400 Years of Splendor

Tradition and Innovation in the World of Kabuki

Ebizo Ichikawa performs as Kamakura Gongoro Kagemasa in *Shibaraku* © SHOCHIKU

By Danielle Demetriou

Welcome to the world of kabuki. One of Japan's most colorful traditional art forms, kabuki—a highly stylized stage play mixing dance and music—has enjoyed a special place in the country's heart over the past four centuries.

The name itself is revealing: while its three *kanji* individually mean "sing," "dance," and "skill," the word derives from the verb *kabuku*, which can be interpreted as either "leaning" or "to be out of the ordinary"—a perfectly apt reflection of kabuki's avant-garde qualities.

Kabuki is highly decorative and gorgeous. It uses ornate stage sets—a gold-flecked Mount Fuji or a sea of cherry blossoms—complete with high-tech traps and revolving platforms. Added to the mix are the classic tales of life, love, and war that dramatically unfold to the audience.

And at center stage? Undoubtedly, the actors: an all-male cast that sings, dances, and dazzles in every role (playing both men and women) with extraordinary versatility while dressed in bold kimono costumes, wigs, and stark white-face makeup.

Seiichi Kondo, an acclaimed kabuki expert, explains its enduring popularity: "Its popular elements have been developed and supported by the general public for 400 years—such as the splendid costumes and stages, the spontaneous gags and simple but dramatic stories focusing on value conflicts, such as love versus loyalty."

Its meandering roots can be traced to 1603, when, according to kabuki legend, a young shrine maiden called Izumo no Okuni created a distinct new performance style while dancing in a dry riverbed in Kyoto.

But it was in Edo—the old name for Tokyo—during the Edo Period (1603-1867) that it truly flourished. Kabuki was one of a flurry of now-iconic cultural arts that emerged from the capital at this time (among them, ukiyo-e woodblock prints).

The concept of all-male acting troupes emerged in the seventeenth century, with other now-familiar traits—such as the focus on drama mixed with dancing and the formalization of plot structures—adding to the form over time.

Kabuki lost many followers in the late nineteenth century, but it is now one of Japan's most popular forms of traditional theater, with stars, often from different generations of the same family, who are widely revered and enjoy celebrity status in society.

The fact that kabuki is formally recognized along with two other major Japanese classical theater forms, noh and bunraku, as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage is a testament to its respected status.

The checkered pattern known as *ichimatsu moyo* appears in Kabuki costume motifs, often in the traditional Japanese indigo blue. It was adapted for use in the official emblem of the Tokyo 2020 Games.

Today, a major hub of kabuki world in Japan is undoubtedly the Kabukiza Theatre in Tokyo's Ginza district. The Kabukiza has been at this location since 1889 and was renovated several times. The newest building, which opened in 2013, has a performance space with seating for about 1,900, a beautiful *hinoki* cypress wood stage, and 29 stories of offices.

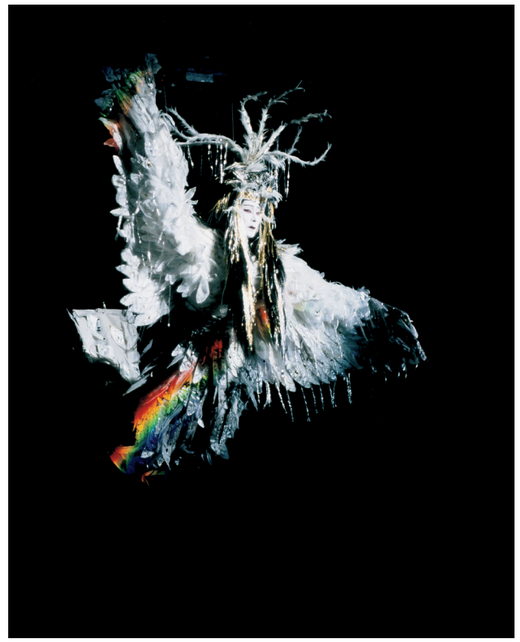
Perhaps best of all for visitors, kabuki is no longer the exclusive preserve of the Japanese. In 1982, English Earphone-Guide service was introduced in theaters, enabling non-Japanese spectators to understand events unfolding on stage and the cultural context and symbols relating to the performances.

Kabuki is now much more accessible for overseas visitors, due to the actors' expressive performances, assisted by audio guides and commentaries at the beginning of the performance. Kabuki is also taking bold steps to expand its horizons internationally, with a growing number of global tours—among them, a headline-catching kabuki festival that took place in Las Vegas earlier in 2016.

Such a dynamic combination of old and new is precisely what appears to be keeping the art form alive—as reflected in the rise of so-called Super Kabuki, which describes a popular new form of theater that combines traditional kabuki with modern stage technology. "Therefore, kabuki still remains very popular; and it is an easily accessible spectacle for both Japanese and foreigners to enjoy," says Kondo.

Danielle Demetriou is a Japan correspondent for the *Daily Telegraph* and a columnist for *The Japan Times* and the *Mainichi Weekly*.

Koshiro Matsumoto in the role of Benkei in *Kanjincho* © SHOCHIKU



Ennosuke Ichikawa stars in the Super Kabuki *Yamato Takeru* © SHOCHIKU