

KABUKI IN NEW YORK, 1900-1969
THE DEVELOPING AMERICAN INTEREST AND RESPONSE

by

BARBARA ELLEN THORNBURY
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Department of Theatre

The University of British Columbia
Vancouver 8, Canada

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Abstract

American acquaintance with Kabuki began before World War II, although sustained interest did not begin to develop until after the war. In fact, Kabuki became known in the United States largely because a number of influential American authors and theatre people responded enthusiastically to this Japanese theatre form, which they had seen during the Occupation. On returning to America, these people wrote about Kabuki and made efforts to bring a troupe on a visit to New York City and other parts of the country. Subsequently, the Azuma Kabuki Dancers and Musicians came in 1954 and again in 1955-56, and the Grand Kabuki visited in 1960 and 1969.

Focusing on New York, the paper outlines the history of Kabuki performances in America and traces the development of interest, mainly by showing how those writing in newspapers and popular magazines responded to Kabuki over the years. Despite problems of diplomacy and the technical difficulties in transporting a full-sized troupe abroad, a wide base of interest had been established by the time of the last troupe's visit in 1969.

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Introduction

A look at the periodical literature in English on the subject of Kabuki reveals that an overwhelming number of articles concern the six Kabuki and Kabuki-related troupes which visited the United States and performed primarily in New York City, from 1900 to 1969. A large portion of the material also deals with the American "discovery" of Kabuki in Japan after World War II and the subsequent efforts to bring a full-sized troupe to New York and other parts of the country. Altogether, these writings document the history of Kabuki in America and the development of American--and to a large extent, Western--interest in this classical Japanese theatre form.

Among the studies that have been done on Kabuki, however, little has been written on the topic of Kabuki in America, despite the availability of research material. Zoe Kincaid's Kabuki, The Popular Stage of Japan (1925) and Faubion Bowers' Japanese Theatre (1952) briefly mention the two troupes which came in the early part of the century, while Leonard Pronko's Theater East and West (1967) and Earle Ernst's "The Influence of Japanese Theatrical Style on Western Theatre," (Educational Theatre Journal, 1969) also give information on three of the four later visiting troupes. Up until now there has been no work which deals

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exclusively and comprehensively with the American interaction with Kabuki, a fascinating and significant area of study in American theatre.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to outline the history of Kabuki performances in America and to trace the development of American interest in Kabuki, mainly by showing how those writing in newspapers and popular magazines have responded to Kabuki over the years. Since most of the articles are written by and concern New York people and the performances which took place in New York, this study will focus on that city.

The paper begins with an introductory chapter on the visits of the Kawakami troupe (1900) and Tsutsui and the Players from Japan (1930). Although preliminary investigation showed that these two companies were not strictly "Kabuki," they are important to this study because they were the first troupes to be represented as such and thus gave Americans their initial, though curious, glimpse of Japan's popular theatre. The main body of the paper then follows Earl Miner's observation that "the proper appreciation of Kabuki in...America has begun only since the Second World War."¹ Accordingly, the second chapter is on how American interest in Kabuki developed after the war, while the third and final chapters are concerned with the subsequent New

York performances of the Azuma Kabuki Dancers and Musicians (1954 and 1955-56) and the Grand Kabuki (1960 and 1969).

Since much of the information on the Azuma and Grand Kabuki troupes is contained in the extensive number of reviews of their performances, considerable space is devoted to the presentation of this critical reaction. In Chapter III and Chapter IV there are special sections on the reviews, where, for the sake of comparison as well as convenience, the reviews are arranged by individual critic and grouped chronologically, beginning with opening night and progressing through later program reviews. Because magazine reviews generally came out after those in the newspapers, they have been given separately in these sections.

The New York Times Index and the Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature were the main bibliographic sources for the paper, although material was obtained from books and other journals not included in these guides. For the approximately fifty reviews that were collected for the Azuma and Grand Kabuki troupes, the New York Theatre Critics' Reviews and the Reader's Guide were used to determine, respectively, newspaper and magazine selection.

Macrons have been used to indicate long vowels in Japanese words except the most common proper nouns. Japanese names are given in the usual Japanese manner, with the family name coming before the given name.

Note

¹Earl Miner, The Japanese Tradition in British and American Literature (Princeton: Princeton University, 1966), p. 216.

Chapter I: Early Kabuki Performances in New York, 1900 and 1930

The first troupe to bring Kabuki to New York came by way of San Francisco and Boston in the early spring of 1900. As the playbill shows, the members of the troupe were Kawakami Otojirō, "Japan's Most Distinguished Actor," his wife, Sada-yakko, "The Leading Emotional Actress of the Flowery Kingdom," and the "Dramatic Students of the Kawakami Theatre, Tokio,"¹ which numbered between twenty and thirty performers, according to differing accounts. In early March the troupe opened at New York's Berkeley Lyceum Theatre, about two weeks later moving to the Bijou Theatre, where they remained until leaving for the Paris Exposition in April of that year.

In Japanese theatre history, Kawakami Otojirō is remembered as a founder of the Shimpa ("New School") theatre movement. This movement "which began in the late 1880's and 1890's, was originally inspired by political ideals, and used traditional Kabuki techniques in order to portray the contemporary scene."² Kawakami had some success, and in 1896 founded the Kawakami Theatre in Tokyo, which soon closed, however, due to poor management and bad plays. Soon after, he sailed for America and Europe with his wife and the members of his troupe to study Western theatre techniques. Kawakami planned to use these techniques to revitalize his theatre when he returned to Japan.

On landing in San Francisco, however, Kawakami found there was a ready audience for Japanese drama--and not just among people of Japanese extraction. Americans, generally, were curious about the geisha and samurai they had heard and read about, and were eager to see these characters represented on stage. So taking advantage of the opportunity to acquire a little fame and fortune abroad, Kawakami put together a program of Kabuki-derived dramas of his own invention, which the troupe performed in New York a few months later.

Many of the Americans who saw the Kawakami troupe perform believed they were seeing an authentic and representative example of the Kabuki theatre. However, in Kabuki, The Popular Stage of Japan, Zoe Kincaid described the Kawakami effort as no more than "crude melodrama,"³ lacking even the timely Japanese themes which had characterized Kawakami's theatre in Tokyo. Many Japanese people and others who were familiar with Japanese theatre were ashamed that Kawakami, his wife, and the other members of the troupe should be thought of as distinguished Kabuki actors. As Kincaid wrote in 1925, a quarter century after the visit took place: "The poor impression [the Kawakami troupe] gave of Japan's theatre art has not been erased, since no leading Kabuki actor has yet been seen in the West to show what is sincere and true on the Japanese stage."⁴

The Kawakami troupe, however, was well received by many Americans. After seeing such Kawakami plays as "Zingoro, an Earnest Statue Maker," "The Faithful Wife," "The Royalist; or Kojima Takanori," and what proved to be their biggest hit, "The Geisha and the Knight" ("knight," here, being a translation for "samurai"), critics praised the acting style of the Japanese visitors. To overcome language problems, Kawakami reduced Japanese dialogue to the barest minimum and concentrated on action, in the literal sense of the word. Essentially, the plays were "melodramatic vehicles adapted from Kabuki plots, designed to display Kawakami in sword-fighting scenes and Sada[yakko] in those of dance, madness, and death."⁵

Sadayakko, who made an especially strong impression in New York, had been trained as a geisha before her marriage and therefore had some competence in the traditional arts, such as dancing. Before coming to America, however, she had had no acting training. It was still virtually unheard of for a woman to appear on the Japanese stage. When Sadayakko arrived in San Francisco with the otherwise all-male troupe and found that the Americans wanted to see a real geisha in her husband's plays, her acting career began. Sadayakko's subsequent fame in the West, moreover, helped the cause of actresses in Japan, and when she eventually returned there she founded a school of acting for women.

New Yorkers were extremely curious about the geisha lady. Soon after the troupe opened, an article called "A Japanese Actress" appeared in the Sunday New York Times. Having seen Sadayakko in her role as a geisha in several of the plays, particularly "The Geisha and the Knight," the writer of the article reported in frank amazement that "the little Geisha girl is surprisingly human."⁶ Reflecting the prevailing late nineteenth century image of Japan as a land of the "exotic," he added: "It is difficult to think of the Japanese woman of any age, rank, or character as anything but a pretty, dainty little creature, sitting in her toy house, arranging her single branch of cherry blossoms."⁷

If Sadayakko's melodramatic portrayals of geisha had no other effect, they at least changed some attitudes. She showed that "a Japanese woman can love deeply, hate savagely, and then die quietly."⁸ To the surprise of many she proved that Japanese women are people of feeling: "No one would have expected to find an emotional actress in Japan, for who would have expected to find an emotional woman there?"⁹

Kawakami himself also pleased audiences in the many scenes of sword combat which filled the plays. "The Royalist; or Kojima Takanori" was remarkable for its "terrific sword combats."¹⁰ As one critic described "The Geisha and the Knight," it opened with a fierce battle scene followed by

"a second fight, in which the hero killed half a dozen of his foes with dexterity and dispatch."¹¹ The second half of the play contained an "exciting duel," while the final curtain closed on another combat "with nearly every one on the stage in a more or less dilapidated condition."¹² Admitting that all the bloodshed may have been somewhat overdone, the critic, nevertheless, says that there was "unquestioned power"¹³ in the performance.

Scenes of this kind also had a major role in the performances of the next troupe to visit New York, in 1930. Tsutsui Tokujirō and The Players from Japan, opened at New York's Booth Theatre on March 4, 1930. The troupe of twenty-five actors and actresses had been doing a variety of classical and modern pieces in the Kyoto-Osaka area when a man named Itō Michio recruited them to perform in America and Europe. He subsequently assumed the role of their managing director.

Itō, who has variously been described as playwright/dancer/director/entrepreneur, had first come to the attention of the Western theatre world about fifteen years earlier when he performed his version of the Nō drama for William Butler Yeats. He later appeared in a London production of Yeats' Nō-inspired play, At the Hawk's Well. The tour of the Tsutsui troupe seems to have been Itō's attempt to raise his prestige further in the Western theatre world.

Tsutsui was an actor of no special renown in Japan. However, he had devised a number of ken-geki ("sword plays") from the Kabuki repertoire. Itō took these and revised them for Western audiences, putting particular emphasis on "pantomime and the dance."¹⁴ Unfortunately, the resulting "Romance in Cherry Blossom Lane," "The Shadow Man," and "Festival," their attendant geisha and samurai notwithstanding, only moved critics to say that Itō "has rendered no signal service either to the Japanese theatre or to...New York,"¹⁵ concluding that The Players from Japan lacked artistic merit.

Itō seems to have underestimated the ability of New York audiences to know a bad job when they saw one, even if it was from the "exotic" Orient. Referring to Zoe Kincaid's description of Kabuki as something of great interest, a critic remarked: "It is inevitably disappointing, therefore, to go to the Booth and find almost nothing of this stimulating character, but only...rather bad, old-fashioned plays."¹⁶ As for stage settings, the same critic could not believe that the Kabuki theatre in Japan would have sets of the "storage-warehouse"¹⁷ type he saw. Another said the sets resembled "the 'Sherlock Holmes' period in America,"¹⁸ recalling William Gillette's late nineteenth century melodrama, which was done so often and in so many different places by touring theatre companies that not much care was given to stage settings.

With respect to acting technique, there was some praise for the kind of skills Kawakami had displayed thirty years earlier, but the program, generally, was dismissed as "Oriental drama that is coming down the main highway of the Occidental theatre, and has not progressed very far."¹⁹ Itō had merely reduced and adapted Tsutsui's own Kabuki adaptations until there was no perceptible style--Oriental or Western--left in them.

Thus, by 1930, two Japanese theatre troupes had come to New York to perform their Kabuki-related dramas. The fact that the Kawakami troupe was better received than Tsutsui and The Players from Japan after them must partly be explained by changes in audience taste and expectation over the thirty year period that had elapsed. The melodramatic style that had appealed to New York audiences at the turn of the century did not suit them after they had become accustomed to the realism of Ibsen and O'Neill.

Another cause for dissatisfaction was the performers themselves. Although audiences in 1900 had been delighted with Sadayakko as a geisha, by 1930, those familiar with Kabuki knew for one thing that specially trained men played the women's roles in orthodox Kabuki. Tsutsui particularly suffered from comparison with Chinese theatre star Mei Lanfang who was performing in New York at the same time and who

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was well known in China, Europe and America for his impersonation of women.²⁰ New Yorkers, therefore, were blasé, if not simply bored, by women playing women's roles in Tsutsui's troupe.

Also, by 1930 the New York theatregoer was more internationally-minded and sophisticated in his taste for foreign drama. As one theatre observor wrote early that year: "omnivorous theatregoers of New York...have assimilated Russian ballet, German 'mystery' plays, the dramas of all Europe, and, most recently, the exoticism of Mei Lan-fang."²¹ Having heard that a real Kabuki troupe had visited Russia two years earlier, they were curious to see what Tsutsui and his troupe would offer. Tsutsui, however, was a disappointment, largely because anything less than real Kabuki was not good enough any more for New York.

Favorable or adverse criticism notwithstanding, the Kawakami and Tsutsui troupes were important in that they gave New Yorkers their first look at performances that were labeled "Kabuki." Even if this so-called Kabuki was only distantly related to the real thing, the troupes broke ground in Japanese-American artistic relations in an age when the concept of Japan was little more than a superficial image in most peoples' minds.

The movement to bring authentic Kabuki to New York had

its first tentative beginnings in 1930. "For several seasons in Gotham 'that Oriental atmosphere' has been getting thicker... there is something 'Japanesey' in every corner... We have sampled everything Japanese but the drama."²² "Drama" meant Kabuki, but it was not until more than twenty years later, while people were still recovering from war with Japan, that serious negotiations were started to bring Kabuki on its first visit to America.

Notes

¹Playbill for the Bijou Theatre, n.d. The New York Public Library Collection.

²Gunji Masakatsu, Kabuki, John Bester, trans. (Palo Alto: Kodansha International, 1969), p. 29.

³Zoe Kincaid, Kabuki, The Popular Stage of Japan (1925; rpt. New York: Benjamin Blom, 1965), p. 345.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Earle Ernst, "The Influence of Japanese Theatrical Style on Western Theatre," Educational Theatre Journal, 21 (1969), p. 131.

⁶"A Japanese Actress," New York Times, 11 March 1900, p. 16.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰"Plays in Japanese: Otojiro Kawakami and Sada Yacco Appear in Three Pieces at the Berkeley Lyceum," New York Times, 2 March 1900, p. 7.

¹¹"Japanese Plays in Boston: Actors and Dramatic Students from Tokio Present Two of Them," New York Times, 6 Dec. 1899, p. 8.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴"Guild to Sponsor Japanese Company: Tokujiro Tsutsui and His Troupe of Actors and Dancers to Appear Here This Season," New York Times, 9 Jan. 1930, p. 22.

¹⁵"The Dance--Japanese Art: Visiting Troupe Raises Some Questions of Comparison," New York Times, 9 March 1930, Section IX, p. 8.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹J. Brooks Atkinson, "Japanese Players in Realistic Drama," New York Times, 5 March 1930, p. 26.

²⁰Kenneth Macgowan and William Melnitz, The Living Stage (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1955), p. 309.

²¹Miriam Beard, "More About the Drama, Both Domestic and Foreign--Come the Japanese," New York Times, 2 March 1930, Section IX, p. 4.

²²Ibid.

Chapter II: Americans Discover Kabuki in Japan: Efforts to Bring Kabuki to New York, 1952-1954

On a recent round-the-world busman's holiday, Joshua Logan, the director, co-producer, and co-author of the new musical, 'Wish You Were Here,' went to theatres in every one of the countries he visited. Quick to spot a potential hit...Logan saw the fun and fantasy of [the Kabuki theatre] and promptly made arrangements for its future tour of the United States.¹

The year was 1952 and Joshua Logan, recipient of the Pulitzer Prize, along with Oscar Hammerstein and Richard Rodgers, for his part in writing, directing and producing the hit musical South Pacific, was trying to arrange the first visit of a Kabuki troupe to the United States. The visits of the Kawa-kami and Tsutsui troupes were now distant memories and the wish--first expressed twenty years earlier--to see authentic Kabuki in New York finally seemed to have the possibility of realization.

Logan proposed that the first and major stop would be New York City. He aimed at bringing over a troupe as early as the autumn of 1952, in time for the opening of the new theatre season. Envisioning that the visit would be made under the joint sponsorship of the American and Japanese governments, Logan was encouraged by John Foster Dulles, then a State Department advisor at work on the peace treaty with Japan. In spite of Logan's--and others!--enthusiasm and

efforts, however, the visit did not take place for eight years.

Joshua Logan was not the first American to discover Kabuki in Japan. Zoe Kincaid and others had visited and even lived in Japan ever since that country was reopened to foreigners in the latter part of the nineteenth century. It was not until after World War II, however, that for the first time sizable numbers of Americans, mostly members of the Occupation forces stationed in Japan from 1945 to 1952, had the opportunity to see Kabuki. In the September 1953 issue of the journal, Theatre Arts, Faubion Bowers, who was official censor of the Japanese theatre during the Occupation, told about the Americans' experience with Kabuki in Tokyo.

Bowers reported that because the Japanese government had used the Kabuki as a vehicle for propaganda purposes before and during the war, the Occupation forces' immediate reaction was to ban its presentation altogether. In due course, however, it was allowed to reopen, but to avoid anti-Occupation sentiment and disease through contact with Japanese people in the theatre, American and other Allied forces were not permitted to attend performances. However, no doubt thanks at least in part to Bowers' personal regard for the theatre, an experimental Allied Night of Kabuki was held, to which the Japanese public, by the way, was not invited. Since the main theatre, the Kabuki-za, had been destroyed

during the war, Kabuki was performed temporarily at the Tokyo Gekijō (Tokyo Theatre). After spraying the theatre with DDT, the Westerners were allowed to enter. Although there had been trepidation, as well as curiosity, on the part of both performers and audience, the first Allied Night of Kabuki was a success and repeated once a month for some time after.²

Bowers reported that the main play of that first Allied Night of Kabuki in Tokyo was Kanjinchō ("The Subscription List") and that cuts were made to speed up the playing time for an audience not used to the long hours that characterize Kabuki as it is traditionally done in Japan.

For the many Americans and others who subsequently developed an interest in Kabuki, the reopening of the Kabukiza in January, 1951 was a welcomed event. As the armed forces' newspaper reported: "Hundreds of United Nations personnel on leave or stationed in Tokyo attended a kabuki first nighter during the first week of the New Year for the purpose of finding out, or if already acquainted...to renew the enchantment."³

It was toward the end of the Occupation period, in 1951, that Joshua Logan made his round-the-world journey with that important stop in Japan. Excited by what he saw in the theatre there, Logan became the first American to

make a serious effort to bring Kabuki to the United States.

At the same time Logan was attempting to negotiate a visit, other people--most notably, the playwright Paul Green, James Michener, and later, Faubion Bowers--also spoke out in support of a Kabuki visit. Like Logan, these people had been to Japan, had seen Kabuki there and felt it was something the internationally-minded New York theatre community should also see and experience. Writing in major newspapers and journals over approximately a two year period--until the visit by the Azuma Kabuki Dancers and Musicians in 1954--these people served to create a potential Kabuki audience in New York.

These articles began to appear after Joshua Logan announced his plans to bring Kabuki to the United States. "Logan to Import Japanese Troupe, Director Plans to Present 50 in Kabuki Theatre Here Next Season in Stylized Art" appeared in the December 24, 1951 issue of the New York Times. After citing Logan's credentials as a top director and author, a man who knows a theatrical success when he sees one, the article reported that Logan has been "completely won over by the entertainment qualities inherent in Japan's Kabuki theatre."⁴ Logan's intention was to have a troupe stay in New York two or three months and then tour other U.S. cities for a total of perhaps two months. Optimistically thinking ahead toward

an actual visit, Logan told the reporter that performance time would be shortened in order to conform to usual New York standards, but that otherwise, Japanese features would be adhered to. Lanterns, for example, would be hung in the theatre lobby and Japanese snacks and mementos would be sold.

As for the plays that would be seen, "a light play, 'Revenge,' and a longer one of a more serious nature called 'The House of Precious Dishes on Ban Street'"⁵ were promised. Although the "light" and "serious" designations were reversed, it probably did not matter at that time to future New York Kabuki audiences. Like the author of the article, they were not quite sure what Kabuki was, although it did sound interesting.

The first article to explain Kabuki and give first-hand information on the subject in a newspaper of national importance was "Tribute to the Kabuki Theatre of Japan." This appeared on the front page of the theatre/arts section of the Sunday New York Times, January 27, 1952, a month after Joshua Logan's plans were announced. It was written by Paul Green, a Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright, who had just returned from a world tour which took him to Japan--and the Kabuki. After leaving Japan, Green happened to meet Joshua Logan in Burma and urged him to hurry and see Kabuki for himself.

After seeing the Kabuki, Logan had reacted by trying to bring the Kabuki "show" to New York and other parts of the United States. ("I felt that the American public must be given the opportunity of sharing my experience."⁶) On the other hand, Green reacted by writing about what he saw and trying to analyze the experience for his fellow Americans:

Japan has in the main the finest theatre art in the world...What choreography! What color of costume and exquisite use of dance, pantomime and music! And the tremendous virtuosity and lyric reach of the acting--these take you like the rich outpouring of a great glowing flower.⁷

He speculated that the European theatre theoreticians Adolf Appia and Gordon Craig would also have been impressed by Kabuki production methods. As Green said; in Kabuki one finds "for the first time all the elements, all the materials of stagecraft, organic and inorganic, completely seized upon and possessed by mind."⁸

Green, however, did more than praise Kabuki. He also advised young Japanese playwrights to revitalize--and revise--Kabuki, which, from his point of view "is too much taken up with dead ethics and empty loyalties--with puppet mikados, ancient shoguns, ronins, samurai, and the ever-present gutting sword of hara-kiri...Death, not life, is its downward pull and climax."⁹ Green felt that Kabuki, like post-war Japan itself, should be made to change with the times.

Within the body of Green's article, Joshua Logan enclosed a short paragraph, "Mr. Logan Seconds Mr. Green." In Logan's words, a Kabuki visit would serve as "an outstanding gesture to the East, by applauding one of its greatest traditions... it would be heartwarming...[in each other we would] find sources of sympathy and similarity."¹⁰ Specifically, the "East" meant Japan and with a background of the recent war and the continuing Occupation, Logan knew that a Kabuki visit could not be simply an artistic or cultural event; politics and diplomacy would also be involved. Although Logan was convinced Kabuki would receive a warm welcome in the United States, much of the delay in actually bringing about a visit seemed due to American--and Japanese--doubts on how Kabuki would indeed be received in the post-war United States.

Both Logan and Green, however, had perceived a universal artistic appeal in Kabuki, as did one former soldier of the Occupation who wrote a letter to the editor of the Times soon after seeing Green and Logan's articles. This person had not only seen Kabuki at the Tokyo Theatre at the Allied Nights of Kabuki, but had also seen rural Kabuki performances, sometimes done outdoors even on cold winter nights. To him, Kabuki was "a strong affirmation of man's timeless need and desire for the art of the theatre."¹¹ He suggested that it was time to transcend the war experience and move toward a new

level of human understanding which a theatre visit might help provide.

Another former soldier expressed his views on the subject later that year. "Japan" by James Michener, prize-winning author of Tales of the South Pacific, was the featured article in the August issue of the popular travel-oriented Holiday magazine. That month's cover was an eye-catching photograph of a kimono-clad Japanese girl. In his introductory remarks, the editor addressed readers with: "Just what is Japan like? And what kind of people are the Japanese? Here is a double-length report on our recent enemies by a man who fought them in the Pacific and who has just revisited them to give you this intimate, colorful and surprising picture."¹² One of the most surprising pictures, literally, was a splendid color photograph of the Kabuki actor Bandō Mitsugorō in full costume.

Although the article was about different aspects of Japanese culture, it was the first of several occasions that Michener wrote about Kabuki. Observing that Kabuki is the Japanese art which seems to impress foreigners the most, Michener described Kabuki in the style of a novelist: it weaves an "intense dramatic spell" and "sounds like Japan centuries ago: harsh, unearthly, powerful...[it] hit me like a thunderbolt."¹³ He concluded: "If you can find it in your

heart to erase the hatreds and suspicions born of a bitter war...then you will find Japan a most rewarding land," and Kabuki one of its most rewarding experiences.¹⁴

Michener wrote other articles concerned exclusively with Kabuki and the possibility of a visit to the United States, but next in order of appearance is Joshua Logan's article "I Love the Japanese Theatre," which appeared in the August 15, 1952 issue of Vogue magazine.

Vogue is a magazine for the style-conscious, especially style-conscious New Yorkers, who, like Logan, were fond of and familiar with the Broadway theatre scene. As though describing some grand extravaganza, Logan spoke of Kabuki as something which "has everything--singing, dancing, clowns, sword play, fights, murder, thievery, mountains of scenery with real bridges and orchards of almost-real cherry trees."¹⁵ Surely, the Vogue reader would want to put it on his or her "must see" list. Indeed, Logan's unshakable belief in Kabuki as "one of the most stimulating theatrical experiences to be found in the world today"¹⁶ should have been bringing the day of Kabuki-in-New York closer. It was already the autumn of 1952, however, the new theatre season had begun, but the Kabuki was nowhere in sight.

It was some time after the Vogue article appeared that Joshua Logan gave up trying to bring Kabuki to the United

States. Although there was no formal announcement, Logan simply said no more on the subject. Then four months later, in an article called "One More Vote for Kabuki Theatre," James Michener reported on the difficulties that Logan had encountered in the year that had already passed since he began to work the project. Citing "financial reasons on our part and obtuseness on the part of the Japanese," Michener warned: "If Kabuki fails to visit the United States it will be a cultural tragedy."¹⁷ For New York in particular he added, "It would be a shame if New York, the cultural center of the world, failed to see...the world's most satisfying theatre."¹⁸ Whatever the obstacles and no doubt there were many--from funding the trip to problems of language once the troupe arrived--it was still not time for the bilateral cooperation necessary to bring Kabuki to America.

Logan had failed, but others were still talking about the possibility of a visit. Faubion Bowers wrote "Kabuki is Broadway Bound" for the September, 1953 issue of Theatre Arts magazine. Here Bowers projected that Kabuki might come within the next two theatrical seasons, possibly "as early as" the autumn of 1954, and he outlined some of the more basic problems which must be solved for Kabuki to be a reality in New York. It was the first time Kabuki staging requirements were specifically considered. Even when the Kawakami and Tstsui troupes had come years before, no mention was

made of the kind of special staging required by authentic Kabuki.

Bowers cited the need for a large stage and suggested the Metropolitan Opera House as a possible location. Although a revolving stage and hanamichi would also be required, the most difficult problem, he felt, was the large number of specially trained people that are needed. Bowers noted that "extras" cannot simply be recruited from the New York area: "The problems of staging and the numbers of personnel make the transportation of Kabuki to America a gigantic task. Perhaps the magnitude subconsciously put all thought of the venture out of our heads in those early days."¹⁹ Those "early days" had been within the previous two years, the time of Logan's and others' initial enthusiasm for bringing Kabuki to the United States.

Six months after this article by Bowers appeared, a whole group of articles on Kabuki was published in the same journal. "Theatre in Japan" was the featured section in the March 1954 issue of Theatre Arts. The articles, seven in all, included Paul Green's "East Meets West," Faubion Bowers' "Backstage at the Kabuki," and most important, James Michener's "Kabuki is a Must for America," in which the author summarized what had been done toward bringing Kabuki to America. He also recommended what should be done to finally make the visit a reality.

According to Michener, the major obstacle was the Shōchiku Company, the controlling management of Kabuki, which was opposed to a troupe's visit to the United States for reasons that can only be described as "vague fears of how Kabuki might be received in the United States." Shōchiku seemed to want assurances that a visit would be critically successful, because they did not want to risk the embarrassment of bad reviews and unfavorable comments. Still sensitive war feelings were no doubt largely to blame, but as Michener himself said:

I can't guess what reception Kabuki would have in New York. If the most recondite plays and boring dances were put on, it couldn't last a week...On the other hand I can name half a dozen plays which are overwhelming in their force and beauty, and...a selection of these, perhaps changed each week, could run at least a month and a half.²⁰

When the Grand Kabuki finally did come in 1960, the program was carefully chosen for its balance and appeal and as Michener had suggested, the play selection was changed in the course of the run.

Thus, two years had passed since Joshua Logan first announced his plans. Logan's attempt had stimulated the development of American interest in Kabuki and even while the situation still remained complicated with numerous diplomatic issues and sensitivities, there was a surprising turn of

events at the beginning of 1954. In response to the expressed American interest in Kabuki, independent action was taken to bring a troupe to the United States by an American theatre entrepreneur and a Japanese Kabuki dance master.

Notes

¹ Joshua Logan, "I Love the Japanese Theatre," editor's preface, Vogue, 15 Aug. 1952, p. 134.

² Faubion Bowers, "Kabuki is Broadway Bound," Theatre Arts, Sept. 1953, p. 66.

³ Andrew Headland, Jr., "Kabuki," Pacific Stars and Stripes: Far East Weekly Review, 20 Jan. 1951, p. 3.

⁴ Sam Zolotow, "Logan to Import Japanese Troupe," New York Times, 24 Dec. 1951, p. 10.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Joshua Logan, "Mr. Logan Seconds Mr. Green," New York Times, 27 Jan. 1952, Section II, p. 1.

⁷ Paul Green, "Tribute to the Kabuki Theatre of Japan," New York Times, 27 Jan. 1952, Section II, p. 1.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Logan, "Mr. Logan," p. 1.

¹¹ Ned Manderino, letter in "Drama Mailbag," New York Times, 17 Feb. 1952, Section II, p. 3.

¹² James A. Michener, "Japan," editor's preface, Holiday, Aug. 1952, p. 27.

¹³ James A. Michener, "Japan," Holiday, Aug. 1952, p. 27.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 78.

¹⁵ Logan, "I Love," p. 134.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 176.

¹⁷ James Michener, "One More Vote for Kabuki Theatre," New York Times, 14 Dec. 1952, Section II, p. 2.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹Bowers, p. 67.

²⁰James Michener, "Kabuki is a Must for America," Theatre Arts, March 1954, p. 80.

Chapter III: The Azuma Kabuki Dancers and Musicians in New York, 1954 and 1955-56

The Azuma Kabuki Dancers and Musicians
Century Theater, February 18-March 21, 1954

In January 1954 impresario Sol Hurok, well-known for introducing high quality foreign performers to America, announced that he was bringing a Japanese troupe called the Azuma Kabuki Dancers and Musicians to New York the following month. Although reporters were told that this was not a troupe from the Kabuki theatre that Logan, Michener, and others had been talking and writing about, but a smaller company "devoted entirely to the dance and musical aspects of the larger medium," one newspaperman observed, "it is no doubt planned in a measure to prepare the American public for the larger dramatic productions to follow."¹

Madame Azuma Tokuho was founder and leader of the twenty-five member troupe. The daughter of the famous Kabuki actor Uzaemon XV, she had been trained in Kabuki dance and was considered a master of the art. Unable to become a performer on the professional Kabuki stage, she privately founded the Azuma School of dance based on her father's Kabuki style.

Madame Azuma knew that Americans had expressed a desire to see Kabuki. Since no agreement had been reached in sending a full-sized Kabuki troupe abroad, she enterprisingly realized that a small company under private management would be an immediate possibility for a foreign tour. She therefore

formed a troupe expressly for this purpose from the men and women connected with the Azuma School, and other professional acquaintances. Aside from Sol Hurok who had arranged the tour, the company received the patronage of Prince Takamatsu (brother of the Japanese Emperor) and the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This patronage in particular made the visit seem more officially "Kabuki."

The members of the troupe were almost equally divided between dancers and musicians. While the musicians were, for the most part, professionals from the Kabuki stage, the dancers were not. About half the dancers were women and among the men, only one, Onoe Kikunojō, was a professional Kabuki actor. Although the troupe performed selections from the Kabuki repertoire--and all original works were strictly Kabuki style--it should be realized that Madame Azuma was not concerned with Kabuki theatre as a whole, but only with its dance and musical aspects.

From the large amount of advance press coverage it received, the visit of the Azuma troupe was viewed as a significant event on the New York cultural scene. On Sunday, February 14, 1954, four days before the scheduled opening, two articles of an introductory and explanatory nature appeared in the New York Times.

The first article, "An Ancient Art from Japan," by

Kawazoe Hiroshi, Special Envoy of the Japanese Society for International Cultural Relations, dealt with the "foreign" nature of the music in the upcoming performance. He warned that although it might sound like an "exotic clamor" to some, the music is actually a kind of language which "narrates, describes and comments on the scene, adding a wealth of subtle atmospheric and emotional detail," highly meaningful to the trained ear.² Instruments including the stringed koto and samisen, Japanese flute and various Japanese drums, bells, and gongs would be played by distinguished Kabuki musicians. Kawazoe further explained that to the so-called "Japanese" ear, the sound of the large drum evokes feelings of warmth; the gong and the high-pitched drum suggest how one might feel "in an elaborate garden or in a shrine with blossoms" adding, "music, to the truly cultivated Japanese, is not sound alone. It is the wisdom and expression of the heart."³ His point, after all, was that foreign audiences must be prepared to open their ears--and minds--to a new cultural experience. This was not only true of the music, however, but all aspects of the performance, and the problem was further underscored in the second article, "A Glimpse of Japan's Classic Theatre in its Choreographic Aspects," by John Martin, dance critic of the Times.

Even before he had seen a single performance, Martin had concluded:

For the Western mind to grasp straight-way the ancient traditions of Japanese theatre art and the intricacies of its organization would be asking a good deal, and there is certainly no way for us to approach the coming season except with complete relaxation and an open mind. It is quite useless to try to 'know' anything.⁴

The writer, however, devoted most of his article to background information on the Azuma troupe and Kabuki in general, presumably so audiences would know something before they went.

Several other newspaper and magazine writers also tried to explain to their readers what kind of troupe Madame Azuma had brought over and how it was related to the traditional Kabuki theatre. Martin reported that the Azuma troupe did a selection of dances from the Kabuki repertoire, though often in very abbreviated form, as well as a few original, though Kabuki-style, pieces choreographed by Madame Azuma's husband, Fujima Masaya. "Japanese Import: The Dance-Drama" in Time magazine referred to the troupe as Kabuki style dancers and musicians, adding however, "the color of the traditional Kabuki remains: stylized postures, garish costumes and make-up."⁵ In fact, the Azuma troupe had come equipped with twenty-four tons of sets, plus numerous trunks of props, costumes and wigs, several crates of dancing platforms, and twelve cases of musical instruments.⁶ Like the Grand Kabuki troupes to come, the Azuma troupe was well prepared for a spectacular

show.

During the troupe's stay in New York, two articles written by Faubion Bowers appeared: "Concerning Kabuki" in Saturday Review and "from Japan: azuma tokuho" in Dance Magazine. Bowers, too, tried to related the Azuma troupe to Kabuki as a whole, and his familiarity with Japanese theatre, as well as a personal acquaintance with Madame Azuma, enabled him to approach the topic from several unique angles. Although the first article was mainly concerned with the staging aspects of Kabuki,⁷ in "from Japan: azuma tokuho" Bowers addressed himself directly to the problem of Madame Azuma's "authenticity." "Is it Kabuki?...Is she a fake?"⁸ Bowers was assigned to give readers the "exclusive story."

After reviewing Madame Azuma's Kabuki credits--her Kabuki family lineage, the fact that she had studied dance with Kabuki masters and had her own school--Bowers then concluded: all of Madame Azuma's dances may not come directly from the Kabuki theatre, but the style definitely does. Hers is the "Azuma version of Kabuki" and although "Many spectators in New York will mistakenly assume that this is the Kabuki, Japan's fabulous, classical theatre that has excited such eminent personalities as Joshua Logan, James A. Michener, Paul Green...and which will eventually be imported here," they can be assured that the Azuma troupe offers "beautiful and expert dances, performed with an authenticity which has

never been shown here before."⁹ The Azuma Kabuki Dancers and Musicians did not represent Kabuki totally--or even officially--but at least they were a good representative of some aspects of that theatre.

During their stay in New York the troupe performed selections from the following dances and dance-dramas. Unless otherwise noted, the dances were choreographed by Madame Azuma and her husband. The English translations are those used by the troupe. First program, February 18 to March 9: Sambasō ("Offering to the Gods," Kabuki dance-drama, first performed in 1853), Sagimusume ("White Heron Maiden," Kabuki dance-drama, first performed in 1762), Kōjō ("Greetings"), Tsuchigumo ("Spider Dance," Kabuki dance-drama, first performed in 1881), Ninin-Wankyu ("Memories"), and O-Matsu-ri no Hi ("Festival Day"). Final program, March 10 to March 21: Tsuchigumo, Ninin-Wankyu, Ōchō ("Ancient Court Days"), Hashi Benkei ("Benkei at the Bridge," dance-drama of Nō origin), Koten Kabuki ("Six Short Sketches"), Fukitori-Tsuma ("The Would-Be Flute Player Seeks a Wife," adapted from the Kyogen), and Cha-no-yu ("Tea Ceremony").¹⁰

Critical Reaction

The Azuma Kabuki Dancers and Musicians came to America in a spirit of friendship and goodwill, but it cannot be forgotten that the war was still a terrible reality in the minds

of many people at that time, and would most likely have some influence on the critical reaction to the performances. Even a sentence on the front page of the playbill showed that all was not normal yet: "In the event of an air raid remain in your seats and obey the instructions of the management."¹¹ Despite this ominous warning, however, the troupe opened on schedule and enjoyed a successful run.

The Azuma troupe was the nearest that New Yorkers had yet come to Kabuki. Because of the interest that had already been generated in Kabuki and the troupe itself, they were given extensive critical coverage. Of the seven major daily newspapers that had regular theatre arts reviews, only two did not review the Azuma performances. Among the five major popular magazines that normally reviewed theatre arts events in New York, only one did not cover the performance. In nearly all cases, dance critics, rather than regular theatre critics, wrote the reviews.

The event was generally received with a mixture of excitement and curiosity. There was special praise for the "gorgeous" costumes and sets. In addition, a number of critics were surprised, though often pleasantly so, by the variety of "strange" musical sounds they heard. Of course, they had been warned to expect an "exotic clamor" of musical instruments unfamiliar to Westerners. But perhaps the strangest

sounds of all were the performers' voices, producing a kind of guttural singsong, which upon first experience is hardly pleasing to most Western ears.

The most significant observation to emerge was the concept of the "theatricality" of Kabuki. The term "theatricality" was used in two ways, although both are based on certain contrasts with Western "realistic" theatre. One refers to Kabuki's use of the many resources of theatrical production--from elaborately executed costumes and sets, to dance, music and song, in addition to the "basics" of speech and gesture that are fundamental to so-called realistic theatre. The second refers to the stylized, non-representational nature of Kabuki. It was seen as theatre for theatre's sake, with no pretense of giving an illusion of life. In other words, Kabuki--as performed by the Azuma troupe--was an art that not only made wide use of theatre resources, but at the same time gave no thought to "naturalistic nonsense," as one critic had put it.

To be sure, the Azuma troupe only performed dance pieces from the Kabuki and did not show audiences the kind of "serious," more nearly realistic dramas the repertoire also includes. What the troupe did perform, however, seems to have succeeded in conveying the spirit of Kabuki theatre to New York audiences. In some ways, it was unfortunate that an

authentic Kabuki troupe had not come, but in other ways, the Azuma troupe fulfilled its mission as an introductory envoy for the Grand Kabuki troupes that would eventually follow.

Despite the fact that many Americans undoubtedly still harbored hostile feelings to Japan in 1954, it must be said that critics, overall, had been open-minded toward their new experience. This first visit of the Azuma troupe showed that Kabuki (even in a somewhat abbreviated form) could arouse great interest in the West.

Perhaps Doris Hering of Dance Magazine best summarized the troupe's visit and its place in the history of Kabuki in America:

Of course, now that these charming Kabuki excerpts have been revealed to us, we should like to see a complete Kabuki play. For some of the numbers seemed so drastically cut that one had to imagine their potential impact. But as a beginning--as a way of introducing Westerners to this ancient and complex art form--the programs were conceived and executed in the finest of taste.¹²

On March 22, the day after their New York run ended, nine leading members of the troupe were introduced to President Eisenhower at the White House in a gesture of international good will. A successfully combined artistic and diplomatic mission had been accomplished. Two months later newspapers announced that Sol Hurok and Madame Azuma had

signed a contract for a second tour to take place approximately two years later.

The Reviews

Newspapers: opening night

Walter Terry ("Azuma Kabuki Dancers," Herald Tribune, 19 February 1954) described his encounter with the Azuma troupe as an "enchanting, wonderfully rich evening of dance." Impressed by the costumes and settings which gave the stage extraordinary "pictorial beauty," he was pleased to discover a variety of themes and styles among the dances. He concluded that "the level of dance performing was, by any standards with which I am familiar, on a remarkably high plane." For Terry, the performance succeeded on its own terms.

Miles Kastendieck ("Azuma Kabuki Dancers: A Perfection of Art," Journal-American, 19 February 1954) called the performance a "perfection of art rarely experienced these days," but he was unable to say exactly what kind of art it was. He understood the performance to be "Kabuki," therefore Kabuki "viewed through occidental eyes," as he put it, is primarily dance. After that, he could only conclude that the Azuma troupe is "the most unusual novelty in the city at the moment," adding, "their performances are something to see rather than describe here." It seemed best, after all, to let everyone draw their own conclusions.

Frances Herridge ("Japanese Company Opens at Century," Post, 19 February 1954) reported that dance and non-dance

fans alike will be interested in "the strange voice and pantomime techniques, the authentic music, the creative decor... the spectacle of lavish costumes, wigs and masks." However, as for the dances themselves, she found them "difficult to classify" and ended by calling them "more stylized pantomime than dance." If it did not resemble the type of dance with which she was familiar, Herridge concluded it probably was not dance, after all. "It is a show so foreign to us in every respect that all but the most provincial will find it an experience not to be missed." For this critic, it was a novel, yet at the same time, a fascinating experience.

John Martin ("Century Yields to Kabuki Troupe: Japanese Dancers in Ancient Drama-Music Presentation Impressive in Opening," Times, 19 February 1954) was very enthusiastic. "It would be hard to imagine a more captivating evening... anyone who goes once will certainly want to go again." Like Walter Terry, he took the performance on its own terms, as one example of the universal art of dance. Saying a good performer is good "no matter what language he speaks or what traditions of art he practices," Martin found everything in the Azuma performance done "with the greatest artistic authority, with a deep respect for form and with impeccable elegance." He seems to have followed his own earlier advice to have an open mind for this new experience.

Finally, Louis Biancolli ("West Meets East Via Kabuki Show," World-Telegram and The Sun, 19 February 1954) wrote the quaintest among the opening night reviews: "A colorful little troupe of Japanese dancers and musicians fluttered delicately across the stage." Herridge had called it "stylized pantomime"--Biancolli decided it was ballet, though clearly "far beyond the scope of conventional ballet." He concluded with an uplifting note: "I feel proud and privileged to have seen and heard these earnest artists from the East." The slightly anachronistic tone of this review is reminiscent of articles written about the Kawakami troupe more than fifty years earlier.

Newspapers: later reviews

John Martin ("The Azuma Kabuki Style Makes Alien Conquest," Times, 28 February 1954) began by saying that when Sôl Hurok first announced the Azuma troupe visit, some, including Martin himself did not expect a stimulating artistic experience from the foreign performers. We "were fairly well resigned to being politely instructed and nothing more." But as the title of the article suggests, great interest was generated by the troupe.

In this article and in a later review ("Kabuki Dancers in New Program...Tokuho Azuma Scores," 10 March 1954) Martin also praised the theatricality of the troupe's performance

which gives no thought to "naturalistic nonsense and playing at credibility." The Kawakami melodramatic style had been well received at the turn of the century, though thirty years later Tsutsui and his troupe were much less popular with an audience more interested in "realism." Similarly, by 1954 change had again taken place. Now, Martin and others reacted to the gloomy slice-of-life realism that had been prevalent in the theatre for decades, and the presentational style of the Azuma troupe was praised for its spectacle of "pure theatricality."

Magazines

The anonymous reviewer for Newsweek ("Song-Dance-Skill," 1 March 1954) found the songs and rhythms "surprisingly pleasing," but said little more.

Irving Kolodin ("Azuma Kabuki Dancers," Saturday Review, 6 March 1954) called the performance "an agreeable experience rather than a particularly stimulating one." Although he felt the Azuma troupe was certainly skilled, their dances did not move him. He ascribed this to his lack of experience in Japanese theatre and dance, calling himself someone "not attuned to its subtleties and fine points." Kolodin was the first critic to actually disqualify himself from judging the performances because of his lack of knowledge and/or experience with respect to Japanese dance in particular and things-Japanese

in general.

Winthrop Sargeant ("Kabuki," The New Yorker, 6 March 1954) felt the dancing was "expert and moving." In all, he found the show "authentically Japanese in its quaint symbolic pantomime, its solemnly exaggerated, crooning dialogue, its striking ritualistic dancing." For this critic, unlike Kolodin above, the Azuma performance succeeded as dance, in general, and was particularly fascinating as Japanese dance.

Doris Hering ("The Azuma Kabuki Dancers and Musicians," Dance Magazine, April 1954), like John Martin of the Times, praised the Kabuki dancers for their theatricality. Revealing "a perfect blending of theatre elements," she found that "speech, song, gesture, music, decor and dance" were in perfect balance. Like William Butler Yeats who found his long sought-after "lyric" theatre in the Nō, Hering found hers in the Azuma Kabuki Dancers and Musicians.

(Note: The newspapers and magazines which did not carry reviews were the Daily News, Mirror, and Time.)

The Azuma Kabuki Dancers and Musicians
Broadway Theatre, December 26, 1955-January 14, 1956

From the time of the first visit of the Azuma troupe near the beginning of 1954 until their return at the end of 1955, no further mention was made of plans to bring authentic Kabuki to America. Although the Azuma dances could only have whetted the appetites of Kabuki connoisseurs, we must interpret the silence as evidence of continuing frustration in arranging the visit of a full-sized troupe of performers.

The Azuma Kabuki Dancers and Musicians returned to New York in December 1955 for three weeks at the Broadway Theatre. Although arrangements had again been made by Sol Hurok, and the twenty-five member troupe was still under the patronage of the Emperor's brother and a Japanese government agency, certain interesting changes were evident. As Faubion Bowers said: "There is more of the genuine Kabuki...this time."¹³

It had been argued that since "the problems of transporting real Kabuki, with its vast casts and elaborate settings, to America seem insurmountable,"¹⁴ the Azuma performances were better than nothing at all. The troupe, however, had been criticized--both in Japan and in America--for calling itself Kabuki when it did not truly represent the Kabuki theatre, but merely one school of Kabuki dance. As Bowers reported: "It was feared that the great traditional theatre of Japan would be misrepresented to foreigners."¹⁵ Therefore,

Madame Azuma felt more responsible to live up to the "Kabuki" name when she returned to America in 1955.

Changes were made in program selection. For the first two weeks of the new run, the troupe did seven dances and dance-dramas which they had not done before in New York. For the last week however, they mostly chose works which had been especially popular on their first visit. In addition, three professional Kabuki actors came this time, compared with only one before. Consequently, more stress was now put on traditional Kabuki roles, especially the onnagata, and stage acrobatics, which can be considered among the most specialized dance techniques of the Kabuki theatre.

The troupe performed selections from the following works. First program, December 26 to January 7: Dammari ("Kabuki Pantomime"), Fujimusume ("Wisteria Maiden," Kabuki dance-drama, first performed in 1826), Setsu-getsu-ka ("Snow, Flower and Moon"), Momiji Gari ("The Witch Among the Maple Leaves," Kabuki dance-drama, first performed in 1788), Kasane ("The Sure Heavenly Retribution," Kabuki dance-drama, first performed in 1823), Sannin Katawa, Kagami Jishi ("The Girl Who Became a Lion," Kabuki dance-drama, first performed in 1893). Final program, January 9 to January 14: Kōjō, O-Matsuri-no Hi, Tsuchigumo, Ninin-Wankyu, Fukitori-Tsuma, Sāmbasō, and Musume Dōjōji ("The Maiden at the Dojo Temple," Kabuki dance-drama, first performed in 1753).¹⁶

Critical Reaction

As in 1954, the Azuma Kabuki Dancers and Musicians received extensive critical coverage. Again, the beautiful costumes and sets, the "exotic" music and vocal sounds, as well as the "theatricality" of the troupe's performance were praised--and in much the same terms as in 1954. Beyond that, there was a surprising emphasis on the "foreign" and "strange" nature of Kabuki.

Since the critics were in all cases the same ones who had reviewed the troupe's performances two years earlier, it would have been natural to expect a sense of familiarity with the style and methods of the Azuma Kabuki Dancers and Musicians. However, it was a fact that Madame Azuma did not simply repeat what the troupe did in 1954--at least during the first half of the 1955-56 run. There was a new selection of dances and dance-dramas. Among these there were fewer originally choreographed works and more strictly authentic and traditional Kabuki dance-dramas, with features typical of the traditional Kabuki theatre given more stress. Onnagata roles, as we have mentioned, were done by one of the professional Kabuki actors, while the other professional actors did Kabuki sword fight scenes and acrobatics.

This shift from 1954, however, is hardly mentioned by the critics. Referring to onnagata and such, no one said

more than an occasional "amazing." Knowing little about traditional Kabuki performances, the problem was that the critics could not fully understand what they saw and felt unqualified to make detailed comments. They were impelled to conclude, therefore, by labeling the performances "foreign" and "strange," or by simply repeating what they had written two years earlier.

I It is certain, however, that interest in Kabuki had not diminished. However bewildered some critics may have felt, they still generally found Kabuki a uniquely impressive art and retained a vivid sense of the spectacle nature of Kabuki which they had first observed in 1954.

On the other hand, there seemed to be a growing dissatisfaction. Although the Azuma troupe had tried to convey more of the totality of the Kabuki art, they could not really break out of the repetitious patterns imposed by the limitations of their dance and dance-drama repertory. Some people, like Doris Hering, believed that New York had had enough introduction to Kabuki. Seeing a few selections was not sufficient, and she now firmly felt the necessity to experience Kabuki in its "native theatre," that is, to see the real thing--be it in Tokyo or New York. Four and a half years later New Yorkers had their chance.

The Reviews

Newspapers: opening night

Walter Terry ("Azuma Kabuki Dancers," Herald Tribune, 27 December 1955) again liked the performance and expanded the observation he made in 1954 regarding the "pictorial beauty" of the show. In addition to the "pictorial beauty" of the costumes and sets, he also found that the troupe offered three other "beauties:" elegant style, rich dance themes, and mysteriously exotic music. Terry concluded: "Although one cannot, due to sharp differences in acting styles and the use of legends remote from our own heritage, identify himself with the problems of the beings on stage, he can respond to the dancers' invitation to view an art expression which never lacks the warming glow of beauty." Still believing that the Kabuki dances succeed on their own terms as dance, he had come to feel, however, that full understanding and appreciation are somewhat diminished by the foreign nature of the performance.

Miles Kastendieck ("Kabuki Dancers: Blend of Beauty and Art," Journal-American, 27 December 1955) changed little in two years. For him the Azuma troupe created an "other-world atmosphere which constantly expresses one thing above all: Beauty." This beauty was to be found in the spectacle aspects of the production.

Frances Herridge ("Japanese Theater Comes to Town," Post, 27 December 1955) repeatedly used the word "strange" to describe all aspects of the performance. Apparently unable to think of anything new to say, she concluded with almost the same words she had used in 1954.

John Martin ("Azuma Kabuki Troupe Scores: Japanese Group Here for Second Season," Times, 27 December 1955) again was impressed by the performance, but like the others, he tended to merely repeat what he said the last time the troupe performed.

Similarly, Louis Biancolli ("Kabuki Dancers Please at Broadway," World-Telegram and The Sun, 27 December 1955) was as quaint this time as in 1954: "To a local scene already teeming with world-wide wares, the Kabuki Dancers brought their own little cargo of artistry last night."

Newspapers: later reviews

Walter Terry ("The Magical Art of Kabuki Dance," Herald Tribune, 8 January 1956) addressed himself to the problem of Western audience response to the Japanese performance. He said that people in the West--particularly New York--are so accustomed to speed in all aspects of daily life and even in art that the "leisurely pace" of the Japanese dances may bother some. Terry, however, felt a certain preference for these "unhurried marvels" of the Azuma troupe.

Modifying his previous views on the difficulties of understanding the dances because of their Japanese content, Terry said "the emotions are universal and so also, beneath exotic garb, are the individuals: heroes and heroines, villains and bumpkins, innocents and sophisticates." In a final review ("Azuma Kabuki Dancers," 10 January 1956) the critic summed up his feelings:

To most of us, it was an evening of enchantment. There are those, I realize, who miss the pace of Western dance... But for many, these Japanese artists work their magic and transport us into a wonderful new realm where pictures seem to come to vivid life and where poetry is transformed into heroic, into witty, into lyrical action.

Terry, and later, Doris Hering, are unique among critics in 1955-56 in being able to go beyond what they had previously written and thought, and to meaningfully discuss the new performances.

Finally, John Martin ("Tokyo Finale: Azuma Kabuki Troupe in Final Week," Times, 10 January 1956) reviewing a program of dances which had been the "favorites" in 1954, found that "every number seems somehow better than it did last year." There was little feeling, however, that there was anything new to be seen and experienced.

Magazines

Winthrop Sargeant ("Musical Events," The New Yorker,

7 January 1956) restated his old views in new ways, and added some fresh observations. Although some of the dance-dramas "may strike the western mind as slightly obscure in motivation and behavior," he praised "the unfailing Japanese flair for the visual side of theatrical spectacle." Commenting on a particular actor's ability in female as well as male roles, he was the first to remark on the virtuosity of Kabuki actors--an observation that is often heard in connection with Kabuki theatre.

Doris Hering ("The Azuma Kabuki Dancers and Musicians," Dance Magazine, March 1956) reported that Madame Azuma has returned "with her assemblage of warriors, lovers, maidens, villains, courtesans, comedians, acrobats, singers, and musicians--all woven into the powerful beauty of Kabuki." Rather than call it Kabuki dance, Hering now referred to the Azuma performance as Kabuki proper, saying that this time she found that the "dramatic" aspects of the performance--as opposed to dance aspects alone--have been given much more prominence. Because the plays were so abridged, however, she complained that character could not be sufficiently developed.

(Note: In addition to the newspapers and magazines cited last time, Newsweek and Saturday Review did not carry reviews.)

Notes

- ¹ New York Times, 17 Jan. 1954, Section II, p. 15.
- ² Kawazoe Hiroshi, "An Ancient Art from Japan," New York Times, 14 Feb. 1954, Section II, p. 7.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ John Martin, "A Glimpse of Japan's Classic Theatre in its Choreographic Aspects," New York Times, 14 Feb. 1954, Section II, p. 15.
- ⁵ "Japanese Import: The Dance-Drama," Time, 22 Feb. 1954, p. 80.
- ⁶ Martin, "A Glimpse," p. 15.
- ⁷ Faubion Bowers, "Concerning Kabuki," Saturday Review, 27 Feb. 1954, p. 24.
- ⁸ Faubion Bowers, "~~from Japan~~ azuma ~~tokuho~~," Dance Magazine, March 1954, p. 15.
- ⁹ Ibid., p. 14.
- ¹⁰ playbill. New York Public Library Collection.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Doris Hering, "The Azuma Kabuki Dancers and Musicians," Dance Magazine, Apr. 1954, p. 62.
- ¹³ Faubion Bowers, "The Broadway Triumph of a Lady from Japan," The Reporter, 12 Jan. 1956, p. 36.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ playbill. New York Public Library Collection.

Chapter IV: Grand Kabuki in New York, 1960 and 1969

Before continuing with a discussion of the visit of the Grand Kabuki troupe, mention should be made of how American interest in Kabuki was suddenly manifested in books published in the 1950's.

Prior to the war and the ensuing Occupation, little had been written on Kabuki in English. In fact, Kincaid's Kabuki, The Popular Stage of Japan was the only major study in the field up until that time. As American interest in Kabuki began to grow after the war and through the 1950's, however, books on Kabuki began to appear in increasing numbers.

The major works of the decade were: Faubion Bowers' Japanese Theatre (1952), a general account of Japanese theatre, though giving special emphasis to Kabuki; Aubrey and Giovanna Halford's The Kabuki Handbook (1956), an excellent source for plot outlines and detailed information on many aspects of production; A.C. Scott's The Kabuki Theatre of Japan (1956) and Earle Ernst's The Kabuki Theatre (1959), both general histories. In addition, Hamamura Yonezō's Kabuki (1956) and Kawatake Shigetoshi's Kabuki, Japanese Drama (1958) were written to give Westerners an introduction from the Japanese point of view.

It is interesting to note that with one exception all these books came out after the Azuma Kabuki Dancers and

Musicians had performed in New York for the second time. Two visits by the troupe had evidently proved to publishers that people were really interested in the Kabuki theatre and would therefore buy books on the subject. That so many books came out in so short a time is a strong indication that there had been a genuinely positive response to Kabuki.

Just as the Azuma troupe had fulfilled a kind of introductory function, the books themselves tended to be of a general and introductory nature. For years, moreover, books dominated publications on Kabuki; there was no comparable display of interest in newspapers and magazines until the beginning of 1960.

Grand Kabuki
City Center, June 2-22, 1960

Nine years after Joshua Logan had first started negotiations to bring Kabuki to New York, a troupe of twenty-four actors, eighteen musicians, and twenty administrative and stage assistants from Tokyo's Kabuki Theatre came to America to celebrate the one hundredth anniversary of the signing of the first Japanese-American Trade Agreement. The troupe, sponsored by the Society for International Cultural Relations and the Japan Society, arrived at the end of May, 1960 for a three week engagement at New York's City Center. Whether or not the anniversary celebration was just a scheme to persuade the Kabuki-controlling Shōchiku Company

to let a troupe leave Japan, Grand Kabuki, as it was called to signify that this was absolutely real Kabuki, had at last arrived. Although Logan was not directly involved in bringing about the visit, it was the realization of his and others' earlier dreams.

In the middle of January 1960 plans for the visit were announced in New York newspapers. By February 20, final arrangements had been completed. Lincoln Kirstein, impresario and director of the New York City Ballet, and Faubion Bowers had personally gone to Japan to negotiate the tour with the Shōchiku Company. Although the Americans had originally hoped to arrange a two-month tour, with stops in New York, Washington, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and possibly Hawaii, they finally had to agree on a one-and-one-half-month tour, with performances in New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco.

In the six months between the first announcement of the visit and the first performance itself, the momentum of interest in Kabuki was gradually built in newspaper and magazine articles. In March, for example, the Japanese consul was reported to have said that the upcoming visit would be "the initial exposure in the West of complete Kabuki with top performers."¹ Kabuki troupes, similar to the one that was coming to New York, had only been out of Japan twice before--

to Russia and China in the first half of the century. Then in April, a correspondent in Japan sent word of a traditional name-taking ceremony at the Kabuki Theatre in Tokyo.² He reported that the previous one had taken place in 1951, when an outstanding onnagata actor was given the name Utaemon VI. Now, Utaemon VI, along with Kanzaburō XVII and Shōroku II, three of Japan's greatest Kabuki actors, would be coming to New York as the troupe's star performers. In May, New Yorkers read that the troupe would be bringing a twenty-four by sixty foot special silk gift curtain--containing 73,000 small sheets of gold foil--to be hung for the performance at City Center.³ The curtain had been donated by five Japanese businessmen. The visit was, after all, nominally in commemoration of the anniversary of a trade agreement.

The June issue of Dance Magazine (published in May) announced the details of the upcoming Kabuki tour in "Press-time News," and in the same issue, "The Past Within the Present: The Grand Kabuki ventures into the New World," an article by Faubion Bowers, appeared. Bowers said that the Kabuki visit is an important moment for America: "What a long way we have come...in our awareness of theatre arts abroad!"⁴ Observing that although the word "Kabuki" might now be part of our vocabulary--as familiar as "kimono," "judo," or "Zen"--he wrote that as theatre, however, "no-

thing really prepares you for Kabuki except direct experience."⁵

Among the articles written prior to the visit, "Classic Spectacular from Japan" by Donald Keene was most informative and exciting for the newcomer to Kabuki. The article was featured in the Sunday Magazine section of the Times and aimed at giving a short history of Kabuki in Japan, its present day characteristics, as well as suggestions on what American audiences may find especially interesting in the performances they would see. Keene and Bowers, incidentally, helped select the plays that would be performed in America.

Keene wrote that even if not one word of the Japanese dialogue is understood, "The flowing movements...the bold gestures and the sharp notes of the music give pleasure," adding, "Eyes accustomed to single-set performances will find fresh interest in the revolving stage and the variety of pictorial effects in which Kabuki abounds."⁶ Keene felt that Americans would like Kabuki, not just as an "exotic spectacle," but as one of the world's great classic theatres.

Printed explanations and a translation/commentary system at the City Center would help solve comprehension problems--not only in the spoken language, but also in the language of Kabuki theatrical conventions. As Keene wrote, for example, often in Kabuki "it is hard to tell where acting ends

and dance and song begin."⁷

For one dollar audience members could rent small transistorized receivers which were used to broadcast live an English translation and running commentary by Donald Richie and Watanabe Miyoko. Watanabe had used the same kind of system to help foreign visitors at the Kabuki Theatre in Tokyo, but this was the first time it was used in America for a visiting foreign troupe. Narrators and microphones alone had been used during the Azuma troupe's performances. One aspect of the system that audiences found particularly amusing was when Watanabe would discreetly suggest appropriate times for them to applaud.

On the other hand, Kunizō Matsuo, spokesman for the troupe, said: "I am sure that American audiences will understand the plays. We have shortened some of the sentences and changed some of the pantomime so that American audiences can follow the actions."⁸ Kabuki would present novel problems for many theatregoers, but as some had suggested at the time the Azuma troupe visited America, audiences would do well to open their ears, eyes, and most important, their minds to the new experience.

Incidentally, the night the Kabuki opened at the City Center striking actors had forced the closing of all legitimate theatres on Broadway. The strike was caused by a dis-

pute between the Actors' Equity Union and the theatre-managing League of New York Theatres. Kabuki performers were not affected, however, because they came under the jurisdiction of the American Guild of Musical Artists, not Actors' Equity. That all Kabuki performances were sold out must be ascribed to strong interest, but it should also be realized that from June 2 to June 13 Kabuki was just about the only theatrical event open. One benefit of the strike was the leisure it gave New York actors to attend the Kabuki. Some actors, in particular, came back two, three, and four times.

The troupe performed selections of the following plays and dance-dramas from the Kabuki repertoire. First program, June 2 to June 8: Kanjinchō ("The Subscription List," dance-drama, first performed in 1840), Tsubosaka Reigenki ("The Miracle at Tsubosaka Temple," play, first performed in 1887), and Kagotsurube ("The Courtesan," play, first performed in 1888). Second program, June 9 to June 15: Musume Dōjōji ("The Maiden at Dojo Temple," dance-drama, first performed in 1753), Chushingura ("The Forty-seven Ronin," play, first performed in 1748), and Migawari Zazen ("The Substitute," dance-drama). Final program, June 16 to June 22: Musume Dōjōji, Chushingura, and Takatsuki (dance-drama, first performed in 1933).⁹

Critical reaction

The visit of the Kabuki to America in the late spring of 1960 was a theatrical event of the greatest importance. Though the company...has been abroad, it had never been to the United States, had never performed before a New York audience, one of the world's most sophisticated, and certainly one of the most intolerant. The American backers feared that the Americans would not like what they saw; the Japanese feared that the foreigners would not understand. That the New York performances were almost completely sold out before they began calmed no fears and the dress rehearsal was a shambles: the hanamichi, built into the City Center Theater just the day before, was too short; the mawari-butai (revolving stage) stuck; the big gift curtain was too big for the proscenium...the transistor radio translation-units would not work in certain parts of the house. Yet the performance, two hours later, was perfection itself.

The American audience was ready for the Kabuki...and the troupe could easily have played another month. The reviews were almost entirely enthusiastic and, upon those occasions when they were not, respectful...The audience was intelligent and completely receptive.¹⁰

Donald Richie and Watanabe Miyoko wrote this summary of the 1960 Kabuki visit in the concluding notes of their book, Six Kabuki Plays, a collection of the translations they had made for the performances. To be sure, the long-awaited visit was a success and the consensus among most critics was that it was an exciting and rewarding experience. Looking closely, however, at the reviews themselves reveals the various ways in which the critics reacted to Kabuki. Whereas dance critics had reviewed the Azuma troupe, regular

theatre critics, generally, gave their opinions on the Grand Kabuki.

As in the case of the Azuma Kabuki Dancers and Musicians in 1954 and again in 1955-56, critics were most impressed by the spectacular aspects of the Kabuki performances--especially the grand display of costumes, make-up, and sets. Seeing Kabuki as theatre-in-total now, and not as just dance or dance-drama, there was a wider range of comment.

Critics had much to say about the acting, labeling it "stylized" and citing star performers for their skill and versatility in playing various roles--especially the onna-gata roles. There was much uncertainty at first regarding what should--or could--be said about Kabuki performance in general. Critics of the Azuma troupe skirted issues by labeling what they saw "foreign" or "strange;" now in 1960, simply to call the production "highly stylized" was often the substitute for more thoughtful criticism.

While the concept of Kabuki's "theatricality," its wide use of theatre resources as well as its "non-realistic" nature, emerged again, as in 1954 and 1955-56, the Kabuki in 1960--seen as nearly as possible as it is done in Japan--was a much more powerful and complicated experience than the earlier Azuma selections had been. There was so much more to see and experience that at first it was overwhelming and many

critics could do little more than be "impressed." As they went back a second and third time, however, it is interesting to see that they were able to perceive more details of the performance, and the more meaningful and enjoyable the experience became.

Although often frustrated by comprehension problems-- language, acting style, and such--critics tried hard to grapple with the experience, to understand and in turn explain to their readers what they saw. At first some felt that Kabuki could only be appreciated by the experienced Kabuki theatre-goer, but in the end they found it was enough to be an experienced theatregoer in general. Even allusions to past and present problems in Japanese-American relations gradually dissolved as the perception of Kabuki as a universal theatrical and artistic experience began to evolve.

The Kabuki broke all attendance records at New York's City Center...despite the great cost of sending the entire troupe, with musicians, technicians, scenery and costumes-- it lost no money, and it gave pleasure to thousands. No one who ever saw their series of performances will ever forget them, this culmination of East and West working together.¹¹

Time, however, would tell Kabuki's success and the fact that a troupe returned in 1969 is one indication that it was indeed a success. As one critic wrote just before the troupe left New York, it was "one of this season's most remarkable theatre events."¹²

The Reviews

Newspapers: opening night

John Chapman ("Grand Kabuki Makes Impressive Appearance at the City Center," Daily News, 3 June 1960) was "impressed" by what he saw, but did not feel qualified to judge this foreign art form, as he referred to Kabuki. "Being almost totally unacquainted with the peaceful and cultured side of the Japanese, I had to start from scratch, and can report only as an onlooker, not an expert." Unfortunately, Chapman reported on little, finding general expertise in theatre criticism inadequate when reviewing Japanese theatre. He remarked, however, that he found the actors "impressive even to these foreign and untutored eyes," humorously adding, "Utaemon...struck me as the ablest female impersonator since Mae West." Those who have seen Utaemon perform know the tremendous femininity and almost wicked beauty he brings to his onnagata roles. Chapman concluded, however; "Give me about 40 more years of watching the Grand Kabuki and I'll be able to write you a scholarly report." The tone of the review was less than serious, giving the impression that Kabuki was not only too "foreign" for this critic's understanding, but too "Japanese"--in the sense of being sent by a former enemy--for this critic's comfort.

Walter Kerr ("3 Japanese Plays Given by 'Grand Kabuki';"

Troupe," Herald Tribune, 3 June 1960) reported that the Kabuki plays can be enjoyed by being "intent upon the surface texture, without even hoping to become emotionally embroiled in so rigid and alien a form." Although he felt the foreign nature of the performance tended to limit his full understanding, he went much further than the previous critic. Praising the extensive use of many different theatrical elements and devices, Kerr said: "Though everything is strange... each device brings its...force to bear on an experience that is not in any superficial sense realistic but that digs at recognizable emotional roots just the same." Like some critics of the Azuma troupe, Kerr applauded the frank theatricality of Kabuki, at the same time recognizing a universal basis for this classical Japanese theatre.

John McClain ("Curtain Rises on Kabuki," Journal-American, 3 June 1960) reported that Kabuki "to this Western mind, proved to be almost too stylized to be estimated by our conventional standards," then added, "as entertainment in our sense of the word it leaves much to be desired." The tone is similar to that in the Daily News, with McClain warning future Kabuki audiences: "be prepared merely to study an Oriental expression of drama as different as pot roast and sukiyaki...most of the evening was very special stuff, to be savored by students." If so-called students are people who

want to learn, this critic could not count himself in their number. He even refused to appreciate the attempt to help the audience with the transistorized commentary and translation: "I wasn't frankly fascinated in what either the actor or the translator had to say." Though conceding that the performers did seem competent, McClain concluded with the doubt that Kabuki "will have much popular appeal here. Strike or no strike." Happily, however, he was wrong. Kabuki did have much popular appeal and other critics were more able to explain why.

Robert Coleman ("Kabuki Players Prove Captivating," Mirror, 3 June 1960) enthusiastically reported on the "brilliance" of the evening, beginning with a description of the audience, which was "comprised of political, diplomatic, social and artistic leaders." With hardly a hint that there might be any problem of comprehension or appreciation because of language or other difficulties, he assured his readers that the actors' "expressive gestures and movement speak louder than words." Praising "the exotic settings and gorgeous costumes," Coleman concluded that Kabuki is "magnificent" and that it is the kind of experience "the cognoscenti of international art are too seldom given the opportunity to enjoy."

Richard Watts, Jr. ("Visit of the Kabuki from Japan,"
Post. 3 Jun

Post, 3 June 1960) said that to have Kabuki in New York "is to participate in an international cultural experience... [it is] an event of artistic and theatrical importance." The tone of the review changed, however, when Watts began discussing the performance itself. He felt that he has a "blind spot" when it comes to Kabuki, because he is "an alien to [Japanese] artistic tradition...it is impossible for me to find their stylized playing dramatic or moving. Unable to share in their emotions, I must confine myself to respecting them."

Brooks Atkinson ("Grand Kabuki: Japanese Troupe is at the City Center," Times, 3 June 1960) wrote a review that is characterized neither by sweeping praises nor complaints. Atkinson, who had visited the Kabuki Theatre in Tokyo before the war, began with reference to the strike which turned out the lights on Broadway: "Amid the inky darkness of the theatre district there is one bright gleam--the 'Grand Kabuki.'" Where other critics faltered, Atkinson explained: "'Presentation' is the key word to distinguish Kabuki from the Western theatre of 'representation.'" It is a kind of "pure theatre" characterized by "ritual, ceremony, style and spectacle."

With regard to the problem of language and comprehension, Atkinson found the transistORIZED system helpful, but told

his readers:

It is said that Japanese audiences are less interested in the words of a drama than the ritual of the acting, the glory of the costumes, the rhythm of the movement, the composition of the performance, the synchronization of the acting with the exotic tinkling, clapping musical instruments that punctuate the story.

To be sure, despite a somewhat archaic vocabulary in the Kabuki plays, Japanese audiences generally understand the words quite well--just as we understand Shakespeare today. In the end, however, Atkinson's point was that even if language is a barrier to comprehension, there is a lot that the Western theatregoer can still gain from Kabuki. The strike brought dark days to New York theatres, "but the arrival of the Kabuki troupe gives us something to admire and wonder at during a melancholy interregnum."

Finally, Ted Morello ("Grand Kabuki Bows at Center," World-Telegram and The Sun, 3 June 1960) related his impressions of audience response: "Despite a certain understandable bewilderment over what was happening before their eyes [the audience] applauded warmly" and everyone especially went "ahhh" when the curtain opened on beautifully elaborate sets. Morello described "the extreme stylization"--the acting which "calls for grotesque facial contortions and a manner of delivery in which the words are squeezed out re-

luctantly, like cold molasses from an atomizer." At the very least he found Kabuki a theatre of strange wonders.

Newspapers: second program reviews

Walter Kerr ("3 Japanese Plays Given By 'Grand Kabuki,'" Herald Tribune, 10 June 1960) called the performers "remarkable players in a remarkable company." With the initial shock, as it were, having worn off, Kerr was now able to make more detailed observations. Suggesting that the power of Kabuki is in contrasts--bold colors side by side with pastels, moments of great action followed by absolute stillness--he felt that the enchantment works something like "snake-charming, if you are reasonably willing to play the role of snake." In other words, Kerr advised audiences to let themselves be open to the experience--and not be stopped by initial appearances of foreignness and incomprehensibility.

Frances Herridge ("Grand Kabuki in a New Program," Post, 10 June 1960) wrote the review this time, instead of Richard Watts, Jr. Having also seen the Kabuki during its first week in New York, Herridge found she liked the second program better for several reasons: "For one thing, you begin to catch on to the meaning of those stylized gestures and expressions...You get so you don't expect too much action and you settle for watching the smaller details, the statuesque pose struck suddenly, the precise ritual of a bow..."

the use of the fan and kimono." As the critic who had referred to the dances of the Azuma troupe as "stylized pantomime," she now found the Kabuki dances part of a "universal language" of dance. Although she found that the speeches were "merely a weird noise to Westerners,"¹⁰ she had special praise for the onnagata actor Utaemon who "moves spectacularly well." Like Walter Kerr and others, the more she saw Kabuki, the better she liked it.

Brooks Atkinson ("More Kabuki: 'Chushingura' heads City Center bill," Times, 10 June 1960) said that after seeing the second program, he felt that the Grand Kabuki is really grand. Even with the commentaries and ample program notes, however, "a theatre-goer ignorant of Japanese may find himself losing his place as the story slowly unfolds," but the acting was "magnificent" and that made up for deficiencies elsewhere.

Finally, Diane de Bonneval ("Grand Kabuki: A Refreshing Change from Trivial Reality," World-Telegram and The Sun, 10 June 1960), writing in place of Ted Morello, said something similar to what Brooks Atkinson and others had remarked on earlier: "In a theater often fretted by social editorials and This Is Your Life realism, a breath of pure 'art for art' is refreshing." Moreover, "if anything good can be said for the present blackout along Broadway, it is the

added wattage it allots the Center's Oriental guests."

After the second program of plays had ended and before the third had begun, "Visit by Kabuki: City Center is Host to Troupe of Japanese" (Times, 12 June 1960), a lengthy article by Brooks Atkinson appeared, assessing the performances thus far. Atkinson made his point at the outset of the article: the visit of the Kabuki is a momentous event "to people who are interested in theatre as an art." He then discussed some of the differences between Western theatre art and Oriental, as exemplified by the Kabuki. "Although realism is no longer the sacred goal of theatrical ambition, realism underlies our approach to the stage." But "the closer Kabuki comes to realism, the further it departs from its nature."

Newspapers: third program reviews

Harriett Johnson ("Kabuki Music Vital Part of Drama," Post, 17 June 1960) found the music in Kabuki "an integral part of each drama's expressiveness...While the Kabuki's use of color is consistently spectacular and flamboyant, the music's contribution is more varied and flexible. It may serve as a sinuous counterpoint to the speech, as a protagonist in the drama, as punctuation, or simply as background." Johnson is the third critic to review Kabuki for the Post. First they sent a regular theatre critic, then a dance critic, and

now a music critic. For those who think of Kabuki as music-dance-drama (the literal meaning of the word "Kabuki"), then it does make sense to send specialists in these areas to do the reviews. Johnson discovered that while the music was part of a "fluid, exotic panorama," it was not "soothing." The singing was "guttural whining," the speech sounded like "singsong," the samisen like a "mournful banjo," and the flute was simply "eery." For those seeking a melodic orchestral accompaniment, Kabuki was definitely not recommended.

Brooks Atkinson ("Superb Clown: Kabuki's Kanzaburo Stars as a Drunk," Times, 17 June 1960), reporting mainly on one play in the final program, was particularly impressed by the versatility of the Kabuki actors. A large part of the review was concerned with the current political situation in Japan; riots in Tokyo had cancelled President Eisenhower's trip to that country. As Atkinson said, Japanese-American political relations are embroiled in passions--personal and "focused on the present moment...Meanwhile, a troupe of Japanese actors brings us a rich, impersonal art that has no time or place...Nothing intrudes on their world but grace, beauty and stateliness. An audience of New Yorkers receives them with the respect we owe to all civilized persons. For the theatre is decenter than politics." This statement is in marked contrast with Paul Green's observation just

after the war that Kabuki was inappropriately concerned with "dead ethics" and should be brought up to date. For Atkinson, Kabuki was essentially a timeless, if not universal, art.

Finally, Frank Aston ("Kabuki Stomps Out Hoedown," World-Telegram and The Sun, 17 June 1960) reviewing Kabuki for the first time, wrote about one of the dance plays in the Kabuki's third program. He praised what had been praised many times before--the beautiful costumes, the graceful movements--and concluded: "Grand Kabuki is refreshment for eye and spirit."

Magazines

The anonymous critic of Newsweek ("Import from Japan: Enchanting, Exciting," 13 June 1960) reported that "the Grand Kabuki's plays are presented in a masterful and unmistakable style that is the essence of universal make-believe." It is particularly exciting for those who have only previously seen the "small traveling companies exploiting the Kabuki label" whereby "Americans got the impression that Japan's great traditional theater was simply a charming form of exotic entertainment dedicated to dancing geisha girls and the language of the fan," referring to the Azuma Kabuki Dancers and Musicians.

The critic for Time ("New Show in Manhattan: Grand Kabuki," 13 June 1960) also referred to the past visitors:

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"Unlike previous Kabuki-type visitors to America, Grand Kabuki, as true Kabuki, consists of all-male casts." In other words, Americans were seeing authentic Kabuki for the first time.

Henry Hewes ("The Song-Dance Tricksters," Saturday Review, 18 June 1960) reported on the "symbolic complexity" that characterizes a Kabuki performance. Although he felt that some gestures, for example, can only be understood by the experienced Kabuki theatregoer, most are immediately comprehensible to the experienced theatregoer in general. Hewes concluded; "the present tour successfully demonstrates Kabuki's superb theatricality and an excitingly full use of stage resources." In a second review, "Orientation Course," (25 June 1960), he was especially impressed by the great versatility of Kabuki actors--their ability, for example, to play two different roles in the same play. In Hewes' opinion, Kabuki was a definite theatrical success.

Finally, Doris Hering ("Yatsushashi of the Western World," Dance Magazine, July 1960) compared Kabuki to the Martha Graham dance troupe. In her opinion both use all the resources of the theatre and one finds in both "the same control, the same formality."

Magazines: special articles

In addition to regular reviews, two magazines had special

articles that assessed the performances.

"East Meets West 55th Street" (Dance Magazine, August 1960) was written by Jacqueline Maskey, who gave her view of the Kabuki as a City Center usherette. The article is particularly interesting because it described some aspects of the performances no one else thought of or knew enough to mention. She told, for example, how the City Center was specially equipped for the Kabuki. A special sound booth was built on the second level of the first balcony to accommodate Donald Richie and Watanabe Miyoko. With regard to the traditional Kabuki hanamichi, City Center personnel chose to build a small one from stage right to the first side-exit door in order not to lose paying seats by building a full-scale hanamichi through the auditorium.

There apparently had been rumors that the audience itself might be entirely Japanese. After all, some thought, who else would be interested in Kabuki. But as Maskey reported: "the audience did not change much...we were pleasantly surprised...Aside from a higher percentage of Orientals than usual, the customers were little different from the family groups that regularly attend our drama and musical seasons." The appeal of Kabuki in the end was not just as "exotic" entertainment.

"Kabuki in America" (The Nation, 9 July 1960) was written

by Faubion Bowers, who attempted to assess what effect the Kabuki visit might have had especially on the American theatre people--actors, directors and others--who saw the plays. "It may be years before each one has sorted inside himself exactly what his profit was, and the incorporation of elements from Kabuki may take longer before they are visible in our theatre, but a general broadening was immediate." Bowers reported that people were especially impressed by the versatility of the actors. The "stylized" aspects of Kabuki were also impressive and "the depth of emotion communicable through stylization came as a surprise to many." The question of how Kabuki has influenced American theatre practice is still unanswered, but there is no doubt that the visit of the Kabuki troupe did have a significant impact.

(Note: There was a full complement of reviews in newspapers and magazines in 1960).

Just as the publication of a number of books in the 1950's indicated a growing interest in Kabuki, the decade that elapsed between the first and second Grand Kabuki visits witnessed a blossoming forth of interest not only in new books, but in other areas as well.

Starting with the books, several very good ones on Kabuki were published in the 1960's. Kabuki Costumes (1966) by Ruth Shaver, with its beautiful diagrams and illustrations, is an almost exhaustive reference source for the costumes and properties of production; and Theatre East and West (1967) by Leonard Pronko continues to be a provocative work for many, especially in its suggestions on how Kabuki techniques might be used in Western theatre. In addition, Kabuki (1969) by Gunji Masakatsu, with an introduction by Donald Keene, has an informative text and excellent photographs of scenes from many plays. The growth of a reading public interested in Kabuki is further evidenced by the re-issue of Kincaid's Kabuki, The Popular Stage of Japan in 1965.

During this time interest of an academic nature also developed in Kabuki. Schools such as New York's Columbia University and Brooklyn College began offering courses on Japanese theatre.

Even more exciting, perhaps, were the first Kabuki plays

done by university and other groups.¹³ During the mid-sixties in New York, the Institute for Advanced Studies in Theater Arts invited Onoe Baiko, a leading Kabuki actor from Japan, to direct their production of Narukami ("Thunder God"). IASTA, as the group was known, had been founded in the late fifties so "young professionals in American theater might become familiar with foreign theatrical traditions under the direction of a master of those traditions."¹⁴

One spectator at the IASTA Kabuki performance "commented that it was 'an electrifying theatrical experience....' And Stella Adler stated that a single moment of Narukami had more style than a hundred years of naturalistic theater."¹⁵ In fact, after Baiko left, one of his assistants continued to teach Kabuki dance and movement in New York. The experiment itself and the sustained interest afterward indicated that Kabuki had truly penetrated the American theatre consciousness.

There were other outgrowths of interest in Kabuki and Asian theatre in general, including the organization of a special Asian Theater Research Council, as well as the sudden proliferation of play translations and special issues of theatre journals devoted to Kabuki and Japanese theatre.

Altogether, this activity in the 1960's showed that the first Grand Kabuki visit at the beginning of the decade had

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been a touchstone, as well as a turning point in the development of American interest in the Kabuki theatre. As we will see below, there was even paradoxical proof of this interest in the conspicuous absence of newspaper and magazine articles on Kabuki prior to the Grand Kabuki's return to New York in 1969.

Grand Kabuki
City Center, September 10-21, 1969

Nine years after Kabuki's first visit to New York--and the West--a troupe of twenty-six actors, twenty-five musicians, and twelve staff and crew members arrived for a two-week visit at New York's City Center. They came equipped with one hundred and fifty tons of scenery and three quarters of a million dollars' worth of costumes for a tour that was also to take them to Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Francisco.¹⁶ The troupe was under the patronage of the Japan Cultural Society and Prince Takamatsu, earlier patron of the Azuma Kabuki Dancers and Musicians. This time, however, the trip was planned and arranged strictly as a commercial venture by the New York-based company, Pacific World Artists, Incorporated.

The enthusiastic response which greeted the Kabuki troupe in 1960 had broken ground for other visits to the West--Europe (1965), and Hawaii and Canada (1967). Although Kabuki tours involved much complex planning and arranging,

the Japanese, especially the Kabuki-managing Shōchiku Company, had at last become accustomed to the idea of "cultural exchange" and mobility for their artists. By 1969, therefore, there was no longer any need for trade-agreement anniversary celebrations or other such excuses to bring Kabuki to the United States. They came on the strength of American interest in Kabuki.

There were certain interesting indications that the American attitude toward Kabuki had changed over the years. As people heard more and saw more of this classical Japanese theatre form, it became less of an exotic curiosity. The lack of press coverage prior to the visit is one indication of this. In 1960 newspapers had announced the Kabuki visit months in advance; in 1969 the first article appeared only three days before the show opened, though of course advertisements to sell tickets came out before that. On September 7, 1969 the following articles appeared in the Times: John Canaday's "Kabuki o Miru Tsumori Desu," announcing that the Japan Society and Japan Cultural Society were sponsoring two shows of Japanese prints in conjunction with the Kabuki visit,¹⁷ and Faubion Bower's "Even Garbo Wasn't Allowed Backstage," which was primarily anecdotes from the 1960 visit, accompanied by a large cartoon caricature of Kabuki actors drawn by Al Hirschfeld.¹⁸ Needless to say, recogni-

tion in this way by Hirschfeld meant that Kabuki had indeed arrived.

The Bowers' article contained reminiscences about the time Greta Garbo asked to be permitted to watch one of the actors put on his make-up and was refused for fear it would ruin the theatrical illusion for her. He also told readers what was planned for the coming Kabuki program, warning the "foreign spectator" of 1969 that "Kabuki, inevitably, brings obstacles when it crosses so many thousands of miles and transverses such long generations of history."¹⁹ Suggesting that people study the stories of the plays in advance, Bowers felt that with a little effort it is "just about impossible not to enjoy--rather than just marvel at--Kabuki."²⁰ Indeed, there had been a lot of "marveling" during the 1960 visit. Bowers, who would provide the transistorized running commentary and translation for the present visit, concluded with the hope that the next Kabuki visit would be sooner than nine years away.

The sixty-five member troupe arrived in New York on September 8. Although several of them had come before, most were in New York for the first time. The troupe was led by three outstanding actors: Baiko VII (who had directed the IASTA production of Narukami), Shōroku II, and Kuroemon II. As leading onnagata of the Kabuki world, Baiko's closest

rival was Utaemon VI, who had come to New York in 1960. Shōroku and Kuroemon, performers of the leading male roles, had both come on the previous visit, although Kuroemon was now being featured in the place Kanzaburō XVII had held in 1960.

The twelve-day engagement was sold out before it began, with extra matinee performances scheduled at the last moment. As before, the plays were slightly cut to conform to usual performance times in American theatres, but otherwise the plays were essentially done as they are in Japan.

The following is the program of the Grand Kabuki in 1969. First program, September 10 to September 16: Chushin-gura, Kagami Jishi ("The Mirror Lion Dance," dance-drama, first performed in 1893). Final program, September 17 to September 21: Kumagai Jinya ("General Kumagai's Battle Camp," play, first performed in 1751), and Momiji Gari ("The Maple Leaf-Viewing Picnic," dance-drama, first performed in 1788).²¹

Critical Reaction

In 1969, the old and often-repeated "beautiful costumes--beautiful sets" type of review had been replaced by a more analytic approach, and two particularly important concepts of Kabuki emerged.

The first was the concept of Kabuki as an example of "total theatre." This is a further development of the earlier

concept of the "theatricality" of Kabuki, especially the idea that Kabuki makes wide use of theatre resources. By 1969, "total theatre" had become a popular topic of discussion and debate among Western theatre and drama theoreticians. While a discussion of "total theatre" and whether or not Kabuki can really be classified as such is not our purpose here, the fact that critics were beginning to think about Kabuki in these terms indicates a new and important development in the critical consideration of Kabuki as part of the main stream of universal theatre art.

The concept of Kabuki as something "exotic"--though in a rather special sense--also emerged. As the critic of Time magazine said:

A culture transplant poses the same difficulty as a heart transplant. It is socially as well as biologically instinctive to reject what is alien. One slightly condescending form of acceptance is to treat what is foreign as exotic. Culturally speaking, this makes one man's meat another man's persimmon. In many ways, the Grand Kabuki is a Japanese persimmon on a U.S. theatergoer's palate. It is a sweet, ²² sumptuous and strange new taste sensation.

Kabuki, then, was seen to have value by virtue of its "exotic" nature and as one critic had suggested, this exoticism could even reawaken us anew to the magical and other-worldly quality which is at the basis of theatre.

By 1969 Kabuki was still regarded as a "foreign" art,

but because of the tremendously increased interest and understanding over the years--especially since 1960--it had become much less of an "alien" art to the New York theatregoer.

That Kabuki could generally be viewed and accepted as a viable--and valuable--theatrical experience meant, more than anything else, that Kabuki had indeed arrived in New York, America, and the West.

The Reviews

Newspapers: opening night

James Davis ("High Fashion Acting by Kabuki," Daily News, 11 September 1969) reported that "New York theatergoers, accustomed to modern staging that calls for swift progression of events and electric scene-changing, could well become impatient at the deliberate pace of this highly stylized production" and advised audiences to "relax" and patiently let the performers take their time. He was impressed by the acting and felt that Kabuki "is well worth a visit, if only to marvel at the style of playacting that has survived for so long."

Richard Watts, Jr. ("The Notable Gentlemen of Japan," Post, 11 September 1969) was the only critic among the present three who also reviewed the 1960 opening night performance. Again, Watts found Kabuki "an alien but extraordinarily striking form of theatrical artistry," adding that although "it would be the height of absurdity if I attempted to judge the quality of the individual members of the cast...I'll merely say that all of them were impressive"--especially the men who played women's roles. Watts had changed in nine years. In 1960, faced with so "foreign" an art form, he could not respond at all. In 1969, however, he was quite receptive, merely feeling inadequate to judge what he saw.

83.

Clive Barnes ("Far From Remote Kabuki," Times, 11 September 1969) wrote that Kabuki is a "ritual theater of a species hardly understood in the West." He noted that on the surface Kabuki "seems remote from the Western theater and can be matched in our experience only by Kathakali dance-drama, the Peking Opera" and other foreign troupes which New Yorkers recently had the opportunity to see. The classical Indian Kathakali and the Chinese Peking Opera, like Kabuki, are performed with centuries of tradition behind them. There is little in the West that is comparable, except perhaps ballet.

Newspapers: second program reviews

Clive Barnes ("Power of Kabuki: Drama and Dance Offer Theatrical Treats," Times, 18 September 1969) wrote that "the social, moral and historical patterns that find reflection in the Japanese theater are completely apart from our own." This results in responding to Kabuki as something "exotic" which, for Barnes, then enables "the hardened, skeptical theatergoer [to] recapture something of the awe he had for theater as a child."

Magazines

The unnamed critic of Time ("Samurai Saga," 19 September 1969) reported that Kabuki is most comprehensible to Western audiences when it mirrors human nature and least so

when it reflects the complexities of ancient Japan. As others had said, there were difficulties in understanding the "Japanese" content of Kabuki, but those difficulties could be overcome if one were willing to look for and recognize certain universal basics of theatre and human life.

Brendan Gill ("The Tightening of the Strings," New Yorker, 20 September 1969) compared the emotional pitch of Kabuki performance to the energy contained in tightened piano strings: "what held me at once...was the fierceness of the passion that the actors conveyed--and were enabled to convey--by conventions of speech and gesture that have been preserved largely unaltered from generation to generation." Gill felt that in the nine years since the first Kabuki visit, interest in Japanese art and culture had increased greatly "and the Kabuki might well have risked scheduling a run of months instead of weeks."

Jack Kroll ("Larger Than Life," Newsweek, 22 September 1969) thought that a person pays more attention than usual to a Kabuki performance just because it is not familiar, feeling, moreover, that "Kabuki goes right to the nerve of theatre." In a rather dramatic conclusion Kroll said: "The final sense of Kabuki is that of a cosmic animated drawing. It creates a species of human beings moved and driven in predetermined orbits by a terrifyingly neutral and all-powerful hand."

Harold Clurman ("Theatre," The Nation, 29 September 1969) said: "The Grand Kabuki...provides a particular pleasure. No one truly interested in the theatre should miss it." Particularly impressed by the acting in this "gorgeous show," Clurman concluded: "We talk a great deal about 'total theatre.' It is an ancient thing: Kabuki is one of its most brilliant forms."

Finally, Marcia Marks ("The Grand Kabuki," Dance Magazine, November 1969) wrote a short review which essentially advised people to go see Kabuki for themselves. Although the review itself appeared over a month after the last show had ended, perhaps it was her way of saying what many felt. That is, people were already looking forward to the next visit of a Kabuki troupe to New York.

(Note: Because of insurmountable economic problems, many New York newspapers went out of business in the mid-sixties. By 1969, only three of the seven newspapers which had reviewed Kabuki in 1960 were still in business.)

Notes

¹Oscar Godbout, "Japanese Kabuki Company Will Display Its Formalized Beauty Here for First Time," New York Times, 22 March 1960, p. 39.

²Robert Trumbull, "Kabuki Theatre Elevates Actor in Traditional Japanese Rites," New York Times, 12 April 1960, p. 39.

³"That Glitter in Curtain For Kabuki is Gold Foil," New York Times, 18 May 1960, p. 47.

⁴Faubion Bowers, "The Past Within the Present: The Grand Kabuki Ventures Into the New World," Dance Magazine, June 1960, p. 35.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Donald Keene, "Classic Spectacular from Japan," New York Times Magazine, 22 May 1960, p. 60.

⁷Ibid., p. 50.

⁸"Kabuki Actors Here to Play City Center," New York Times, 29 May 1960, p. 4.

⁹playbill. New York Public Library Collection.

¹⁰Donald Richie and Watanabe Miyoko, trans., Six Kabuki Plays (Tokyo: Hokuseido, 1963), postscript, pp. 103-4.

¹¹Ibid., p. 114.

¹²Louis Calta, "Japanese Troupe Ends 3-Week Run," New York Times, 23 June 1960, p. 18.

¹³For a list of Kabuki productions done by university groups see Theatre East and West by Leonard Pronko.

¹⁴Leonard Pronko, Theatre East and West (Berkeley: Univ. of California, 1967), p. 48.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 158.

¹⁶Oka Takahashi, "The Art of Kabuki: A Blend of Theater," New York Times, 10 Sept. 1969, p. 49.

¹⁷John Canaday, "Kabuki o Miru Tsumori Desu," New York Times, 7 Sept. 1969, Section II, p. 33.

¹⁸Faubion Bowers, "Even Garbo Wasn't Allowed Backstage," New York Times, 7 Sept. 1969, Section II, p. 1.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹playbill. New York Public Library Collection.

²²"Sāmurai Saga," Time, 19 Sept. 1969, p. 66.

Conclusion

The history of Kabuki in America has not been a series of isolated events. As I have tried to show by investigating what took place in New York City, a certain amount of interest in Kabuki existed prior to each troupe's visit. In turn, the visits themselves then stimulated more interest for later visits. While this might be true when any foreign theatre form is introduced into another culture, what is especially important in the case of Kabuki are the two major factors which have shaped the course of Kabuki in America. One is the war and the other is the sheer difficulty in transporting a full-sized troupe abroad.

As we have seen, by 1930 New Yorkers were already lamenting the fact that they had not yet been given a chance to see authentic Kabuki; the Tsutsui troupe, after all, was viewed merely as a kind of "cheap import." Despite the fact, however, that troupes from the Kabuki Theatre had recently performed in Russia and China, New York still seemed an impossible distance from Tokyo for all the people, sets, costumes and properties that would have to be brought. There was also the Japanese sensitivity to cultural distance which persisted even in later years. Serious Japanese artists were hesitant to perform in the West for fear of being misunderstood and ridiculed.

It was necessary, therefore, to wait until Japanese-American relations were radically altered as a result of the war. Paradoxically, it was the war and the firsthand contact with the Japanese way of life during the ensuing Occupation which first gave many Americans an appreciation of Japanese culture. The American introduction to Kabuki was both a product of Occupation activity (the Allied Nights of Kabuki) and the fact that at this time Joshua Logan and others took the first definite steps to finally bring Kabuki home to New York and other parts of the country.

We have seen in detail how Kabuki was introduced--and established--in America during the past twenty years. That the Azuma Kabuki Dancers and Musicians could come to New York and be greeted so warmly even as early as 1954, while post-war tensions still ran high, was a great accomplishment for those who were trying to establish a receptive American audience for the Japanese theatre. Proceeding through the remainder of the 1950's and 1960's we then observed how a pattern of fading war memories and growing interest then developed. In addition to the visiting troupes which came from Japan--culminating in the Grand Kabuki in 1960 and 1969--the publication of books, the inception of university courses, and even the production of Kabuki by American performers are all manifestations of the enlarged response.

It was not only the new era of Japanese-American relations, however, that caused the great growth of interest in Kabuki. There had been significant changes in attitudes toward theatre as well and New York was a world leader in this change. The sixties especially was a time of experimentation and innovation. Avant-garde groups were searching for new ways to revitalize theatre. Increasingly they turned toward foreign forms such as the Kabuki for their ideas. Even the more conservative members of the theatre community found inspiration in Kabuki.

American interest in Kabuki can finally be interpreted not simply as superficial acquaintance, but more significantly, as acceptance into the mainstream of theatrical consideration. In examining the history of Kabuki in America, it has become apparent that a wide base of interest has been established. The ice has been broken diplomatically and artistically. Moreover, with the development of an audience for Kabuki, there are no longer any barriers to furthering American understanding of this theatre form.

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