East Meets West: Japanese Theater in the Time of Shakespeare

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THE YEAR 2003 saw the four hundredth anniversary of the birth of Kabuki in Kyoto, the ancient capital of Japan. While Shakespeare and Lope de Vega were creating their rich dramatic world in Europe, Okuni1 and her fellow performers were giving birth to a new form of theater seven thousand miles away.

One may wonder whether there was any connection between these theaters of the East and the West at the turn of the seventeenth century. The answer has been, for a long period of time, basically “No”; or rather, not many people have seriously asked the question itself. Four centuries after the event, however, some scholars have started wondering whether the answer could be “Yes.”

These include authorities on Kabuki like Kawatake Toshio and Hattori Yukio, as well as the influential novelist/essayist Maruya Saiichi, who reached a similar conclusion through a different avenue. There are also other scholars, like Thomas Leims, who are researching various historical documents and manuscripts in the hope of finding more concrete evidence.2

The key factors underlying these ideas are the Jesuit mission to Japan and secular encounters of the Europeans and the Japanese since the middle of the sixteenth century. The purpose of this paper is to introduce this new trend in Kabuki and Noh studies, so that we can look at both European and Japanese theaters from a more global perspective.

One of the earliest Kabuki plays was entitled Chaya Asobi, or Playing in the Teahouse (1603). The word “teahouse” was a euphe-
mism for a “house of pleasure,” where courtesans entertained men with their music and dance. The play was so popular at the time that we still have some paintings of the performances in various galleries and libraries.

Plate 1 shows a youthful dandy visiting this house of ill repute, sporting his swords and holding a fan. He is dressed in a most fashionable and decadent manner, with a lavish two-layered kimono. What attracts our attention, however, is his gentle, feminine features and the gracefulness of his hands, giving out a strange sensation of androgenous beauty in spite of his braggard, masculine posture. No wonder—it is an actress who is playing the role of this dandy. Here we witness a manifestation of transvestism as an artistic expression of rebellion against the establishment. What the actress is impersonating is the “kabukimono”—a deviant, a non-conformist in a society that, after more than a century of civil war, was suddenly being organized into a more stable and fixed form of class system.

During the turmoil of the civil war, every samurai had had an opportunity to become the ruler of the country. The ambitions of the youths, however, were crushed by the establishment of the Tokugawa Shogunate by the serious and sedate figure of Tokugawa Ieyasu in 1603. The capital was moved from Kyoto to Edo (Tokyo) in the same year; the commencement of the Edo Era, an unrivaled period of peace lasting more than two and a half centuries.

This sudden change in the society produced many discontented “kabukimono” who could only give vent to their youthful energy by dressing themselves in a strange, exotic fashion and behaving in a rebellious manner. The word “kabuki” comes from the verb “kabuku,” which means “to slant,” “to be oblique,” “to deviate from the normal path.”

Etymologically, therefore, Kabuki can be called a “theater of deviation,” or a “baroque theater” in the original sense of the word (“baroque” signifying a “distorted pearl”). This idea of “Kabuki as a baroque theater” was first presented by Kawatake Toshio in 1961 and has recently become popular among scholars, resulting in a conference under the same title in 2002.

Okuni, the creator of Kabuki, gave a further twist to the figure of “kabukimono” by playing the role herself. Her gender challenge was even bolder, if not subtler, than that of Shakespeare, who created the mind-boggling situations of boy actors playing the roles of young women who were disguised as young men. The androg-
Plate 1. Uneme performing the role of a dandy originally played by Okuni. From Kabuki Zukan (The Pictorial Book of Kabuki). Courtesy of Tokugawa Gallery.
enous attraction of the “kabukimono” she presented on stage was so captivating that the theater itself was called “Kabuki,” and imitators cropped up immediately in Kyoto and the countryside. Plate 1 shows an actress called Uneme performing the role played originally by Okuni. Looking more closely at the picture, one notices another element of deviation from the norm of the society manifested by this person. She is wearing a long necklace looking like a huge “juzu” (Buddhist rosary), with a cross attached at the end as its pendant head. What was the meaning of this cross in a society that was predominantly Buddhist in all its cultural aspects?

The first full-length essay on this cross was written by Komiya Toyotaka as far back as 1933. It was rediscussed and supported recently by Hattori Yukio in his *Edo Kabuki Buka Ron* (2003). Komiya suggests the following possibilities: 1) the cross was part of a new fashion, something that gave a finishing touch to the outfit of a rebellious dandy. 2) The “kabukimono” wearing the necklace with a cross was really and truly a Christian, led into the Catholic faith by the Jesuit missionaries who kept coming to Japan after 1549. Komiya and Hattori conclude that both 1) and 2) could have been the case: it was both fashionable and daring to proclaim oneself to be a Christian, when there had been an official (but not serious) ban on Christianity since 1587. Then they give us a hint in solving the mystery of the cross by introducing a historical figure who was connected with Okuni.

The legend has it that Nagoya Sanzo, a handsome man of great charm and achievement who had served a Christian lord, became Okuni’s lover; as he was widely regarded as the most attractive example of “kabukimono,” Okuni’s impersonation of a dandy could well have been based on his image. Even after he died a tragic death in a brawl in 1604, he kept haunting people’s imaginations. There is a painting of a scene in another Kabuki play in which his ghost comes back to Okuni, approaching the stage from the auditorium—quite an effective method of production, inviting the emotional involvement of the audience. In this picture in *Okuni Kabuki Zoshi* (Yamato Bunkakan Gallery), Nagoya Sanzo is wearing a huge necklace that looks like a rosary, and his kimono has a distinct Western flavor to it, with a pattern of the cross woven into it. He could well have been a Christian, considering that his lord/friend Leon Gamo Ujisato was one. In those days it was customary for the retainers of a war lord to follow suit when their lord became a Christian. In spite of the martyrdom of the twenty-six Christians in Nagasaki in
1597, the number of Japanese converts had increased to nearly 750,000 by 1605.

We cannot rule out the possibility that Okuni herself was a Christian, or at least had some contacts with Christianity. Some scholars suggest that Okuni and her followers like Uneme could have seen, or even performed in, some of the plays produced by the Jesuits for the education and entertainment of the Japanese Christians. Those plays usually presented some episodes from the Bible in Japanese, using various types of traditional Japanese theater and music, on occasions like Christmas and Easter. They were very popular among people; the missionaries often had to restrict the number of the non-Christian audience members who rushed to see the plays. Performers were of course Christians, but sometimes professional troupes of players joined in. The Jesuit plays presented in the style of Noh were called “Kirishitan Noh,” or “Christian Noh,” by Hayashiya Tatsusaburo. It is perfectly conceivable therefore that until a serious ban was issued against Christianity by the government in 1612, there were much more frequent and direct interactions between the Japanese and the Western theaters than we have imagined up to now. Plate 2 shows the audience of the Uneme dance we have seen (Plate 1), which includes a Westerner at the back. This is just one example of many extant paintings of Japanese theaters that show Westerners among the audience.

As a counterpart to these visual pieces of evidence, there is a mural painting of the Japanese delegates sitting in the auditorium of the newly completed Teatro Olympico in Vicenza in 1585. They were sent to Rome by the Christian war lords in Kyushu in order to pay homage to the Pope. After seeing some plays in Europe, the delegates compared the Japanese theater with the Western theater in their diaries: the Japanese dance (Noh), they say, tends to be sad and pessimistic, with the protagonists wearing dismal masks that represent ghosts and spirits. Western plays on the other hand are more varied and delightful; the scenery is more realistic and the way of acting more naturalistic. Beautiful songs and witty interludes are inserted, so that the audience can never get bored.

We have to take into consideration that they were sixteen or seventeen years old when they arrived in Europe, and had been only thirteen or fourteen when they left Japan. It would have been very difficult for them to understand the aesthetics of Noh drama, with its underlying concept of “Yugen”—poetic gracefulness with a Buddhist sense of mutability—and the subtle symbolism of the
Plate 2. The audience of the Uneme dance. From *Kabuki Zukan*. Courtesy of Tokugawa Gallery.
masks. The boys go on to suggest that the Japanese theater should reform itself by absorbing what is best in the Western theater, casting off the masks and introducing spectacular costumes. This, as it happens, is exactly what Okuni did with her Kabuki eighteen years later.

Fortunately, the traditional style of Noh performance was also kept intact by the patronage of the Tokugawa Shogunate, so that we can enjoy the appearance of the ghosts and spirits with their haunting masks to this day. Still, what the boys expressed could have represented the feelings of a large part of the audience at the time. Noh had thrived for more than two centuries, and was about to be established as a theater for the ruling class. Ordinary people were looking for something different, something that gave them a sense of freedom and excitement.

This is partly why the Jesuit plays were so successful with the Japanese audience. The missionaries knew very well what pleased the Japanese eye, which had always been attracted by the exotic and spectacular. "The play's the thing," they might have thought, to seize the hearts of so many Japanese in such a short period of time. The play was the thing indeed for the Jesuit mission all over the world, with as many as one hundred thousand plays written and performed in the space of two hundred years. What they spread with these plays was not only the Catholic faith, but also the concept of the Baroque theater. Lope de Vega was educated at a Jesuit college; Okuni and Uneme also might have had a chance to be exposed to the Baroque art of the Jesuits.

One feature of the Jesuit theater was its protean nature, absorbing all types of art that were available in a particular country at a particular time. In presenting their plays in Japan, they used Noh, Kyogen, and the Puppet Plays. They incorporated various forms of dance including Kagura, Bon'odori, and Kowakamai. Biwa (the Japanese lute) was used as well as Western organs; traditional Japanese tunes like Imayo were mixed with those of the Gregorian chant.

What Kabuki shared with the Jesuit theater was this tendency to become a melting pot for all kinds of performing arts, in order to attract and please a large, mixed audience. They also shared a talent for the invention of theater machinery. It has been pointed out that the same mechanism was employed to create the illusion of a huge running river onstage both in Kabuki and the Jesuit plays in later years. The famous revolving stage of Kabuki also had its counterpart in the Jesuit theater.
In spite of their seemingly opposite principles and aims (one tried to lead the audience to the thought of Pleasure and the other to the thought of God), their positions in the Japanese society had many aspects in common. They were both aware, for example, that they were becoming “too popular” in the eyes of the authorities. They knew that they were diverging from the “norm” of the society, and that the Shogunate could ban their activities at any moment.

Just as Baroque art was a deviation from Classical aesthetics in the Renaissance, so was Kabuki a deviation from the classical idea of Noh. Although Tokugawa Ieyasu did not issue a ban on Kabuki, his successors proclaimed it to be immoral. The fact that some actresses doubled as courtesans did not help the situation; the performance of women onstage was forbidden in 1629. When boy actors took over from the actresses, they also became so popular that the establishment banned the boys’ performance as well in 1652. This new situation inevitably contributed to the creation of “Onnagata,” the female role played by grown-up men.

The concept of “Onnagata,” however, was there right from the beginning. When Okuni played the role of a dandy, the part of a woman in the teahouse was played by an actor hiding his moustache behind a fan, which is reported to have created a hilarious effect. Transvestism was an expression of the protean freedom onstage, the joy of transforming oneself temporarily into what one could never be in real life. The actors took the restriction as a new challenge, and developed the role of “Onnagata” into an essential part of the theater. Because the natural beauty of women and boys was no longer accessible, they did their utmost to present the illusion of ideal femininity with a combination of verisimilitude and stylization.

While Noh and Kyogen represented the tragic and comic—or symbolic and realistic—aspects of life respectively, Kabuki incorporated both, and gradually developed into a “total theater” during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It also assimilated the music and the stories of its rival Bunraku (the Puppet Theater), which had come into being in 1600. As Tsubouchi Shoyo put it, Kabuki was a chimera with the potential to swallow all that came within its reach, absorbing and giving out the exuberant energy of the common people. It is important to remember that this uniquely Japanese theater could have received, at its birth, the “baptism” of Christianity and the Western idea of the theater.

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It would be more difficult to prove that there was an influence in the other direction, from the East to the West, in the late sixteenth and the early seventeenth centuries. This is an area of study that has been rarely explored, and no firm conclusion has been reached so far. It would be fascinating for some scholars, however, to step into the following fields of research, in the hope of finding some evidence for further points of contact between the two theaters.

1) The reports and letters sent by the Jesuit missionaries and other Europeans who lived in Japan between the 1540s and the 1630s. Some of the missionaries' reports have been published in Japanese, but many still remain in manuscript form and are kept in various libraries and archives in Europe. The key persons on the secular side include William Adams, John Saris and Richard Cocks, who lived in Japan and left their invaluable letters and diaries between 1600 and 1623.

2) The books and pamphlets on Japan and the Japanese delegates published in Europe in the 1580s and 1590s. According to Adriana Boscaro, more than ninety books on the Japanese delegates were published in the Catholic areas of Europe between 1585 and 1593. None was published in England, but John Eliot, the author of books on French language and culture, happened to be in Rome and recorded his encounter with the Japanese boys in his *Ortho-epia Gallica* (1593). His description reminds us of the fact that the procession of the delegates along the streets of Rome was a form of pageant, a stately street performance for the entertainment of the people. The boys seem to have performed very well indeed. It is highly probable that Shakespeare read this book by John Eliot, or heard about it directly from him.

3) The records of the activities of other Japanese people who lived in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The first Japanese to have visited Europe was a young man called Bernardo who went to Portugal and worked as a priest there in the 1550s. There were also two Japanese youths called Christopher and Cosmus who were taken to England by Thomas Cavendish in 1587. Richard Hakluyt regarded them as "a pledge of God's further favour," as they were talented boys who could tell him everything about Japan. In 1591 they persuaded Cavendish to embark on a voyage to Japan and China, in the hope of opening up trade with these countries. Unfortunately, the ships were wrecked in storms, and we know little about what happened to Christopher and Cosmus afterward.
4) The Jesuit plays on Japanese themes performed in Europe in the first half of the seventeenth century. Japanese themes were very popular among the Jesuit plays written and performed in Europe. One of the plays, entitled *Antipelargesis*, was based on an actual event that took place in Kyoto and was reported by a missionary in 1604. With its theme of the piety of children toward their parents, it became one of the most frequently performed Jesuit plays in Europe in the seventeenth century.13

5) Comparison of the structure of an earlier Noh theater with those of the Elizabethan theater and the Teatro Olympico. The ground plan of the Noh theater set in the riverbed at Kyoto in 1464 bears a remarkable resemblance to the ground plan of the Globe.14 There is also a feature shared by both the earlier Noh stage and the Teatro Olympico: the passageway leading from the stage to the back.15 These similarities can be purely accidental, but it might be worth investigating the possible connections.

After the final closure of Japan to the West in the 1630s, hardly any Westerners had the opportunity to experience the Japanese theater until the 1860s. In the twentieth century, however, the traditional Japanese theater had a deep impact on Western culture. Writers like Yone Noguchi, Ernest Fenollosa and Arthur Waley introduced Noh to Ezra Pound and W. B. Yeats, who wrote plays in the style of Noh Drama. The productions of Ninagawa Shakespeare, with its Kabuki influence, have been received enthusiastically by Western audiences; so have the performances of authentic Noh and Kabuki. Now some Western directors are adopting the concepts and techniques of Noh and Kabuki in producing Shakespeare.

This intercultural aspect is reflected in the study of the Japanese theater in recent years, which incorporates more and more international and interdisciplinary approaches.16 It is to be hoped that this tendency will continue into the future; the uniqueness of the Japanese theater used to be overstressed, often to the exclusion of the contributions of foreign scholars. We must always bear in mind that Kabuki was born after half a century of profound Western influences in Japan—with Uneme’s cross as its silent testimony.17

**Notes**

I am grateful to the Tokugawa Gallery for permission to reproduce the illustrations for this article.
1. Okuni is believed to have been a votaress of the Great Shrine of Izumo in the west of Japan. She is known to have come to Kyoto by 1600, leading a company of about ten actors and actresses. They performed mainly in the precincts of shrines and on the banks of the River Kamo.


7. See *Tensho Ken’o Shisetsu Ki* (The diaries of the delegates to Europe in the Tensho period) (Tokyo: Yushido, 1969), 188–9. This is a Japanese translation of *De Missione Legatorum Japonensium ad Romanam Curiam* (Macao, 1590), a book in dialogue form based on the diaries of the Japanese boys, compiled first by Alessandro Valignano and then translated into Latin by Eduardo De Sande.


9. Besides being the first modern novelist, Tsubouchi Shoyo played an important role in introducing Shakespeare to Japan.

10. The following book gives us a wealth of information about the history of Japan in the latter half of the sixteenth century, including the performances of Jesuit plays in the same period. *Cartas que os Padres e Irmãos da Companhia de Jesus escreuêndos dos Reynos de Japão & China* (Evora, 1598). This was translated
into Japanese by Murakami Naojiro and was published by Yushodo in six volumes (1966–69).


14. The first thing to strike us about this early type of Noh theater is its circular shape, closer to the Globe rather than the present-day Noh theater. The square stage is thrust into the auditorium, which surrounds it on all sides. There is a ga- bled roof above the stage supported by the pillars, but the main part of the audito- rium is open to the elements. The whole structure is made of wood. Although the earlier Noh theater is a single-story building, smaller in scale and less permanent than the Elizabethan theater, they are amazingly similar in their basic structure.

15. In the Teatro Olympico the passageways are there to give the illusion of depth through the use of enhanced perspectives. Something similar is observed in the Noh theater to the present day. There are three small pine trees placed along the passageway; one farther away from the stage is shorter than the ones closer to the stage, so that the audience can have a feeling of depth and extra space created by this subtle trompe l’oleil. It would be dangerous, however, to talk too soon about possible influences, because this trick of the pine trees probably originates in the Chinese theater, and Italy of course has an independent tradition of perspec- tive paintings.

16. In the past decade or two, numerous international and interdisciplinary conferences have been held on Noh and Kabuki. See, for example, Minoru Fujita and Leonardo Pronko, eds., *Shakespeare East and West* (Richmond: Japan Library, 1996), and *The International Symposium on the Conservation and Restoration of Cultural Property: No, Its Transmission and Regeneration* (Tokyo National Research Institute of Cultural Properties, 1991). The proceedings of the international symposium on Kabuki was published by the same institute in 1998. The Associa- tion for Noh and Kyogen Studies was established in 2002, with a view to opening up the field of study to scholars with more interdisciplinary interests. See “Hira- kareta Gakkai de Aru Tameni” (Suggestions for broadening the horizons) in *Noh to Kyogen* (Noh and Kyogen: Bulletin of the Association for Noh and Kyogen Studies), 1 (April 2003): 17–25. See also Samuel L. Leiter, ed., *A Kabuki Reader* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 2002) and Kawatake Toshio, *Kabuki* (2001). *Kokubungaku* (Japanese literature) (Tokyo: Gakutosha) 43.2 (February 2000) contains articles with interesting comparative perspectives, including the comparison of Kabuki with Shakespeare by Fujita Minoru (pp. 50–60) and Takayama Hiroshi (pp. 61–
67); the comparison of the classical Japanese theater with the traditional Chinese theater by Kikkawa Yoshikazu (pp. 82–89); thoughts on the Japanese and Western music in the Jesuit plays performed in Japan by Kojima Yukie (pp. 104–9).

17. My apologies for not having space enough for Kyogen (Comic Interlude) and Bunraku (Puppet Theater), which are just as important as Noh and Kabuki in the discussion of the classical Japanese theater. In recent years there have been energetic attempts to adapt Shakespearean plays into Kyogen and Bunraku, proving the affinities among these dramatic forms. See Takashi Sasayama, J. R. Mulryne and Margaret Shewring, eds., *Shakespeare and the Japanese Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Excellent introductions to the traditional Japanese theater published in English include Donald Keene, *No and Bunraku* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), and Karen Brazell, ed., *Traditional Japanese Theater: an Anthology of Plays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).