Japanese Kabuki: Character Versus Actor

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In the 1990s during a kabuki performance of the play Shibaraku (Wait a minute!) at the Kabukiza theater in Tokyo, the lead actor stepped out of character, turned to the audience, and started talking about Japanese/American trade relations. The audience became fully engaged in what the actor had to say, even though he had interrupted probably the most dramatic moment in the play. Then, when the actor had finished with his alternative entertainment, the performance continued as if nothing had occurred to break the dramatic illusion. What happened that day is not unusual in the kabuki theater. In the same play, Shibaraku, which is one of the most popular in the repertory, again and again the actor playing the same role will speak to the audience about his lineage as an actor, namely, that he is Ichikawa Danjūrō, number so-and-so, and trace his family line back to the first person who played the role. The moment in Shibaraku, when the actor interrupts in this fashion routinely occurs at the point when a young warrior, Gongorō, comes out on the hanamichi, which is a runway from the back of the auditorium to the stage and makes his way through the audience toward the stage on which the villain (Takehira) and his retainers are about to put to death their opponents, so that Takehira can usurp power illegally without the sanction of the emperor. To stop them, Gongorō shouts out "Shibaraku!", that is, "Wait a minute!"

In traditional Western theater, we would expect Gongorō at that point to go to the rescue of the besieged men and would hope that he can fight off the enemy successfully. Instead the kabuki actor stops the action and does so with a type of interruption that is not part of any tradition in Western theater, unless it is comedy. In a comedy an actor can turn to the audience and say something like, "Hey, did you hear what that guy said?" or argue that his jokes are better than his competitor's. But it did not happen traditionally in serious dramatic productions.

This phenomenon, that is, the suspension of dramatic illusion, occurred early on in the history of kabuki. For example, in another very popular play, Sukeroku (named for the central character), there is documentation to the effect that in the late Edo period, the late 18th century, actors of the role Sukeroku would stop the performance in order to turn to the merchants in the audience and thank them for gifts they had received. This kind of gesture certainly engages the attention of the audience, but it also breaks the development of the story at an exciting moment in the performance. In the play Sukeroku, the break occurs when the young, handsome Sukeroku, dressed as a stylish commoner appears on the hanamichi, and with special music, gestures, and posturing makes his way toward the stage proper where the villain Ikyū is seated in the midst of a

group of geisha. On an elaborate set representing an area in which these high-class courtesans lived and performed, Ikyū speaks badly of Sukeroku to the heroine, the geisha Agemaki, whom Ikyū likes especially well. However, Agemaki favors Sukeroku and has taken the courage to say to Ikyū that, although he is rich, as Sukeroku is not, he is nothing but a drop of ink in a shallow inkwell compared to Sukeroku, who is like the depth of the ocean. We have been conditioned in the West in such a way that we would then wait to see what action Sukeroku will take on behalf of Agemaki and against Ikyū. But instead, before he enters the stage the actor playing Sukeroku turns to the audience. As I said, there is nothing like this in the traditional theater of the West. The closest analogy that I can think of is the use of commercials on TV, which, much to our dismay, occur right before the most important love scenes or the capture of a criminal or the blowing up of a car or building. But in kabuki this interruption is not effected in order to sell a company's product, although it could not have hurt the merchant to be singled out for mention. The timing is similar; the intent is different. And, of course, television is not a traditional Western dramatic form; it is a modern form of entertainment found in every part of the world.

In the West, traditionally the audience was expected to become engaged in how the plot would develop and to be concerned primarily with the fate of the characters, and how they would free themselves from the knots of romance, murder, intrigue, etc., into which they have been thrust. In fact, Aristotle, the ancient Greek philosopher, who set some of the early standards in the fourth century B.C.E. for our studies of biology, metaphysics, ethics, rhetoric, and so forth, also set the standards for Western drama. And he said that the plot was all-important, the very soul of good drama. And so we might wonder what it means in this traditional and serious drama, kabuki, for the actor of a character on the verge of killing someone for revenge to step out of the plot, to attract the audience's attention in one way, but then to distract the audience's attention away from the course of the dramatic action. The reason seems to be that people went to and still go to the kabuki theater for the appeal of the visual and aural color, the excitement of the spectacle, the actors' ability to perform, the theatricality, and the moments of emotional intensity. It is generally agreed that these features and not the plots themselves serve as the indicators of character and express the import of the unexpressible. These are the means to appreciating the problems of human beings caught in the snares of love, intrigue, murder, revenge, and honor. What is more important than the plot itself is how a person faces hardship and prosperity, love and death, sacrifice and gain. "By person" is meant the actor playing the role on behalf of the character. Kabuki allows a kind of objectification of the characters, a removal of them from the development of the plot so as to set them somewhat apart from the dramatic action in order to allow the audience become engaged in the theatrical moment rather than in the dramatic action, in the moments of a story rather than in the logical development of the plot. There is a story, but it has become relatively

unimportant, except when an actor performs a storytelling scene, a monogatari. What happens in kabuki is a very different slant on drama than the one Aristotle prescribed. Aristotle said the soul of a serious play was its plot. He also said that what one merely sees was unimportant. The kabuki critic and enthusiast says the opposite: what one sees is the essence of kabuki. Aristotle said that plot should not be episodic. The stories of kabuki plays are episodic. That is to say, a play can be cut up and scenes performed by themselves outside the overall context without hurting a production or the integrity of the performance. For example, the play Shibaraku as it is now performed consists of little more than Gongorō's entrance and, after the famous interruption mentioned above, his successful defeat of the villain and his retainers. However, that scene, that moment, was derived from a much longer play in which originally Gongorō angers the Shogun in Act One. In the original play as a whole, now no longer performed, there are many intrigues along the way, including love affairs and murders, some of which develop out of this first act. But it does not matter that the first act was usually omitted. Some of the scenes in turn were simply added on without consideration for a plot line. For example, when Gongorō and a certain Tamemune with his wife stop at an inn for the night during their travels, they all have the same dream. The dream is enacted on stage for the benefit of the audience's viewing pleasure: in the dream Gongorō seduces Tamemune's wife and kills her when Tamemune calls him immoral in his actions. Then Gongorō, out of remorse over killing her, commits suicide. Kagehisa, Gongorō's brother, arrives and fights with Tamemune until they have stabbed each other to death. At this point the travelers awake from their dreams and continue on their travels. Not another reference is made in the play to the dream or the stage action.

Inasmuch as the audiences are in the theater to see particular moments, to appreciate emotional highpoints, and to be entertained, but not to become engaged in the development of a story, it does not matter that they do not see the story as a whole enacted on stage, or that a scene like this dream is presented in isolation from any larger context.

In fact, when long plays are produced in toto, such as famous play about the 47 rōnin, Kanadehon Chūshingura (The Treasury of Loyal Retainers), people will leave the auditorium for a Japanese boxed lunch (bentō) or a Big Mac whenever they wish, not only at the time of intermission. But they return when the moment is right, when there is something on stage that is exciting for them to see, emotionally charged or action-packed. Kabuki is a theater to be enjoyed and one which allows men and women alike to indulge their aesthetic and emotional energies, not one to tax their brain.

But you might ask, "What does this have to do with an actor's stepping out of character at the very edge of an exciting moment in a kabuki performance?" The answer is "very much." By doing so, the actor makes the important and exciting moments, which are the

essence of kabuki's attraction to most people, even more momentous and exciting. His actions serve as a part of the theatricality. The actor says, in effect, look at me, listen to me, and pay attention to the next scene. These are what we call asides in the Western theater; however, in kabuki they are part and parcel of a number of techniques—visual, aural, and kinetic, used to attract the attention of the audience to especially dramatic and compelling moments. Instead of creating suspense through the development of a plot, the suspense is created with the physical form of the production, that is, with the help of these asides, the costuming, makeup, sets, music, intonation of the voice, gesturing, movement, and props. All of these, and the ability of the actor, are the indicators of how emotionally charged the moments can be in a play, which can include sacrificing a child to death, vassalage or a brothel, losing a loved one, preparing to commit suicide, fighting off a powerful opponent, saving a lover, and deciding to take out revenge at all costs. The use of asides before, during or at the end of, serious moments in the action to attract the attention of the audience may seem an unusual technique to those unfamiliar with kabuki or contemporary forms of theater influenced by kabuki, but, as I said, it is one of the many techniques-visual, kinetic, and aural-that alert the audience to the importance of a particular moment in a scene.

Although character is important in kabuki, character development is not. The very dramatic and expressive makeup helps to betray the actor's character the instant he enters the stage. For example, when you see red lines on a white face they are the mark of a good and just character; certain shades of green and blue a villainous character; black a divinity or transformed character. The male actors, and all of them are male, wear stark white makeup and special paint, ornate and large wigs, and female costumes to turn them into female impersonators, onnagata. The costumes can be gorgeous and elaborate, or simple and unadorned; however, whatever their manifestation, they make a statement about the scene visually and immediately without recourse to plot. By means of appearance alone an actor can change on stage or take off his makeup, wig, or costume and thus change his character to another. The transformations can be very dramatic. A beautiful woman can change into a serpent, a priest into an insect, or, a fox into a man and then on stage turn back into the fox he really is. The movements and dances of the actors help. There are any number of special ways to walk, the most famous of which include the roppō, a very deliberate step used in entrances and exits along the hanamichi by strong male roles, a walk no one in the audience can ignore, and the onnagata walk, including one on very high wooden shoes (geta), so high that the actor must hold the shoulder of an attendant. The former instantiates the macho, the male; the latter the exquisite, feminine characteristics. The twists and turns of costuming and action are accompanied by twists and turns in characterization, which, as I said, these external features indicate. The sound effects, including the instruments: the gongs, drums, bells, flutes, and the

shamisen, a three-stringed instrument, provide backup and can also help to attract attention to the action.

The special makeup and costume, the special walk and sound are among the many kinds of show stoppers. Another occurring in every kabuki and by now a familiar part of the Japanese vocabulary is the mie. As in the case of the asides, the actor stands still and comes to a complete stop. He then assumes his pose, that is, he rolls his head around a little, glares, and then crosses one eye. This you will see. The sound of the ki clapping makes it clear that the audience should pay attention. Ki clappers are, two wooden, rectangular blocks, which a man strikes against the floor of the stage at the side to announce either the beginning of a play or a dramatic or emotionally charged moment. One can easily say that there is no hesitancy in kabuki about interrupting the dramatic action and attracting the audience's attention toward an engaging moment. There are acrobatics.

The sets for kabuki are sometimes spectacular and the stage extraordinarily flexible-in one production a complete roof turns over to reveal another story of the building, in many productions the stage moves around so that it is possible for you to be viewing the action in the interior of a room and suddenly find the entire stage turn around so that you are looking at action in the woods, or at the sea, or on a road. In other productions, such as in Yoshitsune senbonzakura (Yoshitsune and the Thousand Cherry Trees), actors use trap doors to capture our attention or the device that carries an actor over the heads of the audience. In a popular contemporary kabuki play, Yamato Takeru (named for a famous Japanese mythological figure), Ennosuke, one of the most famous contemporary performers, actually flies over the heads of the audience.

The kabuki theater is not dependent for success on a connected text and development of plot and character, but is a theater dependent for success on actors and the techniques and accoutrements that make them worth watching. In the West there is opera, during which the audience waits for the arias and musical numbers and enjoys the sets, the costumes, and the props, including live animals sometimes seen on stage, rather than plot as in traditional western theater. However, since the opera singers do not step out of character to speak as the kabuki actors will do, there still remains a difference between traditional serious western drama and Japanese kabuki. There are comic scenes in kabuki, in which asides are expected, but I am not referring to these but rather to the serious and tragic side of the drama.

In part, this difference can be explained by the close connection between kabuki and bunraku, the traditional puppet theater of Japan, which was a theatrical form contemporary with kabuki. In the bunraku theater the puppets cannot speak for themselves; instead, a narrator, gidayū, accompanied by a shamisen, speaks for them.

As often as not the gidayū will give the audience the background to the story or talk about a character, as if the performance were not a play. What happened in the history of kabuki is that in the hands of Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653-1724), probably the greatest playwright of both kabuki and bunraku plays, the practices of bunraku passed over to kabuki and vice-versa to such an extent that in some kabuki plays a gidayū speaks for the kabuki actors as if they were dolls and the dolls of bunraku are manipulated in a way that makes them seem like live human beings. In the case of kabuki, the effect of the practice of using the narrator's voice is to remove the actors from the characters at moments of intense emotional outpouring by not allowing them to speak. In one sense this practice is the opposite of the actor removing himself from the character to discuss trade relations, but in another the same, since it has a similar effect. The audience cannot become involved in the characters in the same way they do in a Western drama like Oedipus the King, a Greek tragedy written by Sophocles.

In the finale of that play, the main character, Oedipus, who has killed his own father and inadvertently married his own mother, after he returns to the stage from blinding himself offstage so that the audience is not exposed to this act on stage (a moment which would be allowed on the kabuki stage), says "I did it myself, I killed my father with my own hands, it was no other, but me." The actor's ability to act matters greatly, but only in so far as he can make the audience believe in the character Oedipus's ego. In kabuki, acting ability matters greatly also, but when Ichikawa Danjūrō boasts his family lineage he is talking about an ego which is his, as an actor, not the character Gongorō's in the play Shibaraku. The audience at kabuki is not permitted to forget that the actor is an actor rather than the character he plays.

The phenomenon of self-reference and stepping out of character by actors in the kabuki theater is a common practice today throughout the world's theaters; the world has learned from Japan. However, it was not the norm in traditional Western theater where character acting was the rule. We have in kabuki, in bunraku, and in nō, not only an important source for many of the theatrical practices of the world, but also a strong precedence for Japan's dominance in the field of anime and video and interactive computer games, not to mention other aspects of popular culture, including the entertaining value of robots.

In Japanese traditional drama one did not try to become involved with the inner character by means of plot but rather through the theatricality, the acting, and the moments of action. The extent to which this is the case is encapsulated, I think, in the reply of the kabuki actor Utaemon, a celebrated onnagata actor, when he was asked what he thought about using women as actors in the kabuki theater, instead of only men. He said, "There is no woman in all of Japan who can act in as feminine a manner on stage as I." Men can act as women better than women, dolls can seem more lifelike

than the kabuki actors. Bunraku imitates the kabuki actors imitating humans, but kabuki often imitates the bunraku dolls imitating them. Like the present-day examples of popular culture, it is virtual reality with which we are dealing.

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