water on stage, and flying on wires over the stage and out over the audience. Purists, including theatre critics and older actors, expressed horror at these innovations, but there was originally nothing more impure than Kabuki, when novelty rather than reverence was the norm. Ennosuke's "Super Kabuki" is faithful to the spirit of this dynamic theatrical form, which for centuries had more in common with modern Hollywood or Broadway than with a church service.

Late last May in Osaka I saw a production of the Super Kabuki play *Yamato Takeru*, the most spectacular theatre piece I have ever witnessed. Set in ancient, legendary Japan, it depicts political intrigue, war, heroism, love, self-sacrifice, betrayal, gods, ogres, fantastic animals, death, and a flying rebirth. Much of Japanese art and culture is famous for its minimalism, but sometimes less is not more, more is more. *Yamato Takeru* made *Phantom of the Opera* look like a high school production.

Having suffered a stroke, Ennosuke no longer performs, but he did direct the show, with the title role alternating on different days by

² Names herein are in Japanese order, family name followed by given name. Since Kabuki acting companies are all usually members of the same family (by birth or adoption), however, I will refer to actors by their given names, as the Japanese regularly do.

Ichikawa Ukon and Ichikawa Danjiro. (I saw the latter.) It gives some idea of how grueling the role is when you realize that it is too much even for a young, healthy actor to play every performance. The play begins with a struggle between twin brothers, sons of the Emperor of Yamato (an ancient name of Japan), with Danjiro playing *both*. The good brother, Ousu, was dressed in a magnificent white costume with gold trim, while the evil twin, Ohusu, was of course all in black—nothing subtle here! The tour de force of the first act was their duel to the death, with Danjiro using doubles plus incredibly fast costume changes, even though the costumes were anything but simple.

Enraged by the death of Ohusu, the emperor exiles Ousu, commanding him to conquer on his own the faraway land of Kumaso, an impossible task that is the equivalent of a death sentence. Nevertheless, the wily Ousu slips into the palace at Kumaso disguised as a beautiful woman dancer, beguiling the ruling Takeru brothers and then triumphing over them in a huge fight. The dying younger brother, impressed by Ousu's bravery, asks him to take on the Takeru name, so that Ousu comes to be known thereafter as Yamato Takeru. The play continues in this episodic fashion with Takeru's further adventures—love, marriage, a spectacular battle in a fire, a storm at sea tamed by the suicide-sacrifice of his beautiful wife, a battle with ogres, and combat with a wild white boar in which he suffers a fatal wound. Taking a very long time to die (even though this is sped-up Kabuki), he finally expires and is buried, then is reborn as a white swan taking flight from his grave.

As the swan man, Danjiro soared majestically above us so beautifully he almost made me weep. The technology of theatrical flying, used centuries ago in Kabuki and millennia ago by the ancient Greeks, is simple; flying is an acting rather than a technological challenge. The Chinese movie *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* dazzled audiences with flying effects that used computer trickery to remove the image of the wires, but in fact the flights would have been just as triumphant with them fully visible, as here. The true reason for the success of the movie actors is that they played the “as if” of flying with grace and confidence, as did Danjiro. He is a superb actor with expressive eyes (like all great actors), despite stylized white makeup and a very large theatre.

The makeup, while unrealistic, was rarely as stylized as in traditional Kabuki, which adds lines in bold colors to express character and emotion. Similarly, the actors' speech, while heightened, was not so artificial as in traditional Kabuki, where nowadays even Japanese audience members usually rent little headsets to “translate” the dialog into modern Japanese. Many of the performance elements of *Yamato Takeru* were in fact the kind one would see at a spectacular Broadway show, or at an opera at Bayreuth. Lighting in the auditorium was dimmed out during performance, for example, and rather than the traditional Kabuki curtain just pulled across the front of the stage there was a large draw curtain that flew quickly upwards to reveal dramatic tableaux or dropped for histrionic scene endings. Traditional Kabuki

simply uses bright, general white illumination, but here the lighting was atmospheric, often gloomy, including the nowadays universally popular fog effects, while blackouts with follow spots were used for monologs. In keeping with the lighting, the sets, which in traditional Kabuki are figurative to the point of looking cartoonish, were vast and evocative, suggesting something out of *Star Wars* or the *Indiana Jones* movies. Costumes included futuristic military uniforms, golden headdresses, and fabulous brocaded robes that must have cost around a million bucks for the fabrics alone, while the music, played underneath scenes for melodramatic effect, mixed traditional Japanese pieces with Hollywood orchestral gush. But the biggest surprise, to anyone familiar with Kabuki or with Japan itself, occurred when Takeru actually kissed his lover! The music swelled up, the lights faded, the curtain fell, and the audience swooned.

The swan at the end of the play of course recalls *Lohengrin*. The Wagnerian influence is probably direct, because like Wagner's operas *Yamato Takeru* is mythic, nationalistic drama, glorifying an ancient warrior-hero who supposedly epitomizes the spirit of his homeland. Umehara Takeshi, who wrote the original script, is a well-known right-wing nationalist, as is Ennosuke himself. (Ennosuke, along with Nagawa Shosuke, are listed in the program as co-writers.) Yamato Takeru is the legendary ancestor of the current emperor of Japan, successor to Hirohito in what is called the Yamato dynasty. Part of the right-wing agenda in Japan is revival of the emperor cult that Japan had to renounce after World War II. In keeping with this, during the curtain call the entire cast bowed to the actor portraying the fictional emperor, which seemed to arouse no emotion one way or the other in the audience, but which my companion and I found disturbing.

Article 9, the "no war" clause of the Japanese constitution that was forced on the nation during the postwar occupation, will probably be repealed, allowing Japan officially to defend itself. This in itself is no cause for alarm. I cannot imagine Japan regressing to a policy of imperial conquest, if only because the American failures in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq demonstrate the limits of modern military aggression even when the armed forces have overwhelming superiority. A big, powerful nation can still conquer small countries militarily but can no longer govern them, so what is the point? The real problem with the right-wingers in Japan is their denial of history. Japanese aggression in World War II, atrocities like the Nanjing Massacre and horrors like the forced prostitution of Korean "comfort women," are still being denied in Japan today, and information about them suppressed. Germany has acknowledged its sins in that war, but Japanese children learn only that the Japanese people suffered terribly, which is the truth, but only a partial one. Holocaust denial is actually a crime in Germany, but atrocity denial in Japan, pressed by right-wing nationalists, is unofficial policy.

Ennosuke was not the first theatrical figure to believe that Kabuki

had become old fashioned and elitist. As early as 1913, the industrialist, politician, and impresario Kobayashi Ichizo founded a theatre company at the resort town of Takarazuka, outside Osaka. A right-wing nationalist who came to admire Adolf Hitler, he also seems to have been a fan of the Ziegfeld Follies, copying its revue format and many of its staging and costuming elements. The company still exists but has evolved into one of the strangest theatres in history, in Japan or elsewhere. It might be Kabuki's alter ego. It is big, flashy, and popular, but where the actors in Kabuki, originally both genders, became all male, the Takarazuka performers are all young women. They do sometimes put on adaptations of traditional Japanese stories, but most of the repertoire is drawn from Western literature, especially Broadway musicals.

Watching them perform *Oklahoma!* or *Singin' in the Rain* or *West Side Story*, you feel as though you are in an alternate universe. Sets and costumes are authentic and expensive, audiences are huge (the theatre at Takarazuka seats four thousand, and there is another elegant showplace in Tokyo), and the performers are adequate—about on the level of a good college theatre group in the United States, perhaps at some women's college where students play all the roles. Nevertheless, they are speaking and singing in Japanese, and the women in drag are not particularly convincing as men even when they are excellent actors otherwise. In Kabuki, the *onnagata* (men playing women) are so persuasive as beautiful women that they are held up as an ideal, but I cannot imagine any Japanese man modeling his clothes or looks on anyone he saw on the Takarazuka stage, where short haircuts and fake moustaches do not much alter obviously attractive young women.

But then, not many men go to Takarazuka; the audience is about ninety percent women, of all ages. As both an American and a man, I feel doubly incongruous, but at least there are no lines at the men's restrooms. Young women in the audience are famous for developing intense crushes on the "male" leads, collecting their autographed photos, sending them presents, and forming fan clubs. Since the leads also regularly play love scenes with women, Western observers envision the concept "LESBIAN" as if it were a neon sign over the stage. The Japanese insist this is not so, and they are probably right. The plays are chosen and staged with conservative values in mind: the love scenes are more affectionate than passionate, the kisses are brief and infrequent, and marriage is always the goal. As noted, the male impersonators do not look like men, they look like women playing men, which is clearly part of their appeal; if audiences wanted more butch actresses, the producers of this very commercial theatre would certainly find some. The feminist theatre scholar Erica Abbitt has argued that the popularity of a Takarazuka show among women "depends less on a lesbian aesthetic than on the subversive pleasure . . . as they witness a woman getting away with a male performance of power and freedom."³ Of

³ "Androgyny and Otherness: Exploring the West Through the Japanese Performative Body," *Asian Theatre Journal*, 18.2 (Fall 2001), p. 252.

course there are lesbians among the casts and audiences of Takarazuka (as in any large groups of women), but the main appeal is the subversion of strict gender roles that persist in Japan. To have the freedom of a man fulfils a common fantasy, as does the depiction of male characters who are loving and caring, in a country where men are notorious for neglecting their wives. Homosexuality has become an American obsession—fear of the Red under the bed has given way to panic about the gay couple *in* it—but the Japanese do not share our attitude. Note how, for example, when Yamato Takeru successfully impersonates a seductive young woman, it raises no eyebrows about his sexuality.

On the same visit to Japan during which I saw Super Kabuki, I went by train to the town of Takarazuka (I was the only man in the railway car) to see *Me and My Girl*, a 1937 English musical that got revived in London about twenty-five years ago and was immediately snapped up into the Takarazuka repertoire. It is an amiable piece, with hummable tunes and lots of opportunities for dancing, especially of a popular dance step called the Lambeth Walk. The plot owes a lot to Shaw's *Pygmalion*: Bill, a Lambeth Cockney, is the illegitimate child of the late Earl of Hareford and his only heir. The family tries to convert Bill into a proper gentleman, with a Lady Jacquie giving him lessons in speech, behavior—and sex. Bill, however, already has a beloved Cockney girlfriend, Sally. Will he stay true to her? Boy *has* girl, boy almost loses girl, boy regains girl, and they live happily ever after.

In college theatrical productions, there is usually *someone* in the cast who is first class, and the same was true here. Sena Jun as Bill never for a moment looked like a man, but she had the ease, charm, and energy of a major star. Wearing a bowler hat, she did tricks worthy of Charlie Chaplin like rolling it down her arm or diving into it on a sofa, while her singing and dancing were superb. An interesting cultural difference could be inferred from two bits of business: Bill got big laughs when he, unused to high-class drink, accidentally got tipsy, but when he stole a watch from a pompous nobleman there was stony silence. As far as the Japanese were concerned, drunkenness is a hoot, but what is funny about theft? The rest of the cast all sang and danced well too—these skills are obviously what examiners look for at auditions. The acting, however, varied from adequate to just plain bad; a young woman with an ear trumpet trying to depict an old man, for example, was merely pitiable.

After the end of the play itself, the show ended with a Ziegfeld-style extravaganza. The company, which introduced the revue (variety acts organized around a theme, with unity of designs and direction) to Japan in 1927, is still officially known as “Takarazuka Revue.” The only time anymore in the United States you are likely to see the Ziegfeld Follies, with the fabulous staircases and showgirls in feathered costumes and headdresses, is in “I Love Lucy” reruns, where in one episode Lucy ends up in a Ziegfeld outfit whose hat is so tall and heavy she topples

over. Here, the eighty beautiful women strutting on the stairs were presented without irony, an *hommage* to a long-dead American impresario who never set foot in Japan in his life.

What will happen to Sena Jun? Each year, thousands of girls from all over Japan audition for the Takarazuka Music School, the most competitive of its kind in the world, with only between 40 and 50 accepted. They are trained for two years in music, dance, and acting, then get seven-year contracts in one of five companies. After seven years they are finished with Takarazuka; a few become professional actresses elsewhere, many get married (to men, needless to say), and the others fade away with presumably pleasant memories. Stars can also fade away with lots of money from endorsing clothing, cosmetics, etc., but the system is sexist, ageist, and wasteful of talent. Perhaps for these reasons, times are changing. In addition to the five main companies, Takarazuka has added *Senka* (Superior Members) for senior actresses who perform from time to time. Sena Jun finished her seven-year stint in 1999 yet is still playing leads, not for *Senka* but for the Moon troupe, one of the oldest. Sometimes crude commercialism trumps cultural traditions to good effect; the Takarazuka producers must have realized that it is foolish to discard such a crowd-pleasing star.

Super Kabuki and Takarazuka are both examples of lucrative, large-scale, popular theatre of a sort that barely exists in the United States anymore. Even big Broadway shows do not have the same wide appeal or influence. Like all popular literature everywhere, they deal with major social issues of their time, even when set long ago (ancient Japan) or far away (1930s England). And, again like all popular literature, they tend to take conservative viewpoints—revival of Japanese nationalism in *Yamato Takeru*, reaffirmation of traditional gender roles, despite a teasing experiment with them, in *Me and My Girl*. Both shows draw heavily on the West, but just as Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado* is quintessentially Victorian and English, these pieces to an American observer seem fundamentally, strangely, sometimes maddeningly Japanese.

For an American theatre critic who speaks not a word of Japanese, I am knowledgeable about Japanese theatre, but am no expert. I gratefully acknowledge assistance from the following, in addition to those already named in the footnotes: Professors Hirota Atsuhiko and Kishi Tetsuo of Kyoto University, Professor Carol Fisher Sorgenfrei of U.C.L.A., and Professor Samuel L. Leiter of Brooklyn College. I am responsible for the opinions, however, and for any errors.