

An Overview 解説

2005.3.16

Latest trends in Kabuki, Noh/Kyogen and Bunraku

—————Kazumi Narabe (Journalist)

歌舞伎、能狂言、文楽の最新動向 ————— 奈良部和美 (ジャーナリスト)

Over the past several years, the movement to rediscover Japanese culture has had the effect of bringing new audiences to the traditional performing arts. Such figures as ONOE Kikunosuke in kabuki, TOYOTAKE Sakihodayu in *bunraku*, and SHIGEYAMA Munehiko in *kyogen*, who are all leading traditional performance artists at the peak of their youthful attractiveness in their teens and twenties, have been described by a new term, *dengei aidoru* (trad-arts star). Bookstores are enlivened by the primers and photo collections aimed at the young fans acquired by these performers.

Audiences have grown across generational lines, and the Noh theaters, the National Theatre, and the Kabuki-za are filled with a kind of energy that was not there before. Unprecedented new activities have begun, as the Japan Arts Council, which operates the National Theatre, opened a Traditional Performance Arts Information Center in March 2003, the National Theatre is putting its collected materials into database form and working to make them publicly available using the Internet, and so on.

Kabuki

In 2003, kabuki entered its 400th year, and various events were held to celebrate Four Centuries of kabuki. These included staging of musicals and recreations of kabuki in its earliest form. It is said to be four centuries ago that the founding figure of kabuki, Izumo no Okuni, came at Shijo-gawara in Kyoto and performed flamboyant, innovative dances in men's clothing. When the authorities of the time banned kabuki performance by women, saying it would undermine public morals, the roles were taken by attractive young boys instead. This was also banned as indecent, and the result was the appearance of *yaro kabuki*, which was performed by adult men. Since that time, kabuki has refined its distinctive modes of representation, a prominent one of which is the *onnagata*, the female role actors who are said to depict women even better than women themselves. Theater mechanisms also underwent development during the Edo Period, resulting for instance in the *hanamichi* walkway for actors that extends into the audience, and the *mawari butai*, or revolving stage, which rotates the stage floor to bring a new set before the audience.

At present, kabuki performances are held largely by the Shochiku Co., Ltd. at their regular venue, Kabuki-za. There are also periodic performances of kabuki with explanatory commentary and revival performances at the National Theatre, which was founded in 1966 for the purpose of preserving and transmission of traditional performing arts.

The core factor in transmitting the art of kabuki has been the existence of the *ie* (family), where fathers have passed their art on to their sons for generation after generation. The sons of celebrated families, called *rien*, receive their training on the stage from the time they play children's roles. There they absorb the performance skills of the preceding generations, called *o-ie gei* (the family art), and grow up to become stars. Meanwhile, actors who are not from one of these families have few opportunities to play any leading roles, and since the number of actors who wanted to play supporting roles was declining, the National Theatre started a program to foster their successors in 1970. This is not just about actors. Kabuki is a musical drama, and the program is also working to foster the musicians who support this art. The concern is over shortages in the percussionists

An Overview

Latest trends in Kabuki,
Noh/Kyogen and Bunraku

歌舞伎、能狂言、文楽の最新動向

called *narimono* and the kabuki *gidayu* reciters called *takemoto*.

The actors who have gained greatest attention in recent years are probably ICHIKAWA En'nosuke and NAKAMURA Kankuro. En'nosuke has been active in bringing actors who completed the National Theatre's successor training program to the stage and has cultivated such stars as the *onnagata* ICHIKAWA Emiya. Meanwhile, he has also sought to develop kabuki as spectacle by appearing in many performances of new plays. The 21st Century Kabuki-gumi, made up of young members of En'nosuke's troupe, has also been very popular. Kankuro has been working with the contemporary theater directors KUSHIDA Kazuyoshi and NODA Hideki to attempt new interpretations of classical drama. He has performed, for example, at Theatre Cocoon, a contemporary theater in Shibuya, Tokyo, as well as at the Heisei Nakamura-za, a temporary theater patterned after the playhouses of the Edo Period. En'nosuke and Kankuro are seeking to bring out the true thrill of kabuki, which - with its preposterous plot lines and devices that swing actors out to hang suspended above the audience - is at the opposite extreme from realistic drama, and their efforts always receive the acclaim of a full house.

Crossover performances by kabuki actors in movies and Western-style drama are not new. However, there has been conspicuous activity by "trad-arts stars" such as ONOE Kikunosuke's appearance in the Greek tragedy *the Greeks*, directed by NINAGAWA Yukio, and ICHIKAWA Sin'nosuke's taking on the challenge of a leading role in the year-long NHK Television drama series *Musashi*. The fact that such figures remain popular even when performing outside the kabuki genre shows that the shift of generations is definitely well underway.

The kabuki world lost two of its living national treasures with the deaths of NAKAMURA Utaemon and ICHIMURA Uzaemon in 2001, and many well-known supporting actors have also passed away. However, kabuki has the tradition of rising beyond the deaths of great actors by passing on their names to inheritors. By *shumei* (succeeding to a name), the inheritor is considered to receive the artistic style of the father, grandfather, or other great actor together with the name, and puts on a special *shumei* performance in commemoration. A number of major events has been taking place side by side, as ONOE Tatsunosuke - who with Shin'nosuke and Kikunosuke formed a group called San'nosuke (the "Three Suke") - succeeded to the name Shoroku, Kankuro is scheduled to succeed to the name of his father, Kanzaburo, in 2005, NAKAMURA Ganjiro succeeds to the name SAKATA Tojuro, the name of an *onnagata* from Osaka region which has been out of use for 230 years, and so on. People in cultural and business circles in Osaka region are boosting the revival of Tojuro's name, in particular, which is also anticipated to have a favorable economic impact.

An Overview

Latest trends in Kabuki,
Noh/Kyogen and Bunraku

歌舞伎、能狂言、文楽の最新動向

Data

*School (*ryuha*) Schools are groups that formed in order to protect distinctive artistic styles of intangible performing arts and pass them on to succeeding generations. In Noh, there are different schools for the actors who play the main roles (*shitekata*), for the actors who play supporting roles (*wakikata*) for the *shitekata*, for the musical accompanists (*hayashikata*), and for the actors who perform in *kyogen* (*kyogenkata*). For the *shitekata*, for example, there are the five schools of Kanze, Hosho, Konparu, Kongo, and Kita. For the *kyogenkata*, there are the two schools of Okura and Izumi.

Noh Drama

Nohgaku (Noh drama), which was designated a "Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity" by UNESCO in 2001, has a history going back 600 years to the 14th century time of ZEAMI Motokiyo, who created some one-third of the Noh plays being performed today. Noh drama is made up of two parts. One is the musical dramatic form of Noh proper, in which the performers sing and dance to the accompaniment of four instruments called the *shibyoshi* - the flute (*fue*), small drum (*kotsuzumi*), large hand drum (*okawa*), and large floor drum (*taiko*) - and a chorus called the *jiutai*. The other part is *kyogen*, a spoken dramatic form that is primarily comic. Noh in particular uses ultimately simplified movements that have had all excess expression pared away in order to dramatically convey its various contents according to the aesthetic of *yugen* (mysterious profundity). Noh is known as the world's supreme performing art in achieving the beauty of *yugen*.

Since the time of ZEAMI, Noh has had patrons in the ruling class of society. It received particular protection during the Edo Period, when the shogunate government designated Noh as *shikigaku*, the ceremonial performing art to be used in ritual observances. As the performing art supported by the shogunate government, Noh was maintained at a level unaffected by popularity among the populace, and after the downfall of the warrior society, Noh continued to be sustained by leading figures in government and patrons in the newly powerful industrial conglomerates known as *zaibatsu*. The need to acquire fans among the common people only arose after World War II, when Noh lost its patrons with the dissolution of the *zaibatsu*. Noh is presently establishing an economic foundation through education of fans and programs of performance.

This history as a performing art supported by the ruling class of society has left its mark, so many Japanese people still feel that Noh is refined and difficult, and that Noh theaters are only for connoisseurs. Efforts have been made, however, to make Noh more popular, such as the opening of the National Noh Theatre in 1983, and the Yokohama Noh Theater, which is operated by Yokohama Arts Foundation. Large, young audiences have also been attracted to experimental performances, and Noh has become popular enough that tickets can be difficult to obtain. Performances of *takigi* Noh, which is held outdoors at night by torchlight, grew more numerous in the early 1990s and have become extremely popular.

Despite all this, however, the audiences that make their way to the theaters operated by the various schools of Noh are very limited, and are also increasingly elderly. This situation appears finally to have been recognized as a crisis by the performers, and the extremely confined world of Noh gradually began to display some new departures starting about five years ago. Young Noh masters have formed a group called Kamiasobi that crosses the rigid lines between schools, for example, and four young performers of the Konparu School formed Za Square. These represent the beginnings of a movement to make Noh appealing to youthful sensibilities, and they are attracting growing numbers of fans.

Meanwhile, performances of the comic *kyogen* in easy-to-understand, colloquial Japanese have been steadily rising in popularity. NOMURA Mansai, for example, has played leading roles in television dramas and movies, and is the artistic director of the Setagaya Public Theatre. The group TOPPA! - made up of six members of the SHIGEYAMA family of the Okura School in Kyoto, including

An Overview

Latest trends in Kabuki,
Noh/Kyogen and Bunraku

歌舞伎、能狂言、文楽の最新動向

SHIGEYAMA Masakuni, Munehiko, and Ippei - has attained star status among the young.

The *kyogen* world has a rich array of talent across the generations. NOMURA Man'nojo has demonstrated his ability as a producer and has been working on reconstruction of the ancient mask play known as *gigaku*. SHIGEYAMA Sensaku is a living national treasure, born in 1919, who has acquired popularity among young women for an ability to convey the gentleness of human nature with his entire body. There have also been veteran *kyogen* performers such as SHIGEYAMA Sen'nojo and Sensaku who have taken on the challenge of new *kyogen* pieces created by the philosopher UMEHARA Takeshi and produced at the National Noh Theatre. These works deal with such issues as environmental pollution or war by the art of laughter. They have been received very favorably as expressions of the strength of classical performing arts embodied in programs that are new and yet timeless.

An Overview

Latest trends in Kabuki,
Noh/Kyogen and Bunraku

歌舞伎、能狂言、文楽の最新動向

Bunraku

Bunraku is a form of puppet theater that arose in Osaka during the Edo Period. The puppets are manipulated to the recitation of *yoruri* (the narrative) by reciters known as *gidayu* and the accompaniment of the low-pitched *futozao shamisen*. At first each puppet was manipulated by a single puppeteer, but the practice of *sannin-zukai*, in which a single puppet body is manipulated by three puppeteers, emerged during the 1700s. The *omo-zukai* (head puppeteer), who manipulates the head and right hand, is the leader, while the *hidari-zukai* (left puppeteer) manipulates the left hand and the *ashi-zukai* (foot puppeteer) manipulates the feet. Working in perfect unison, the three puppeteers were able to give the puppet a greater delicacy and richness of expression. One of the attractions of *bunraku* is that it is a human drama unfolded through the harmoniously combined efforts of these puppeteers, the *shamisen-kata* (*shamisen* player), and the *tayu* narrator, who recites the parts of distinct multiple characters.

Although *bunraku* had been very popular, the performances began to go continuously into the red from around 1955. In 1963, therefore, the national government, Osaka Prefecture, and NHK provided assistance and the Bunraku Association was established. Performers became craft artists affiliated with the Bunraku Association, and they hold performances at the Small Theatre of the National Theatre of Japan in Tokyo and at the National Bunraku Theatre in Osaka. A television documentary on two living national treasures, the puppeteer YOSHIDA Tamao and the reciter TAKEMOTO Sumitayu, was broadcasted in 2001. This program, which showed the artists engaged in continuing study and training, brought about a sudden revival of *bunraku* popularity, and tickets to Tokyo performances have been impossible to obtain in the two years since. The heart of this popularity is the perfected performance art presented by the five living national treasures and other artists of *bunraku*.

Bunraku does not have the same *ie* (family) system of kabuki to pass the art on from generation to generation, so any man with the necessary ability can find a future in *bunraku*. In fact, 44% of the 88 reciter, *shamisen* player, and puppeteer craft artists are people who have gone through the traditional performing artist training program started at the National Theatre in 1972 to foster successors in *bunraku* art. Many of these people came to the program without any previous background in *bunraku*. Trainees receive two years of basic education, after which they take part in stage performances under a master's instruction. It is a serious course of training, which is said to finally produce top-level results for foot puppeteers after ten years and left hand puppeteers after twenty years, while reciters are not said to attain that level until they are in their fifties. This training program has been fostering successors in the art, and one of its graduates, NOZAWA Kinya (a *shamisen* player), succeeded to the name of NOZAWA Kinshi V at the age of 41 in 1998.

There are promising signs for the next generation. The puppeteer YOSHIDA Minotaro succeeded to the name of KIRITAKE Kanjuro, for example, and a group of middle-level and younger performers staged a joint event at the National Theatre that also included gospel singing and other such performances in between the *bunraku*. There have also been *su-joruri* (stand-alone *yoruri*) performances of the narration and *shamisen* accompaniment without puppets. In November 2003 *bunraku* was also designated a "Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity" by UNESCO. Still, the loss of three reciters in their fifties over the past several years has left a gap, and the living national treasures who are working to uphold the popularity of *bunraku* have grown old, YOSHIDA Tamao being 84 and TAKEMOTO Sumitayu 79. Therefore the change to the next generation remains an issue.

of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity" by UNESCO. Still, the loss of three reciters in their fifties over the past several years has left a gap, and the living national treasures who are working to uphold the popularity of *bunraku* have grown old, YOSHIDA Tamao being 84 and TAKEMOTO Sumitayu 79. Therefore the change to the next generation remains an issue.