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KABUKI
THE CLASSICAL JAPANESE THEATRE

Japanese classical theatre contains few forms of performances – Noh, Kyogen - lyrical drama, Bunraku - puppet theater and Kabuki – which is the popular theatrical form.

There are two ways to interpret sources of the word "Kabuki". First, the simpler one says, that this name comes from three words: *ka* – which means singing, *bu* = dancing, *ki* = acting. It's supposed to be truth, because Kabuki as a performance contains all of this elements. But this word is also believed to derive from the verb *kabuku*, meaning *to lean* or *to be out of the ordinary*. So Kabuki can be in the other way interpreted to mean *avant-garde* or *bizarre* theatre. The justification to this second theory we can find in the book of Masakatsa Gunji -"Kabuki"[1]. Due to the author's words, there exist one unique aesthetic concept of Kabuki theatre, which is giving it consistency – the concept of yatsusi. The autor gives a definition: "Yatsushi is basically an attempt to modernize everything, to transfer it into terms of contemporary society, to parody the old by recreating it in terms of the present and familiar". To follow this rule, we can say that Kabuki is no more that the yatsusi of Noh and Kyogen (in the same way *haiku* – the short lyric forms - are yatsusi of the classical waka verse poem.)

History

The oldest Japanese form of classical theatre is Noh. First printed texts date from about 1600 year, but the language in which they were written came from XIV century and it's already mature, that is why there are supposed to be much older.

Kabuki and Burnaku are younger art-forms, established by the time the centre of power had shifted to the east with the setting up of the Togunawa Shogunate (laste until the restoration in 1868) at Edo (modern Tokyo), at the beginning of XVII century. They reached their highest point of development in the 2 half of the century, and remained more or less static for some time. Since 1945 the many small Kabuki troupes which used to tour the countryside have been disbanded and performances have been given only in larger city.

Kabuki performers during the earliest years of the genre were primarily women. This theatrical form 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. 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 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*.

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. In the century following the legal mandating of male performers

[1] Masakatsu Gunji, *Kabuki,* printed in Japan, p.16

onnogata roles became increasingly sophisticated. 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.

Kabuki is not only the theatre

Kabuki, like all of Japanese classical forms of art is really hight-developped and organized till the last detail. However, even though it is like one unseparable organism, every of various element of Kabuki play, such as music, decoration, costiums, maight be a total art form, due to the fact that like Kabuki itself, they reached high point of profesionalism. All of them follow their own, unique rules.

"Models of theatrical expression are much more varied and diverse in Kabuki than in Noh and Kyogen. " – writes Kawatake Toshio[2] and he gives the reason for this – because of the long – four-hundred year history. Since the time when Izumo no Okuni created *kabuki odori* in 1603, Kabuki has continued to grow and evolve freely, even willfully, as the entertiment of ordinary people.

The same opinion shares Masakatsu Gunji, which writes about Kabuki theatre that its beauty "is too complex and comprises too many different elements to be easly summerised".[3]

Kabuki as a family – the Kabuki actors

While acting techniques must depend on individual actors to give them life, Kabuki is characterized by certain styles or pattern of acting, known in Japanese as "kata". The mastery of these required a great deal of training and thay are handed down in families of actors from generation to generation.

A family tradition of acting may depend on blood relationship, or more often, on artistic kinship. It's the ability, which is the criterion by which a good artist chooses his successor. Generally, this type of system is characteristic of all classical performing arts of Japan. However, with Kabuki (as well as with Burnaku) the technical aspect, the fact that one man posses his experience on a single successor is more important that close spiritual contact. The ceremony at which an actor takes over the name of an illustrious elder is primary a sign that he is caring on the acting traditions of the family, that is important rather than individual. For this some reason, there has always been a strong code of ethics among actors, that governs they behavior as artist and their obligations to the family or school to which they belong. To succeed on actor means to take over his art in the name of his family, the sign of the tradition being the kata that the younger actors inherit from him.

Each acting 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 (born in 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 (born in 1917).

Elements of Kabuki – stage, costumes, music

Due to all theatrologycal theories, there are three factors which are indispensable for theatre – plays, actors and audience. But Kawatake Toshio adds the fourth element – the stage. There exist in Japan few kinds of stage – bugakuden or gagakuden – special for Bugaku dance or Gagaku music, the Noh stage and the respective stages for Kabuki and the puppet theatre - Burnaku. This type of stage sprang up among the ordinary people of Togunawa

[2] Kawatake Toshio, Kabuki, 2001, Tokyo, p.34

[3] Masakatsu Gunji, *Kabuki,* printed in Japan, p.15

shogunate and developed, like all things of classical Japan, into mature and very conventional form.

One of the most recognisable elements of Kabuki stage is “hana-michi” (= “flower way”), which is running on the left-hand side from the back of the hall to the stage at the level of spectators’ heads. It’s the entrance and exit for characters, but because of actors sophisticated unexpectable it also can seem to be something like stage “trick”. A number of stage tricks, including rapid appearances and disappearances of actors, have evolved using these innovations. The term “keren”, often translated *playing to the gallery*, is sometimes used as a catch-all term for these tricks.

One other of popular keren is the Chūnori (riding in mid-air) - a technique, which appeared toward the middle of the nineteenth century, by which an actor’s costume is attached to wires and he is made to “fly” over the stage and/or certain parts of the auditorium. This is similar to “wire fu” of modern cinema. As these “tricks” (keren) devices have fallen out of favor many stages are no longer equipped to handle them.

But the Kabuki stage is not only a place for making kerens, but it’s a space which is following some rules, making it the unique area, easy-to-read for people who know the Japanese tradition. What’s interesting, the curtain not rise but roles back one side. All the scenery is elaborate and complete to the last detail, but also sipmlified almost to astetism.

There are few types of Kabuki stage. One of them is “Mawari-butai**”** (“revolving stage”) developed in the Kyōhō era (1716-1735). Originally accomplished by the on-stage pushing of a round, wheeled platform this technique evolved into a circle being cut into the stage floor with wheels beneath it facilitating movement. When the stage lights are lowered during this transition it is known as *kuraten* (“darkened revolve”). More commonly the lights are left on for *akaten* (“lighted revolve”), sometimes with the transitioning scenes being performed simultaneously for dramatic effect.

The other type of Kabuki stage might be the “Seri**”** refers to the stage traps that have been commonly employed in Kabuki since the middle of the eighteenth century. These traps raise and lower actors or sets to the stage. *Seridashi* or *seriage* refers to the traps moving upward and *serisage* or *serioroshi* when they are being lowered. This technique is often used for dramatic effect of having an entire scene rise up to appear onstage.

But maybe the most interesting thing is that in Japanese theatre acting and play production, including music, are closely allied to the structure and the function of the stage and theatre building. The same is in Kabuki. And what’s more, all these elements have been passed down as a whole from one generation to the next, as thought a single living organism. Not only the performance, but also a structure of the stage – as a place for this performance - differentiates all kind of Japanese theatre and makes Noh to be Noh and Kabuki to be Kabuki and nothing else. This is also the difference between European performance – which can be played in every kind of stages, also in open air, and Japanese ones, which need to follow strict rules simply to exist and be understandable for the people.

While the stage is completely connected with the type of the classical theatre, the costumes are similarly fitted to the part. Rich boarded silks are use in the historical subjects dramas, plain - where the scenes are drown from common life.

Actors in Kabuki theatre are heavily made-up in conventional style, appropriate to the character represented. *Keshō*, Kabuki makeup, provides an element of style easily recognizable even by those unfamiliar with the art form. Rice powder is used to create the white *oshiroi* base, and *kumadori* enhances or exaggerates facial lines to produce dramatic animal or supernatural masks for the actors. The color of the *kumadori* is an expression of the character's nature: red lines are used to indicate passion, heroism, righteousness, and other positive traits; blue or black, villainy, jealousy, and other negative traits; green, the supernatural; and purple, nobility.

Music and sound effects in Kabuki stage are provided by a small party of instrumentalists inconspicuously placed behind a lattice on the left of the stage. 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. one of the special type of sound effect found in Kabuki is the dramatic crack of two wooden blocks (*hyoshigi*) struck together or against a wooden board.

Performances and plays

As it was said in the beggining, firs Kabuki performances, played by femail bands, were mostly focused on a dance. Kabuki dance was originally classified as odori (there are two types of traditional Japanese dances: *mai* – generally distinguished by a restrained, ceremonial quality, and *odori* – which literally means "jumping", characterized by a more earthy, extroverted type of movement.), it drew on the nenbutsu odori and used popular songs for accompaniament.

The term *nihon buyo*, or Japanese classical dance, generally refers to Kabuki dance and its derivatives, as distinct from the ancient and medieval genres. Today there are upwards of 150 schools of classical dance that transmit from generation to generation the artistic styles of accompanished Kabuki actors and dancers.

By the time, however, dance gave a way to drama as the most improtant aspect of Kabuki, and professional playwrights began to appear on the scene, the leading light among them being Chikamatsu Monzaemon. In the XVIII century puppet theater plays like Kanadehon Chűshingua were adapted for Kabuki, and the theatres specially designed for Kabuki began to take shape and many other dramatic works were written specifically for Kabuki. There are around four hundred that can still be performed today, including the so-called "neo-Kabuki" plays written since the Meiji period. Of these 41% are pure Kabuki plays, 27% are gidayu kyogen, 21 dances, and 11% date to the late XIX century or later.

Among classical Kabuki plays we can recognizes 3 main classes: first - jidaimono – which are the histories with a subdivision composed of scenes of exaggerated action, second – sewamono, which could be translated as domestic melodramas or plays, and the last one: shosagoto - dance pieces.

A typical program would thus consist a selection of scenes from one of scenes from on the histories followed by a dance, and a second half consisting by a melodrama follows by another dance.

Although historical plays – jidaimono - 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 – sewamoto - 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 nineteenth 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.*

Meeting West

The XIX century brought many changes to Kabuki theatre. It was closely connected with fall of Togunawa shogunat in 1868 and begun of the new Meiji Emperor government. The samurai class was eliminated and Japan opened to the west. 1872 was the starting points of changing in Japanese culture, under the motto "civilization and enlightenment". The government wanted to make the theatre useful for education purpose, so in practise it meant historically accurate plays and the censorship. What's more, actors started to be the members of the "teaching professions".

That's why the Meiji government made the radical reforms in the construction, organization and function of the Kabuki theatre, such as: expansion of the theatre's frontage and depth by around 7,25 meters, improvements to the entrance, installation of seating for foreigners and installation of gaslights. All theses to be more closed to the West world.

But meeting West meant also deep changes in Japanese mentality. After so many years of isolation and strictly following old rules and traditions, Japan stood suddenly in the front of totally strange culture and the other way of thinking. Traditional theatre couldn't manage the confrontation with West, European plays. In XIX century first Japanese directors were trying to perform plays of Shakespeare or Ibsen, but they didn't succeed. The big tradition, actors played all the time in the same, conventional way, problem with space, with understanding the European lifestyle – these made it impossible. Finally all it led to create new, modern theatrical art – called *shingeki,* what means "modern drama". But *shingeki* is only little connected with Kabuki, and in XX century it developed in different, modern way.

The confrontation with West is visible also in the vocabulary. Maybe nobody in modern, XIX- century Japan know, that the words "geki" and "engeki", which are nowadays used as "drama" and "theatre" came to Japanese language after the time of isolation. Before, there existed two different terms: "shibai"- what means "play or dramatic performance" and "gijõ" which was referred to theatre as a place or a building. Shibai divided into sad ones – it could be translated as a tragedy, and funny – equivalent to comedies.

But what does this change mean? The word "geki" (this new description of "drama") consists three components:" tiger", "wild boar" and "sword". All of this things have some connection with something sharp (for example tiger's claws) and could be interpretated in relation to "fighting to the end" (due to Kawatake Toshio's words, *Kabuki,* 2001, Tokyo). It reminds western way of thinking and building the theatrical plot in plays, where the action is developing during the performance to reach the highest point at the end. A dramatic situation may exist, of course, in all traditional theatres of Japan (also in Kabuki), but Japanese theatre exists on a different plane from plays that rely solely on words and gestures, instead, it makes full use of a wide variety of aural and visual means, that include music and sometimes even engages the audience directly to create a "theatrical time and space".

Kabuki now and abroad

However, in contrast to the other forms of classical theater, today *Kabuki* still continues to be very popular, regularly playing to enthusiastic audiences at theaters such as Tokyo's Kabukiza, Kyoto's Minamiza and Osaka's Shochikuza. In recent years new play and productions have been performanced, and Kabuki's popularity had spread overeats. In 1990

Kabuki performances took place in several countries outside Japan: France, Germany, Hong Kong, the Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan, and the Unites States.

The first Kabuki performance in a foreign county took place in 1928, in Soviet Union, in the anniversaty of Russian Revolution. After that, few performances were given in America, all the time with so big popularity. How we can explain this phenomenon? According to Kawatake Toshio's words, Kabuki is simply the most understandable form of Japanese theater, as it has still some action (in opposition to Noh or Kyogen, which are more focused on the form of performance, not in the plot). Few Kabuki plays were adapted to Western people tastes.

With the time, Kabuki started to be one of the easy recognized symbol of Japanese culture and one of the tourist attraction. It's now a vigorous and integral part of the entertainment industry in Japan. The star actors of *Kabuki* are some of Japanese 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 (born in 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 (born in 1944) received the prestigious stage name Kataoka Nizaemon XV, was treated as a major media event in Japan.

Kabuki is a chimera

However, there's now the question – is the modern, nowadays Kabuki still the same art as it used to be in its first form, before the confrontation with the philosophy of the West? One of the Japanese writer said : "Kabuki might be called the "chimera" of the art world." Chimera is the three-heads monster, making by parts of different animals. Kabuki, due to Tsubouchi Shoyo "is constituted just like this." (Tsubouchi Shoyo and Yamamoto Jiro, History and Characteristic of Kabuki the Japanese Classical Drama, Yokohama, 1960, p.115). Now, Kabuki, is not only the chimera of Japanese theatre, but also the chimera of Japanese culture, witch has developed and changing many times.

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