Traditional Japanese Theater: Nō

Mae J. Smethurst

There are many kinds of Japanese performance. After the Meiji restoration in the second half of the 19th century, Western-style Japanese plays, as well as Japanese translations of Shakespeare, Ibsen, and so forth, were popular. In the 20th century, modern Japanese theater ranged from the all-female productions of the Takarazuka to the plays of Kishida Kunio, Mishima Yukio and, Abe Kōbō, to mention a few. The avant-garde theaters boast such names as Suzuki Tadashi, Ninagawa Yukio, and Miyagi Satoshi. However, this essay will concentrate on traditional theatrical forms of Japan, ones that are still being performed today. They are kabuki and bunraku, the puppet theater, both dating originally from the 17th and 18th centuries, and nō, dating from the 15th and 16th centuries, the precursor of both.

These three theatrical forms did not grow out of a vacuum, to be sure. During the 15th and 16th centuries, there was jōruri, storytelling to the accompaniment of the shamisen , the three-stringed instrument from Okinawa. Before that, in the 11th and 13th centuries the biwahōshi, like bards, narrated their epic tales. The most famous example is the *Heike monogatar*i (*Tales of the Heike*), originally chanted to the accompaniment of the biwa, a Japanese lute. Even earlier, from the 9th century on, the popular performances (kugutsu mawashi) entertained audiences by dancing through the streets and manipulating their puppets. Simultaneously many other types of folk performances and rituals coexisted. The three primary, traditional Japanese performing arts which still exist today, however, form the basis of the discussion that follows, both in terms of what they are and how they reflect the practices of each other.

Of the three dramatic types, kabuki is the most accessible to Western audiences, and even to present-day Japanese. The situations depicted in the plays draw on human interactions. And that which is tragic about these plays arises out of problems that involve human relationships-those between masters and servants, lords and vassals, parents and children, siblings, married couples, lovers, friends, all caught in the double binds created by society's ethical assumptions of loyalty and filial piety. In Japan the ethical formula in the Tokugawa period was one of giri ninjō, one's obligations to others set against one's duty to oneself. Besides relationships between warring lords, or plays with a supernatural dimension, including ghosts, demons, and the like, during a performance of both the domestic pieces, called sewamono, and the period pieces, called jidaimono, kabuki actors, all male, enact functions drawn from the everyday lives of human beings. They make tea and serve it, sew a kimono seam, light and smoke a pipe, and so forth. For example, in the play Sukeroku, the hero Sukeroku taunts the

villain Ikyū by offering him a pipe held between his toes, as a way of insulting him. This type of situation and action is readily accessible to the members of the audience.

The situations depicted in bunraku are for the most part the same as those of kabuki. And the puppets standing almost as tall as human beings carry out many of the same acts with their moveable fingers and flexible body parts. However, some of the accessibility of kabuki is lost in the bunraku, even though the plays themselves are similar and often depend on the same plots as the kabuki, because dolls rather than live male actors play the character roles and one to three manipulators, each dressed in black and most of them also hooded, handle the dolls. This is a unique form of puppetry in the world.

It is nō which developed in the earlier medieval period, that is most suggestive and the least accessible to the uninitiated. Nō is in many respects more a performance of dance and music than drama. And the suggestive quality is apparent in spite of the fact that again live male actors, not dolls, appear on the stage. Their expressionless or masked faces, the haunting sound of their voices, and their very controlled and deliberate body movements, are almost more doll-like than the ningyō, the dolls/puppets themselves. Nō is not theater into which the real world intrudes upon the stage, as it can in kabuki and bunraku.

Even those kabuki plays that are dramatizations or dances drawn from nō, that is, are reflections of nō, like Dōjōji, bring with them a greater amount of entertainment and spectacle than their nō counterparts. In Dōjōji, there is a faster tempo, a more sensuous movement of the male actor playing the woman who has been spurned by a priest, a larger musical accompaniment, and a brighter and more elaborate costume than we see in the nō. The nō Dōjōji, by the way, is the only piece in all of the nō repertory that has a large prop attached to the stage, a bell; the others use temporary props. Dōjōji, is one of only a few dance pieces in nō that employs intricate footwork.

Kabuki is both accessible and entertaining, spectacular and engrossing. Yet, in spite of the very humanness of its situations and the garnishes of actions from real life, kabuki is hardly a realistic theater. Like many theatrical forms it recreates life by limitation and exaggeration, as Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653-1724), the so-called Shakespeare of Japan, so skillfully accomplished. This is done in kabuki, according to Kawatake Toshio, an important Japanese critic of Japanese theater, by the accentuation of particular aspects of the productions, especially those of sight and sound. The audio sector of the kabuki performance can be very elaborate-there are instrumentalists with drums, stringed shamisens, and fue (Japanese flute) hidden behind the bamboo curtains above the stage on the right and the left or in some plays, especially those influenced by nō, lined along the back of the stage. There is singing, chanting, metered language, and the

sound of the clapper at stage left, which announces the show and highlights the dramatic climaxes.

In its visual effects kabuki is spectacular. The sets are more a visual thriller than simple reproductions of real Japanese homes, palaces, islands, and so forth. The stage revolves to reveal great expanses of space for the audience. The make-up, kumadori, sometimes far-fetched, is always apparent; the costumes are often elaborate and gorgeous for the main actors, who on occasion engage in very quick costume changes, called hayagawari. Movements and gestures, often highly exaggerated, include the aragoto, macho style of male acting; the very deliberate exit, called roppō, on the hanamichi, the bridge leading from the stage to the back of the audience; the mie a facial expression assumed at moments of high emotion, in which the actor makes a grandiose stance, opens his eyes wide, crosses one of them and stops the show so that the audience can take a look at him. All of this is spectacle, entertainment, that causes the audience to forget its mundane, everyday life. Reflective of kabuki practices, bunraku also provides a visual spectacle. The dolls often move in front of and within interesting sets, wear elaborate costumes, and assume exaggerated stances and gestures that duplicate those in kabuki. The emotions are convincingly elicited when, for example, a woman hears that her husband plans to commit suicide with his lover and forsake her, or a man sacrifices the life of his son and tells his wife that he will do so. Some dolls with movable eyes can even assume a mie, which the audience, knowledgeable about the conventions of kabuki, can easily appreciate as a reflection of that theater.

The reflection works both ways. In kabuki, at the attack of an opposing army, a hero is able to fight off large numbers of men against great odds and lop off the heads of the opponents with a single swoop of his sword, not of course literally, but by having the actors bend over and go slithering off stage. There is no pretense of making the audience think that the fight is authentic. In bunraku the dolls' heads are hinged so that the manipulators can release them at the neck and they can fall back with the swing of a sword to reveal the red paint on the severed neck in imitation of blood. On more than one occasion kabuki reflects this bunraku practice by using dolls in armed conflict to represent the enemy. The dolls are carried by kōken, assistants, who, because they are dressed in black in the manner of the bunraku manipulators, spectators are supposed to disregard. In this case the kabuki is reflecting the practice of bunraku rather than the other way around. One can see kōken from time to time helping in the actors' quick costume exchanges in kabuki. When the kabuki performance reflects the practices of nō, for example, such as in a dance performance, the kōken wear hakama, as the kōken do on the nō stage.

In these performances, the instruments of nō are featured, however, with a greater number of drums-the ōtsuzumi, kotsuzumi and taiko, and flutes, called fue. These three theatrical forms reflect each others' practices. However, one could almost say that to the extent kabuki and bunraku exaggerate and accentuate reality for the visual and aural pleasure they can provide an audience, nō in many ways, and to the same extent, removes itself from reality for its unique type of visual and aural pleasure. The nō set is always the same and does not change as it does in kabuki and bunraku. In nō the back wall shows a pine tree and on the side there are painted bamboo trees. This is always the case, whether the setting is supposed to be a temple or a beach. The props are minimal. The spider web in Tsuchigumo and the bell in Dōjōji are the most elaborate. The costumes are usually elegant rather than brilliant and gorgeous. There are exceptions, such as the dancer in Dōjōji, dressed in a robe with an abstract snake design, or the lions in Shakkyō.

The bridge, hashigakari, in nō is close to the audience, but does not pass through the auditorium, as the hanamichi does in kabuki. It passes from backstage right at an angle to the raised nō stage. The delivery of the main actors of nō is more resonant than intelligible, except to those who know the text well. In kabuki the language and voices are intelligible. There are only three or four musicians in nō, larger ensembles in kabuki. In some respects the nō today has become both a spiritual and aesthetic experience; kabuki and bunraku are entertainment. The latter two have always appealed more to the merchant and bourgeois class; the nō became the aristocratic art of the shogun and his court, which is part of the reason why kabuki and bunraku emerged. The difference is not merely one of status within society, but the level of expertise in the metaphysics of classical Japanese poetry required by audiences.

And yet these are all Japanese forms of theater sharing culturally specific aspects, such as, the language, the basic approach to costume, the facial features, legends and myth, religious assumptions, and so forth. In addition, there is the way in which these serious theaters point to themselves metatheatrically.

For example, in the Shunkan scene of a kabuki play (derived from a celebrated incident in *The Tale of the Heike* concerning a Buddhist priest who plotted against the ruler) entitled Heike nyogo no shima, when the two men, Naritsune and Yasuyori, fellow exiles of Shunkan, enter the stage, set at the deserted island to which the three men have been sent as a punishment, the gidayū, the chanter, comments on the goodness of Shunkan's character with the following words:

"Although his means are scanty

His welcome (to his friends) is sincere

Showing how truly close

Their friendship is."

Later when one of the two companions, Naritsune, dances in order to describe the beauty of a lovely seaweed diver with whom he is fall in love on the island, the gidayū describes her beauty for him:

"When the tide is right

She reveals her lovely body

And plunges into the bottomless depths

To gather many kinds of seaweed

Too busy even to keep her hair back with

A comb made of boxwood."

A mock marriage then takes place between the diver, named Chidori, and Naritsune, during which the chanter describes the ceremony and party.

To this extent the gidayū/chanter functions as a chorus might from time to time in opera or a musical. However, we find that the gidayū, reflecting the norm in bunraku, where the gidayū always speaks for the dolls, will also on occasion speak for the kabuki actors. For example, again in the play, Shunkan, when Senō, one of the envoys from the capital city comes to announce that Naritsune and Yasuyori have been pardoned because of an amnesty declared on the occasion of the birth of an imperial son, Shunkan's reaction is voiced by the gidayū. At this painful moment when he hears only their names among the pardoned and not his own, the gidayū, not the actor playing the part of Shunkan, says for him,

"Only two of us have been pardoned

And I along have slipped

Through the net of Buddha's grace

Even Buddha's great love and mercy is discriminatory."

The "I alone" is Shunkan; the voice that of the gidayū. There is nothing like this metatheatrical speech to punctuate emotionally intense moments in traditional Western theater. What happens in this case is that, as with other aspects of performance, like the

use of dolls as part of an army and stagehands, kabuki is reflecting the practice of the puppet theater, under the influence in part of the important role Chikamatsu Monzaemon played in the history of these dramatic forms. He was the author of the texts for both kinds of theater. Originally he had been a kabuki actor and playwright; however, he decided to write for bunraku, a theater in which the "actors" were dolls and did not ask for changes in the scripts. Bunraku then enjoyed a period of popularity in the late 17th and 18th centuries. The result was that in order to compete, the plays that Chikamatsu and others wrote for bunraku, among them Shunkan, were adapted for the kabuki stage to bring back its audiences.

In the West, if we had a Punch and Judy show written for marionettes and made into a play for human actors, the effect would be similar; however, traditionally we have tended to take fairy tales or stories and apply them to puppet shows or to live theater. We have not taken plays used in puppet shows and passed these on to the theater, as the Japanese did in the Genroku period of the 17th and 18th centuries. This interim phase seems to have influenced kabuki, thanks to the great master Chikamatsu, the jōruri from Okinawa, and the earlier ninth-century puppet performers. The dolls were manipulated to function like the real actors, the real actors like the dolls. Each reflected the other.

It is a telling cultural indicator that in the bunraku, the most highly charged moments of grief, pity, and so forth feature the gidayū emoting to the point that he is perspiring as he immerses himself fully into the role and brings life to dolls. On the other hand, in the kabuki at the most highly charged moments of tragedy the play reverts to the practice of the bunraku and the actor loses his voice, as it were, and assumes a stance like a doll's. That is not to say the moment is any less powerful in kabuki than in bunraku; it is rather to say that the expression of emotion is in some ways less direct in the theater performed by live actors than in the puppet theater, but the audience knows the convention and waits for it. When we turn to nō, another, but not unrelated, phenomenon occurs. Nō is less realistic than kabuki. The actors are, as in kabuki, all male, but there are usually fewer of them in each play. The chorus sitting always at stage left is a group, rather than an individual, that assumes a collective entity, which like the actors behind their masks or expressionless faces creates an anonymity or better, a third-person identity for them. These chorus members are not granted the individual voices of the gidayū. They are one voice together. And yet, in other respects they function like the gidayū. Sometimes, although their mode of delivery is singing rather than speaking, the chorus will provide some background to the play, will comment on the characters or the significance of the play, or will describe the stage action. These all are forms of narration and storytelling like those of the gidayū. However, whereas the chorus reflects the practices of jōruri and puppet theater's storytelling, nō follows the conventions of the bards.

In the nō, Shunkan, for example, the plot is much closer to the story line of the *Heike monogatari*, on of the epic-like tales narrated by the biwahōshi (bard) than that of the kabuki scene of the same name. No marriage takes place in the nō or in the Heike, as it does in the kabuki. The plot of the kabuki becomes complex when Shunkan helps save the bride, who is the seaweed diver, kills one of the envoys, and thus loses his opportunity to be pardoned and return to the main island with the other two men. In the Heike monogatari the message is loud and clear: we are told that Shunkan squandered his life and threatened authority so he must remain in exile. There are no killings, no sacrifices made. In the kabuki the human relationships among friends, the dramatic scenes of love and violence, are added to make the production more accessible to its audience. In the nō, when the plot follows the Heike closely, the chorus assumes so much of the narrative that we see how this nō, like other nō, reflects the performance of a storyteller, and can barely be called a dramatization of a complicated plot.

In the bunraku, the gidayū's performance shows a strong influence from both the storytelling/narrative tradition and from the chorus of the nō. For example, the chorus comments on the scene in Shunkan, as a narrator might:

"This isle is called the Isle of Devils,

So in its recesses fiends must lurk,

A hell upon this earth."

The chorus also speaks for the characters, as the gidayū does for the kabuki actors, and specifically in the person of the character Shunkan in the continuation of the same section of the nō, called the kuse,

"Listen! The birds and beasts are crying,

Offering me their sympathy."

("Me" is ware in Japanese.)

And finally the chorus also describes the action, as the gidayū does in both bunraku and kabuki, and which sounds quite natural in the narrative of the Heike. At the moment when Shunkan unrolls the scroll that he takes from the envoy of the capital in an effort to see for himself whether his name is listed, the chorus sings:

"He unrolls the scroll once more that

He read a little while before

Searching it again and yet again. He looks and looks,

But all to no avail;

.....

No word like 'Shunkan'"

The chorus speaks Shunkan's words:

"Is this a dream?

Is this a dream?

Wake up! Wake up!"

But then the chorus shifts back suddenly and without warning comments on the scene as if it were an observer:

"O what a pitiful sight!"

One can see how the kabuki and bunraku practices of using the gidayū might be a reflection of nō and the biwahōshi performances.

What happens in nō is that the dramatic illusion is broken with the actor, not by his talking about his own career or turning to speak to the audience about a contemporary matter, as an actor does in kabuki. Rather at some of the most intense moments of the performance, the actor will present his own stage directions and in some cases quote himself, the way the chorus does in the example above from Shunkan. In the nō, when it is clear that Shunkan may not board the ship back to the capital along with the other two exiles and the envoy, and the envoy remarks that the sailors are now lifting their oars to strike Shunkan so that he does not embark, the actor playing the role of Shunkan says:

"Because his life, though wretched, is dear to him

He turns and grasps the mooring rope

In an attempt to hold the departing ship."

At this moment and simultaneously with the speech the stage directions prescribe that the main actor, standing at the pillar stage back right, take hold of the rope attached to the prop representing a ship just as his speech prescribes.

The messenger then says:

"The sailors cut the rope and push the ship out to sea."

With this speech the stage directions prescribe that the actor representing a sailor make the gesture of cutting the rope loose from the boat.

The Shunkan continues, now sitting down and joining his hands together, to say:

"Amid the surf,

Deprived of all,

He clasps his hands and he cries,

'Ahoy, ahoy to the ship!'"

When the messenger acknowledges the call "ahoy" and says that even if Shunkan calls "ahoy" he cannot board the ship, Shunkan, collapsing, expresses his last words:

"Shunkan has no strength left."

The actor steps out of character at this most intense moment and describes, as if he were a narrator or a chorus or the written stage directions, the actions and the words of that character in the third person. Shunkan is but one of many Nō in which this phenomenon occurs.

Japanese bunraku, kabuki, and nō print stage directions in the texts. However, bunraku and kabuki playwrights often allow the gidayū, and nō playwrights the chorus, to comment on or describe the actions taking place on stage. The effect is quite arresting to those uninitiated in traditional Japanese theater when the gidayū or a nō chorus, often almost without warning, shift to their own voice and describe the doll/actor's movements and gestures on stage. The effect is the most striking when in realistic nō plays, such as Shunkan, in plays of which they are a reflex (ion), the actor himself suddenly and without comment shifts from a first-person expression of his feelings, views, etc., to a third-person description of the action he himself is in the midst of carrying out on stage or to a quote of what his character is saying, but in the third person, often at the most emotionally charged moments in the play.

This phenomenon is in some respect the converse of what happens in kabuki at similarly tense moments, yet in some respects similar, that is, the gidayū takes over for the actor, in nō the actor takes over for the character as if were the biwahōshi bard. Actually, as the nō is reflective of the biwahōshi, the kabuki is reflective of the bunraku, which is reflective of the other narrative tradition, the jōruri, also a tradition of theatrical storytelling. All of these types of performance draw on the audiences' familiarity with the tradition by being reflective of it, and so engage performers with the audience as if to look at the play from the audience's point of view. The performances objectify, perhaps distance, certain emotional moments so as to highlight them and make them all the more emotionally charged. In a Western tradition, such as Greek tragedy, the case is different-when a moment of crisis occurs, in Sophocles' Oedipus the King, for example, the character speaks for himself, qua character, and the "me," the "my," and the "I," the ego rings loud and clear. Japanese performance moves these emotions into another realm, perhaps beyond personality.

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Suggested Reading

Those who would like to read the full texts of the kabuki and Nō versions of Shunkan can find them in the following:

Kabuki

Samuel Leiter, *The Art of Kabuki: Famous Plays in Performance* New York: Dover, 2000.

Nō

Brazell, Karen, ed. *Traditional Japanese Theatre: An Anthology of Plays* New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.

General

Kawataki Toshio, *Japan on Stage: Japanese Concepts of Beauty as Shown in the Traditional Theatre.* Tokyo: 3A Corporation, 1990. Observations on traditional Japanese theater by a renowned Japanese scholar.

Ortolani, Benito, *The Japanese Theatre: From Shamanistic Ritual to Contemporary Pluralism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995. An excellent one-volume history of the Japanese theater, with an excellent bibliography of books and articles in all European languages.

Playtexts

Bunraku and kabuki

Keene, Donald. *Four Major Plays of Chikamatsu*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997

Tyler, Royall. *Japanese Nō Dramas.* London and New York: Penguin Books, 1992.