

# An Overview 解説

## Kabuki's New Wave

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歌舞伎の新潮流 —— 長谷部 浩 (演劇評論家)

### 1

People will surely look back on 2005 as a milestone year for Kabuki. In the commemorative performance series celebrating the stage name-inheriting of Kanzaburo Nakamura XVIII held at the Tokyo Kabuki-za theater from March to May, the play chosen for the night performances during May was the production *Noda Version Togitatsu no Utare* directed by Hideki Noda which had premiered in 2001. It was almost unheard of rarity for a new play that had debuted just four years earlier to be used in a stage name-inheriting series, which traditionally is an occasion for showing the continuance of the family's artistic tradition. Needless to say, Hideki Noda is a representative playwright, director and actor who has led the Japanese contemporary theater world since the 1980s. We are told that it was the strong wish of Kanzaburo Nakamura that caused the *Noda Version Togitatsu no Utare* to be chosen as one of the plays for the name-inheriting performance series. The choice to work with a contemporary theater artist was clearly a bold first step toward the opening of a new era of Kabuki rebirth.

In June the Kabuki-za was the venue for a performance of *NINAGAWA Twelfth Night* directed by Yukio Ninagawa, a director who has won international acclaim for his "localized" Japanese re-interpretations of Shakespeare in Britain and other European countries. Just as boy actors were used to play the roles of women in Elizabethan England, *NINAGAWA Twelfth Night* used all male Kabuki actors. In this production the three roles of the protagonist Cesario and the sister and brother twins Viola and Sebastian, in other words a woman, a man and a woman impersonating a man were all played by the handsome young 27-year-old actor Kikunosuke Onoe V. By staging the play in this way, a new connection was clearly opened up between Kabuki and Shakespeare. This production also drew attention for the fact that the "Living National Treasure" Kikugoro Onoe VII played the two roles of the clown Feste and the steward Malvolio. This use of multiple-role, quick change acting is a unique realm of Kabuki that was used to good effect. Another device that Ninagawa used was to line the back of the stage in mirrors that reflected the actor with a kaleidoscope effect. In this way it became a production in which Ninagawa lived up to his reputation for creating visual spectacles without restraint [see [Artist Interview](#) with Yukio Ninagawa].

Then in July, Kanzaburo Nakamura joined forces once again with another contemporary theater artist, Kazuyoshi Kushida to stage a bold new interpretation of the traditional Kabuki play *Hokaibo*. Kushida is one of Japan's representative contemporary theater directors and actors who presently holds the positions of administrative and artistic director at the Matsumoto Performing Arts Centre in Matsumoto city, Nagano Prefecture. *Hokaibo* is a play from the traditional Kabuki repertoire that was written by Shimesuke Nagawa and was first performed in 1784.

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As one of the classical plays, there are certain rules that have been passed down concerning not only the costumes and stage art but also the way the different roles are to be acted. Kushida had the Kabuki actors rethink all the actions and acting conventions they are accustomed to and sought to recast the rough priest Hokaibo—who travels around collecting money in the name of raising charity money for a new temple bell—as a social outlaw of the kind that we recognize in today's society.

Although it may sound strange to readers outside Japan, there has always been a deep and absolute chasm between contemporary theater and traditional theater in Japan. The actors, stage professionals and critics from these two genres belong to two completely different worlds and there has almost never been any crossing of lines between the two. However, like this year, Noda in May, Ninagawa in June and Kushida in July, it is clear that some revolutionary steps were taken in the Kabuki world that until now has been extremely tradition-bound. What's more, these steps were taken at the most influential of all Kabuki venues, the Kabuki-za of Tokyo. Among the audiences at the performances during these three months we saw many young people who were coming to see Kabuki for the first time. We also saw people buying tickets out of pure interest in the theater being performed, not just for the traditional purposes of self-education or social reasons. These were big steps forward in an attempt to breathe new life into a Kabuki world that has lost much of its vitality due its concern for preserving tradition.

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The key person at the center of these new efforts to revive Kabuki is Kanzaburo Nakamura XVIII. Kanzaburo was born in 1955. His paternal uncle was the first Kichiemon Nakamura and his grandfather on his mother's side was Kikugoro Onoe VI. Thus, he inherits the blood of two of the most famous Kabuki actors of the late Meiji to early Showa periods (first three decades of the 20th century). His acting ability stood out from the time he began appearing in child roles and later he mastered a wide range of both male and female roles, while also becoming skilled in traditional dance. His ability to captivate an audience has made him one of today's foremost actors in terms of both popularity and prowess.

While understanding the importance of tradition, Kanzaburo has the ambition and desire not to be content with tradition alone. It is no coincidence that he has created a big new wave in the Kabuki world. By exhibiting strong leadership in starting in 1994 the "Cocoon Kabuki" program at Shibuya's Bunkamura Theatre Cocoon, a venue as a part of the facilities of the shopping store, Kanzaburo (Kankuro at the time) overturned the preconception that Kabuki could only be performed at specialized theater like the Kabuki-za and The National Theatre, but the theater which is a part of the facilities of the department store. A Kabuki theater has a runway called the *hanamichi* that extends out through the audience from the side of the stage. There is also a large rotating circular section built into the main stage called the *bon* that is used for rotating set changes during the play. People updated the idea that Kabuki could be staged successfully in a mid-size 700-seat theater like the Cocoon having no *hanamichi* or *bon*.

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It is not as if there have never been productions of Kabuki staged in theaters intended for contemporary theater. For example, between the years 1946 and 1950, actors including Utaemon Nakamura VI, Kanzaburo Nakamura XVII and the first Hakuou Matsumoto performed a series of 30 Kabuki plays at the Mitsukoshi Theatre completed in 1927 that came to be called the "Mitsukoshi Kabuki." More recently, there is the example of a group of young Kabuki actors led by Ennosuke Ichikawa who performed classical Kabuki plays like *Ibukiyama no Yamato Takeru* at the Parco Theatre in 1988 under the group name 21st Century Kabuki-gumi." However, these performances had the atmosphere of a study exercise for the young actors at the time.

In beginning the "Cocoon Kabuki" project, Kanzaburo XVIII chose as his partner the director Kazuyoshi Kushida, who at the time was art director at Theater Cocoon. For this project, Kushida made a thorough study of the play *Tokaido Yotsuya Kaidan* by Namboku Tsuruya that was first performed in 1825 and then did a modification of the script to make it a tale of desire and retribution that could be understood by today's audience.

One of the primary aims of the "Cocoon Kabuki" project was to recreate the atmosphere of the small Kabuki theaters of the Edo Period (1603 - 1867). The stage at the Tokyo Kabuki-za has a front wall length of 32.73 meters and extremely wide stage. Theater Cocoon has a much more compact space that is similar to that of one of the remaining Edo Period Kabuki theaters, the Kanamaru-za (opened 1836) in Kagawa Pref. on the island of Shikoku, and holding Kabuki plays in such a space was in fact an experiment to see what kind of effect would be created. And, in order to try to bring back the festive atmosphere of Edo Kabuki where people went to see plays as entertainment rather than going to theater as an exercise in art appreciation, the modern theater lobby of the Cocoon was lined with pull-kart booths selling foods in Edo style and having actors in Edo period attire and wigs walking around mingling with the audience in the lobby area before the show.

This "Cocoon Kabuki" project continued with performances *Natsu Matsuri Naniwa Kagami*, *Kamikakete Sango no Taisetsu* and *Sakura Hime*.

And later this experiment in small-theater Edo Kabuki would be continued with the "Heisei Nakamura-za" of 2002. For this project, Kanzaburo constructed a temporary theater on the banks of the Sumida River near where the Nakamura-za once stood in what is now the Asakusa area of Tokyo (Saruwaka in Edo) and used it for performances of classic Kabuki with contemporary interpretations like those performed in the Cocoon Kabuki project.

The play that was chosen for the first performance at this Heisei Nakamura-za project was the same *Hokaibo* performed in August this year at the Kabuki-za. The proper Kyogen name of this play is actually *Sumidagawa Gonichi no Omokage* named after the location of the theater and it is a work that reflected the importance Kanzaburo and Kushida placed on the atmosphere of the new temporary theater. This is only a speculation but perhaps the compact Heisei Nakamura-za creates greater sense of intimacy between the audience and the actors than the contemporary theater that separates the audience from the stage with its proscenium arch. The fact that the audience takes off its shoes when entering the theater space also seems to create a reminiscence of the Edo theaters where the audience sat on *tatami* mat areas.

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The “Heisei Nakamura-za” project went on to and what remains most vividly in the memory is probably the performance of *Natsu Matsuri Naniwa Kagami* at the New York Lincoln Center Festival in July of 2004. The temporary theater was set up in the small park to the left of the Metropolitan Opera House entrance. The Metropolitan Opera House is a venerable institution where Kanzaburo's father, Kanzaburo XVII had given the memorable first postwar Kabuki performance in the U.S. years earlier. But instead of using the Metropolitan Opera House's prestigious stage this time, Kanzaburo chose the primitive atmosphere of the temporary theater for his New York performance. When the curtain is down, the temporary theater is open to the outside at the back of the theater. And there is a climactic scene in which the New York police come rushing into the theater and order everyone to hold their hands up after the protagonist, Denshichi (played by Kanzaburo), who has been forced to kill his father-in-law, runs off stage fleeing from his pursuers. This device immediately links the Edo Period fiction to the realities of the contemporary world of New York.

This staging was the result of the desire not to let the New York audience view Kabuki as one of the traditional arts of the Far East, despite its artistic sophistication. Surely Kanzaburo wanted his Kabuki to be evaluated as contemporary theater on equal footing with not only the other works of the festival but also the plays being shown in the Broadway and off-Broadway theaters.

On July 20th, Kanzaburo's efforts were answered beautifully when a review of the performance by Ben Brantley appeared in the New York Times comparing the play's depiction of guilt and awe of the spirit with reference to the novels of Dostoyevsky. This review can also be seen as antithetical to the type of reviews seen in Japan that invariably stress the acting qualities and compare the staging to traditional precedents. Theme of murder and violence destroying people's lives is an eternal and borderless one that is relevant in contemporary New York just as it was in feudal Edo. This reinterpretation of a classical Kabuki play showed that the unique staging methods of Kabuki and the constant transposition between the stylized and the realistic involved in a Kabuki actor's acting technique can have an impact on Western theater.

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When this new wave of Kabuki is looked at as a whole, it becomes clear that the point lies in the directing authority given to the director. Traditionally there is no such role as that of a director in Kabuki. The system until now has been one in which the main actor in a Kabuki production is given the position of *zagashira* (head of a Kabuki troupe) which involved the right to choose from among the several established staging “forms” for each of the plays in the Kabuki repertoire and give instructions to the stage staff concerning the general direction of the production. And actually, this is not really such an unusual format when we consider that fact that the role of “director” as we know it in theater today did not begin to emerge in the West until the late 19th and early 20th century. Prior to that, modern theater functioned under a system in which the main actor in a production assumed the role of “actor manager” and gave directions concerning the staging. Considering the fact that Kabuki as we know it today became established in Japan's Edo Genroku Years (late 17th, early 18th century), it is hard to criticize the ambiguity concerning the right of directing authority in Kabuki.

Looking back, this is not the first time since the Meiji Restoration (1867) that a series of new plays have been introduced in rapid succession. For example, there is the case of Sadanji Ichikawa II, who was the first Kabuki actor to travel to Europe and see modern Western theater. At the time, he joined forces with the intellectual Kaoru Osanai to form a “Free Theater” in 1909 and stage a production of Henrik Ibsen's *John Gabriel Borkman*, which greatly surprised Japanese audiences accustomed to Kabuki. Sadanji went on to enlist the talents of playwrights like Kido Okamoto and Seika Mayama to actively present entirely new repertoire that came to be called “New Kabuki.” Among the representative works of this New Kabuki were Okamoto's *Toribeyama Shinju* and Mayama's *Genroku Chusingura*.

Artistic genres that have lost the ability to produce new works are destined to decline while clinging to the ideals of keeping the classics alive and preserving tradition. With the exception of a few writers like Nobuo Uno and Yukio Mishima active in the War and postwar years, the works of Okamoto and Mayama's era are generally believed to be the last new works in the Kabuki repertoire that have been performed over and over since.

In fact there have been some cases of efforts in recent decades to defy the decline of Kabuki. One person who brought strong new directing concepts to the Kabuki world from the outside is Tetsuji Takechi. Takechi succeeded in creating a new style of reinterpreted Kabuki known as “Takechi Kabuki (1949 - 1952). The current representative senior actors of the Kabuki world, including Tomijuro Nakamura V and Ganjiro Nakamura III are actors who came of age performing in Takechi Kabuki.

Furthermore, we must note the important role that has been played by the National Theater which was built in Miyakezaka in Tokyo in 1966. The pamphlet for the first Kabuki production contained an essay about the policies by which Kabuki would be staged at the National Theater. The policies included “respect for the original works,” “presenting productions of full (unabbreviated) Kyogen play” and “reviving old Kyogen works,” etc., and especially noteworthy was the comment about the desire to “present unified productions by eliminating self-centered directing by the

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actors.” However, there are in fact many difficulties in separating the roles of the director and the *zagashira* and, according to a comment by Yukio Hattori, by 1971 the National Theater had all but given up on the idea of maintaining a clear directing role.

The actor who has directed the greatest efforts into the renewal of Kabuki in recent years is Ennosuke Ichikawa III. Working together with Shosuke Nakawa, who handles the modification of the script and directing, Ennosuke has been able to revive various Kyogen plays that had been forgotten, and commissioning the philosopher Takeshi Umehara, he has brought a series of new works set in ancient times like *Yamato Taeru* (1988) to the Kabuki stage. He has also worked actively to promote exchange between Kabuki and Chinese Peking Opera, and the request of the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris he has directed the staging of the Rimsky-Korsakov opera *The Golden Cockerel* (French title: *Le Coq d'Or*) in 1984. However, these types of works by Ennosuke are typified more by the flavor of a traditional *zagashira* actor's direction than by a respect for director's form outside the Kabuki world.

The new wave we see emerging this year is typified by once again actively introducing new works and new interpretations of the classics and, if such an expression can be allowed, the battle to try to revive Kabuki within the context of contemporary theater.

Still, even in the case of directors such as Yukio Ninagawa, Kazuyoshi Kushida and Hideki Noda who have been so successful in the contemporary theater world, it would have been very difficult to bring out the stage methods that have been developed within the Kabuki tradition and the physical prowess of the actors without the cooperation of Kanzaburo as a *zagashira* actor.

What should be noted especially about this new wave of Kabuki that emerged between May and August of 2005 is that Kanzaburo's ongoing efforts to revitalize Kabuki are now being joined by Kikugoro Onoe and his Kikugoro Theater Company, who until now have belonged to mainstream Kabuki. And the fact that Kikugoro's son and one of the future leaders of the Kabuki world, Kikunosuke, was able to convince Ninagawa to direct at the Kabuki-za even though he had previously state publicly that he would never direct Kabuki, can be considered a very significant development not only for Kabuki but also in the history of Shakespeare theater.

This new wave of Kabuki does not simply represent a changing of generations within the Kabuki world. Its result has been to split the Kabuki world between actors who are so concerned about the future of Kabuki that they are willing to bring in directors from the outside in order to revolutionize it and actors who continue to rely on the conventions of the classical Kabuki tradition.

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Also, when we look at Kabuki from the standpoint of the world's theater traditions, it can be said that we are in a time when Asian thought and artistic methods have the potential to be a big stimulus to the Western theater tradition that is now on the verge of extinction. There have been a number of Western theater directors who have actively brought non-Western theatrical idioms into their work, such as Antonin Artaud in the past and Ariane Mnouchkine in the contemporary theater scene. So, it is probably safe to say that the day is not far off when Japanese directors who have been trained in Western style theater can bring to the international theater scene works that apply contemporary interpretations to classical Kabuki or new works they create making use of Kabuki actors with their unique physical presence and acting vocabulary. Before long, we will surely be looking back at productions like the 2001 *Noda Version Togitatsu no Utare*, the 2004 New York performance of *Natsu Matsuri Naniwa Kagami* and the 2005 *NINAGAWA Twelfth Night* as the forerunners of this new movement.