KABUKI, JAPANESE TRADITIONS ECHOING THROUGH THE AGES

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Abstract: Kabuki, a suitable outlet for actors' dancing and singing skills, used to also include impromptu performances. Though archaic, kabuki embodies Japan's interest in preserving this art form in modern times as well as in keeping traditions alive, particularly for their historical and cultural relevance.

Keywords: 'hanamichi', 'onnagata', stylised performance, people's theatre

1. Introduction

As any art form, theatre is also meant to equally entertain and raise audience's awareness regarding the dynamics of society. Originally emerged as pure escapism, theatre was to gradually acquire distinct connotations, intended to either mirror how a particular society was being shaped, or to invite theatregoers to reflect upon matters deeply entrenched in their existence.

Needless to place emphasis on the fact that, throughout centuries, theatre has gathered its momentum by scrutinising people's hopes, expectations, disappointment, frustrations, anxieties, sorrows, despair etc. Ill-fated love, dramatically interwoven with long concocted plans for the vengeance that is eventually wreaked upon villains, makes manifest one of theatre leitmotifs.

Peppered with witticism, plays can also read as valuable pieces of literature. However, this question still reverberates in theatre reviews: wishing for an actor-centred theatre, or more like for a play-centred one?

Untangling the complexities of *playwright-actor-audience triangle* is yet to be over. Quintessentially, should theatre indulge its audience, or should the audience appreciate any repertory? Along the same lines, should theatre be all about an outburst of creative activity, prompting actors and audience alike to engage in unrestrained and emotional displays of life?

If we are to dwell a little bit longer on the theatrical architecture, what comes across as sacrosanct? Is it the playwright's masterpiece? Is it the actors' play? Or is it that audience's rapturous acclaim? Furthermore, what precisely bridges the chasm between all these participants' visions?

Beyond a shadow of a doubt, the fact of giving a masterly performance as one character or another amounts to the ultimate criterion of assessing an actor's success. Is such an endeavour revolving around a mere display of the zeitgeist, or is it truly questioning it? To tackle such a conundrum, we need to approach the matter at hand from more than one angle.

Theatre actors are usually acknowledged to be closely monitored while attempting to replicate reality snapshots. Capturing more than one fleeting moment of verisimilitude, staying in characters as long as they have to, all this represents undeniable steps of a stairway to irrefutable success.

Moreover, throughout history, theatre has been equally censored and promoted. How strongly anchored to the past or the immediacy should live theatre be? Should it faithfully

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portray life? Should it accentuate its dichotomies, imbibe in life vivid strokes, while also dissipating an ounce of people's sense of estrangement, anguish, hopelessness, solitude and fear?

Whose is the most authoritative voice ruling for or against a play? Is it theatre critics' or the audience's? Should theatre rely more on our senses than on our manner of thinking? By the same token, should theatre encompass human beings' anguishes and relate to their queries rather than just staging startling fantasies? Fantasizing about the perfect world, or aiming to make the world fit people's legitimate expectations? Theatregoers readily discover that plays either infuse the audience with hope and exuberance, or simply foster the genuine spirit, characteristic of every epoch.

We should also ask ourselves how much psychology is encapsulated by actors' play. With this in mind, should theatre transcend life framework, or should it reinforce its conventions altogether?

2. Kabuki in the Spotlight

Kabuki theatre fosters an interest in Japanese traditions. Up to 1868, the Japanese cleaved to their old traditions. Notwithstanding their acknowledged value, *kabuki* plays' intricate, imaginative tone doesn't always lend itself to westerners' comprehension. In actuality, *kabuki* plays do not fit the Aristotelian theatre pattern.

One peculiar feature of *kabuki* theatre refers to actors' fortuitous movements and to their impromptu performance. For some unfathomable reason, early *kabuki* plays were being changed with every new performance. In a nutshell, actors genuinely used to enter into dialogue with the audience, being customary for them to integrate such discourse sequences within their regular acting.

Beleaguered characters, embodied by actors disguised thanks to heavy make-up or gaudy masks are all reminiscent of *kabuki*. Moreover, we can state that music and dance pour into *kabuki* theatre, thus contributing to a final stylised performance.

2.1. Kabuki Roots

Kabuki stands for traditional Japanese popular drama with singing and dancing, performed in a highly stylised manner. A rich blend of music, dance, mime, and spectacular staging and costuming, it has been a major theatrical form in Japan for almost four centuries. The term 'kabuki' originally suggested the unorthodox and shocking character of this art form. In modern Japanese, the word is written with three characters: *ka*, signifying 'song'; *bu*, 'dance', and *ki*, 'skill'.

Kabuki's highly lyrical plays are regarded, with notable exceptions, less as literature than as vehicles for actors to demonstrate their enormous range of skills in visual and vocal performance. These actors have carried the traditions of *kabuki* from one generation to the next with only slight alterations.

Many of them trace their ancestry and performing styles to the earliest *kabuki* actors and add a 'generation number' after their names to indicate their place in the long line of actors.

Kabuki became the theatre of the townspeople and farmers alike. Somewhat coarse and unrestrained, *kabuki*'s beauty is gaudy and extravagant.

2.2. Historical Insights into Kabuki Theatre

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The *kabuki* form dates from the early 17th century, when a female dancer, named Okuni (who had been an attendant at the Grand Shrine of Izumo), achieved popularity with parodies of Buddhist prayers.

She assembled around her a troupe of wandering female performers who danced and acted. Okuni's *kabuki* was the first dramatic entertainment of any importance that was designed for the tastes of the common people in Japan.

The sensuous character of the dances proved to be to disruptive for the government, which in 1629 banned women from performing.

Young boys dressed as women and performed the programmes, but this type of *kabuki* was suppressed in 1652, once again because of concern for morals.

Finally, older men took over the roles, and it is this form of all-male entertainment that has endured to the present day. *Kabuki* plays grew in sophistication, and the acting became more subtle.

Eventually, by the early 18th century, *kabuki* had become an established art form that was capable of the serious, dramatic presentation of genuinely moving situations.

As merchants and other commoners in Japan began to rise on the social and economic scale, *kabuki*, as the people's theatre, provided a vivid commentary on contemporary society.

Several historical events lie at the heart of *kabuki* plays: *Chūshingura* (1748), for instance, was an essentially faithful dramatization of the famous incident of 1701-03 in which a band of 47 *rōnin* (masterless samurai), after having waited patiently for almost two years, wreaked their revenge upon the man who had forced the suicide of their lord.

Similarly, nearly all the 'lovers' double suicide' (*shinjū)* plays by playwright Chikamatsu Monzaemon were based on genuine suicide pacts, made between ill-fated lovers.

The strongest ties of *kabuki* are to *the Noh* and to *jōruri*, the puppet theatre that developed during the 17th century.

Kabuki derived much of its material from *the Noh*, and, when *kabuki* was banned in 1652, it re-established itself by adapting and parodying *kyōgen* (sketches that provide comic interludes during *Noh* performances).

During this period, a special group of actors, called *onnagata*, emerged to play the female roles. These actors often became the most popular of their day.

3. Kabuki Audience

Traditionally, a constant interplay between the actors and the spectators took place in the *kabuki* theatre. The actors frequently interrupted the play to address the crowd, and the latter responded with appropriate praise or clapped their hands according to a prescribed formula. They could also call out the name of their favourite actors in the course of the performance.

Because *kabuki* programmes ran from morning to evening and many spectators often attended for only a single play or scene, there was a constant coming and going in the theatre.

At mealtimes, food was served to the viewers. The programmes incorporated themes and customs that reflected the four seasons, or inserted material derived from contemporary events.

Unlike most western theatres, in which since the late 17th century, *a proscenium arch* has separated actors and audience, the *kabuki* performers constantly intruded on the audience.

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When two *hanamichi*, elevated passageways from the main stage to the back of the auditorium, were used, the audience was fenced in by three stages[1].

4. Kabuki Purpose and Conventions

Although the basic purposes of *kabuki* are to entertain and to allow the actors to demonstrate their skills, there is a didactic element, an ideal represented by the notion of *kanzen-chōaku* ('reward the virtuous and punish the wicked').

Thus, the plays often present conflicts involving such religious ideas as the transitory nature of the world (from Buddhism), and the importance of duty (from Confucianism), as well as more general moral sentiments.

Tragedy occurs when morality conflicts with human passions. Structurally, the plays are typically composed of two or more themes in a complex *suji* (plot), but they lack the strong unifying elements for which western drama strives.

Kabuki plays include a variety of intermingled episodes, which develop toward a final dramatic climax.

Despite the ease with which it can assimilate new forms, *kabuki* is a much formalized theatre. It retains numerous conventions adapted from earlier forms of theatre that were performed in shrines and temples.

Kabuki dance is probably the best-known feature of *kabuki*. Rarely is an opportunity missed to insert dancing, whether the restrained, flowing movement of the *onnagata* or the exaggerated postures of the male characters. By the same token, the acting in *kabuki* can be so stylised that it becomes virtually indistinguishable from dancing.

The theatre stresses the importance of the play itself, trying to maintain the historical tradition and to preserve *kabuki* as a classical form[2].

5. The Driving Forces Underpinning Kabuki

When the Emperor Meiji began his reign and Japan opened its doors to the western nations, the contemporary Japanese theatre was best represented by the *kabuki*, one of the great forms of stage art which, although perhaps in a period of decline of the quality of plays then being written, was still a powerful force in popular culture and the dominant form of theatrical entertainment.

[1] https://www.britannica.com/art/hanamichi, "*Hanamichi (Japanese, 'flower passage'), in kabuki theatre refers to the runway that passes from the rear of the theatre to stage, right at the level of the spectators' heads. Some plays also make use of a second, narrower 'hanamichi*', *constructed on the opposite side of the theatre. The name 'hanamichi' suggests that it was once used to present flowers and gifts to the actors*. *An integral part of the kabuki drama since the 18th century, it is used for climactic scenes- spectacular entries, exits, processions, and battles. Geographically, it may represent a forest, a mountainous road, an inlet of water, a street or ceremonial path to the inner courtyards of palaces. Like the main stage, it is often equipped with a trapdoor permitting the sudden appearance of ghosts or supernatural beings from below. The door is called 'suppon', (Japanese, 'snapping turtle') because the actor's head emerges like that of a turtle from its shell."*

[2] https://www.britannica.com/art/Kabuki, *'At present, regular performances are held at the National Theatre in Tokyo. The city was also home to the Kabuki Theatre (Kabuki-za), which closed in 2010. Other theatres have occasional performances. Troupes of Kabuki actors also perform outside Tokyo. At the National Theatre, the length of an average programme is about four hours.'*

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The plays in the *kabuki* theatre were stylised to a far greater extent than in the traditional European theatre. It is true, of course, that the *jidaimono* (historical plays) were often based on famous historical incidents, and that the *sewamono* (domestic dramas) were dramatizations of recent incidents, but the manner in which the materials were ordered within the plays shows that the major effect aimed at was a *theatricality* of emotion and action rather than any psychological analysis[3]. According to Thomas Rimer (1974:8), 'Of course, if we say that the *kabuki* is an actor's theatre, then we must recognize that Shakespeare's theatre might be described in the same terms. But unlike Shakespeare's, the *kabuki* plays were constructed so as to provide a series of emotional and scenic climaxes, designed as ends in themselves that do not necessarily represent the inevitable results of the interactions of character and plot. Such a theatre is artistically effective on its own terms, but the principles of dramaturgy involved are far removed from those that stimulated the movement for a modern theatre in Europe. Indeed, the better works of even the early nineteenth-century European stage, albeit within a framework of convention, or even of cliché, do pay a certain amount of attention to psychological logic.'

6. Kabuki Derivatives

It has been a characteristic of *kabuki* since its inception in the seventeenth century that the actor is at the centre of things and the playwright is there to write specifically for him.

Of the three forms of traditional theatre in Japan, *kabuki* was by far the most active when Japan passed into the modern age in 1868. *Noh*, formerly patronised by the ruling Tokugawa house, which had now fallen, almost went out of existence and the puppet theatre was confined to Osaka. *Kabuki*, by contrast, was being performed at a large number of theatres both in Tokyo and in the cultural centres to the west.

In the 1880s and 1890s, *kabuki* enjoyed prosperity within the rapidly changing society that its own unchanging structure might not seem to have warranted. It attracted, as it never had before, the attention of men of power and of scholarship. During this period, *kabuki* came close to being officially recognised as the national drama of the new Japan. Despite a number of vicissitudes, it has remained the representative drama of Japan, and this again received semi-official recognition when the main auditorium of the National Theatre (opened in 1966) was designed clearly with *kabuki* in mind.

As Brian Powell maintains it, '*Kabuki* is often said to be theatre of the eye as opposed to theatre of the ear. The eye is certainly delighted, and usually dazzled, by the splendour of the costumes and scenery, and by the expansiveness of the movements and dancing. But the ear is also delighted. Not perhaps by a subtle and complex dialogue (which is what the apposition of eye and ear usually implies), but by a combination of partly chanted speeches, music, natural sounds (birds, etc.) and stage clappers, all helping to build up the total theatrical effect. […] *kabuki* is actor-centred theatre, and its actors have been exclusively male since the mid-seventeenth century. *Kabuki* actors are highly professional in both the best and worst senses of the word. Their bodies, as the instruments of their art, are rigorously trained over a period of many years. Their acting is highly stylised, but also highly dramatic even to a westerner.' (Powell, 1990:4)

[3]*Ibid., 'Kabuki subject matter creates distinctions between the historical play (jidaimono) and the domestic play (sewamono). A Kabuki programme generally presents them in that order, separated by one or two dance plays featuring ghosts, courtesans, and other exotic creatures. It ends with a lively dance finale (ōgiri shosagoto) with a large cast.'*

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Kabuki has always been popular theatre and dependent for its continued existence on the patronage of ordinary people. But its patrons have known exactly what they wanted and have demanded perfection in its execution. *Kabuki* actors are so skilled in the externals of their art, which we sometimes tend to slight, that it is easy to forget the emphasis on psychological identification which they often bring to their roles.

In a similar vein, Brian Powell also notices that "*Kabuki* has produced a number of derivatives. The world of *kabuki* is essentially closed, organised in families, which have a mutual interest in keeping outsiders outside, however talented they may be. This exclusiveness was breached when *kabuki* began to attract official notice in the 1880s, but in the main it has remained unimpaired to this day. However, if *kabuki* could not be broken into, it could be copied and competed with, and several individuals seized this opportunity in the last decade of the nineteenth century. What emerged was a genre referred to as *shinpa* (or *shimpa* as it appears in most western-language histories of modern Japanese theatre), which literally means 'new school' as opposed to the 'old school' of traditional *kabuki*." (*id.*, 1990:5)

Shimpa became by the early 1900s several companies of actors of both sexes and of varying degrees of ability and training. Some were ranked amateurs, some were highly trained renegades from *kabuki*. *Shimpa* was therefore something of a hybrid. Its acting style owed something (more or less, depending on the actor) to *kabuki*; the *kabukionnagata* (male actor of female roles) was retained, but he might find himself on the stage with an actress. The repertory was rather more up to date than that of *kabuki* and contemporary social problems were often presented. The action, however, was, on the whole, similarly slow, and no opportunity was lost to wring as much emotional response from the audience as possible.

On the emotional level, *shimpa* is melodrama in its most intense form, and the best *shimpa* has always had a powerful effect on its audiences.

A second derivative of *kabuki* was *shinkokugeki* ('new national drama'-a name with no official significance). This was a product that did not use *onnagata*. There were echoes of *kabuki* in its acting style, but, on the whole, it was one stage further removed than *shimpa*. Its distinguishing characteristic was the repertory. *Shinkokugeki* specialised in plays with an Edo-period (1600-1868, also referred to as the Tokugawa period), setting in which sword-fighting played a prominent part. This was masculine drama with some emphasis on the martial virtues, and it retained its popularity well into the 1970s.

7. Conclusion

For over two centuries, *kabuki* performances gained a foothold in the Japanese theatre. By the same token, *kabuki* stylised plays, a powerful mixture of sound and colour, represented a fairly compelling argument in order for common people to crowd around. Strenuous efforts were made throughout the history to perpetuate the skills of *kabuki* troupes. Undoubtedly, *kabuki* actors' contribution to Japanese cultural heritage has earned them an everlasting place in history.

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