Kabuki Theater

*Extract from “Dancing, The pleasure, power, and art of movement”,*

*Gerald Jonas, 1992*

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Japan's kabuki theater achieved classical status by a diametrically opposite route from that of ballet. While ballet percolated down through the social structure from the aristocracy to the middle class, kabuki worked its way up the ladder of acceptability from the bottom. Kabuki traces its origin not to the stately bugaku of the Imperial Court but to the pay-as-you-go tumult of popular entertainment. The word kabuki originally meant "out of kilter" or "off center." Pulled this way and that by government censors, public taste, and the aspirations of its dancer-actor-impresarios, kabuki has pursued a zigzag trajectory from raunchy outlaw-theater to corporate-sponsored classic over the last four hundred years, a span of time that roughly parallels the ascendancy of ballet. During this time the image of female beauty projected on the kabuki stage has left a deep imprint on Japanese culture, just as the image of the ballerina has on the West. In both societies respectable women have gone out of their way to emulate the looks and deportment of performers considered (often with some justification) to be prostitutes of one kind or another. In the case of ballet, the onstage icons of femininity have been largely molded by men; in the all-male world of kabuki the icons of femininity are men,

The Japanese word for a kabuki performer who specializes in female roles is onnagata, or "woman person." The transformation of a mature male actor into a beautiful young woman is accomplished in part through masklike makeup and costuming—a process that may take up to an hour. But the key to the onnagata's art lies in the gestures, voice and bearing of the performer, who must not only move like a woman on stage but think like a woman. Some kabuki performers are acclaimed for their versatility in playing male as well as female roles. But the finest onnagatas have been specialists. In an early example of mass marketing through sex appeal, leading onnagatas of the eighteenth century lent their names to feminine beauty products such as incense, face powder, kimono patterns, hair oil, and hair ornaments.

Today's onnagatas reach even larger circles of admirers. The delicate features of Bando Tamasaburo, a tall, slender man in his early forties, are instantly recognizable to most Japanese from television and advertising posters. As one of kabuki's most popular and highly paid performers, Tamasaburo surrounds himself with the trappings of a rock star: outsized automobiles, a retinue of business associates and personal servants. He has appeared in Western-style dramas playing male as well as female parts—among them Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth and the Idiot in an adaptation of Dostoevsky's novel—but his fame rests on his ability to create the illusion of a beautiful woman in such kabuki classics as Musume Dojoji (The Dancing Maiden at Dojo Temple). When he turns his heavily made-up face (chalk-white base, bright red lips, red-highlighted eyes) toward the audience, his adoring fans, mostly women, cry out, "Kirei, Kirei.'" ("Beautiful, beautiful!").

For any classical theater to exist, there must be a means of passing from generation to generation the vocabulary, outlook, and repertoire that have been deemed worth preserving. Ballet has schools, the best of which are under the control of the. leading ballet companies; through such schools, each generation responsible for preserving the legacy is ensured a supply of young dancers trained in the classical style. In Japan, the establishment of formal kabuki schools is a recent innovation. Traditionally, young performers have been trained by older members of stage families, who control the production and presentation of kabuki and who pass along to the younger generation the family's distinctive style of dancing and acting. Instruction is typically one-on-one; a pupil teheatses a role or a portion of a role until he has mastered every movement, every expression, every line; only then does he proceed to another role. Training begins as early as age five; stage debuts by six-year-old apprentices are not uncommon. This method of instruction is typical of Japan's traditional arts, which tend to be family monopolies. Only if talent seems thin in the family's ranks is room made for outsiders who are adopted into the family.

An onnagata's apprenticeship typically begins with instruction in walking. He practices with a sheet of paper between his knees, feet slightly pigeon-toed, elbows at the hips, fingers close together, body swaying slightly from side to side; if the sheet of paper slips to the floor, he knows he has not yet learned how to walk like an onnagata. Tamasaburo was introduced to kabuki when he was six years old; a doctor suggested that lessons in traditional dance might help him overcome the effects of a mild case of polio. He was adopted into a kabuki family at the age of six. After studying the classic onnagata roles, he spent time observing the great onnagatas of the older generation, such as Nakamura Utaemon VI, who in his mid-seventies still plays young girls on stage and has been named a "living national treasure" by the Japanese government. Tamasa-buro has also pored over videotapes of Greta Garbo, Katharine Hepburn, and Marilyn Monroe. Learning female patterns of behavior, he says, is like learning a foreign language: "To do it well, the patterns and expressions must become one with your thoughts and feelings."

Ichikawa Ennosuke III, perhaps kabuki's most versatile performer, is famous for both his male and female roles. Although his innovative staging of kabuki classics has earned him a reputation as an iconoclast, he cannot imagine a kabuki theater without onnagata. Reformers in this century have proposed letting women play female roles, but the idea was rejected by the traditional kabuki troupes on the grounds that actresses would inevitably perform onnagata-style—and do it less well. Women have performed kabuki outside the classical venues; women's clubs that specialize in kabuki dances are popular throughout Japan; and women appear as actors and dancers on the modern Japanese stage, especially in the famous Takarazuka theater. But the

onnagata's place in classical kabuki seems secure. Purists argue that the stylized theatricality of kabuki, which is the essence of its appeal, would be undermined if women played women. In the words of Ennosuke; "What makes kabuki a great art form is the invention of onnagata." This invention, like so much else in kabuki, grew out of a series of clashes between entertainers who made a living by pleasing crowds and government officials whose principal task was to maintain public order.

Some time around the turn of the seventeenth century a young woman named Okuni, who claimed to have danced at a shrine near Kyoto, began attracting new audiences by dancing in the dry bed of Kyoto's Kamo River. The riverbed was home to an ever-changing cast of street entertainers, fortune tellers, and vendors of pleasure in one form or another. Okuni's first performances may have been based on the dances staged at temples and shrines to please the gods, attract pilgrims, and raise money. These dances were not necessarily models of chaste devotion; the women who performed them, especially those who traveled around the country to solicit funds for the repair of temples, were known by a number of names, the least derogatory of which can be translated as "singing nun." But Okuni's appeal was evidently broader; in 1603, according to one account, she was invited to perform for the emperor in the Imperial Palace.

It is not known what she did there or how she was received by an audience whose tastes had been honed on the classic No dance-dramas, which were sparse in staging, slow in pace, and contemplative in mood. What Okuni did to please the large crowds that clamored to see her out-of-doors is better known. She organized a troupe of dancers and began to embellish her performances with props, plots, and musical instruments borrowed from the No theater but used with a new freedom; at the same time she added lively songs and steps from popular street dances. Her almost blasphemous blending of elements from a centuries-old aristocratic theater with the latest moves from the street created a sensation.

A painted folding screen from the period captures the spirit of these early seventeenth-century performances: An alluring young woman (who may be Okuni herself) poses alone in the center of a small stage, leaning on the hilt of a long sword. She is dressed as a rakish man-about-town, in a fashionable multicolored kimono that leaves her arms bare. A fan dangles from her fingertips, her hair falls over her temples and forehead; a second sword is thrust through her sash from which hangs a Christian cross, possibly a gift from a Portuguese admirer. {Europeans were not banned from Japan until 1639, a year after the massacre of nearly all Japanese converts to Christianity.) The sexual charge of Okuni's pose is unmistakable. She is dressed as a man because one of the staples of early kabuki was the assignation scene, in which a young dandy accosts, importunes and eventually wins over a resident of what the Japanese called the "pleasure quarter." In such scenes, female performers typically played both men and women; occasionally, male performers assumed the female roles.

This early kabuki, which some observers labelled "prostitutes' kabuki," inevitably attracted the attention of the authorities. Audiences tended to be rowdy, and fights among admirers of different dancers were common. Even worse from the government's point of view, people from different social classes were mingling at kabuki performances; this violated official policy, which tried to ensure communal stability by locking everyone into a predetermined place in the social hierarchy.

The government banned women from the kabuki stage in 1629, nine years after Okuni's death. The ostensible motive for the ban was to uphold public morality; another possible reason was that the growing popularity of kabuki gave the women who controlled it a source of income and power that discomfited the rulers of Japan's rigidly patriarchal society. Indeed, kabuki was so popular that after women were banned from the stage, the shows continued with young boys playing all the parts, an arrangement that audiences apparently found even more titillating. In 1652 the government intervened again, this time decreeing that only adult men could perform kabuki. No one thought it strange for men to play women's roles onstage; this was already the rule in traditional forms of dance-drama like No and bugaku.

Kabuki arose during a time of historic change in Japan. After more than a hundred years of civil wars, the Tokugawa Shogunate had emerged triumphant at the beginning of the seventeenth century. While the emperor continued his symbolic reign in Kyoto, attended by an ineffectual court nobility, the Shoguns established their military capital in Edo (now Tokyo). The word Shogun can be translated as "barbarian-subduing great general"; in fact, the Shoguns saw their task as subduing an entire unruly nation. By midcentury the government had virtually sealed off Japan from the rest of the world; the same impulse led to rules and regulations that discouraged fraternizing between Japanese of different occupations, regions, and social backgrounds. While their efforts to isolate the Japanese from one another were less successful than their campaign to close Japan to all foreign influences, the Shoguns did succeed in building a social order that kept the peace, at whatever cost to personal freedom, for more than 250 years. The inspiration for the rigid caste system the Shogunate imposed on the country was clearly military. The head of every household had to post his rank outside his home; on the street you could tell a man's caste by the way he cut his hair. Dominating the social structure were the daimyo, the landowning feudal lords; just below came the samurai, the warriors (identified by a distinctive topknot) who had fought the wars and were now eager to reap their rewards. Together, these made up a privileged class whose right to rule was based, according to a model borrowed from Chinese Confucianism, on an assertion of moral superiority.

Below the samurai, and separated from them by a great divide, came three ranks of commoners: the farmers whose productive rice fields supported the whole structure; priests and artisans; and lastly the merchants, whose profit-making and money-lending activities were officially disdained but tolerated as necessary to the economy. As in all caste systems, there were gradations within gradations, sanctioned by both law and custom. Situated at the bottom of the social pyramid was an entirely separate group (with its own internal distinctions of rank) that included workers in the less savory trades, like skinners of dead animals, tanners of hides, prostitutes, and kabuki performers, Efforts were made to minimize contact between these people and the rest of society. The government began licensing prostitutes and confining them to special neighborhoods (which became known as "pleasure quarters") before the end of the sixteenth century. After 1657, kabuki performances were prohibited outside a clearly marked theater district; the performers were forbidden to live or even to move about outside this district. The purpose of the restrictions was to avert what one official called "the collapse of the social order."

The social order of the Tokugawa Shogunate rested on the twin pillars of family loyalty and feudal loyalty. The most important virtue was obedience. If a family fell into debt, for example, the head of the household might choose to sell his wife or daughter into prostitution to discharge his obligation. While the more accomplished residents of the pleasure quarter were widely admired, the life of a courtesan was hardly a desirable end for a woman of respectable family, and the unhappy consequences of enforced prostitution became a staple of the kabuki stage. Yet virtually no voices—on- or offstage—were raised against the custom itself or the social code that sanctioned it. For an individual who could not endure his or her lot there was a socially acceptable way out: suicide. But to openly disobey the head of the household and go on living was to bring dishonor to one's family—a fate considered far worse than mere personal unhappiness.

Samurai and other retainers of the powerful feudal lords had yet another level of obligation that superseded even family loyalty. A samurai swore an oath of loyalty to his lord. If obedience to the lord conflicted with family loyalty, the oath to the lord came first. The worst fate that could befall a warrior was to be severed from his lord's service, to be reduced to the status of a "masterless samurai." The anguish this caused also became a staple of the kabuki stage. In fact, the "masterless samurai" was an increasingly familiar figure in a warrior society that fought no wars and that was gradually transforming itself from a feudal to a cash-based economy. Like the "code of the cowboy" in the American West, the warriors' code of honor took on a romantic appeal even as its social utility faded. As an ideal of manly behavior, it could be admired even by commoners who had reason to fear the actual samurai they encountered daily in the streets of the city; all members of the warrior caste had the right to carry-two swords and to cut down any commoner who showed them disrespect.

By the end of the seventeenth century, the lower social classes, and especially the merchants, had adopted the morality of the warrior caste as their own. To carry out one's duty according to the social code was good; to put personal desires ahead of social obligations was bad. To ensure that everyone in Japan would remain, in a formulation attributed to the first Tokugawa Shogun, "content with one's present lot," the government tried to curtail conspicuous consumption, The style of a person's clothes was regulated by caste; for example, merchants could wear only somber colors. Houses had to be unostentatious. In time there was even a law regulating the decoration of cakes, Like the rules restricting the whereabouts of kabuki performers, these sumptuary laws were constantly reissued, a sure sign that they were being honored mostly in the breach.

Indeed, the pursuit of luxury seems to have been the order of the day in Edo, a city whose million-plus population made it possibly the largest in the world by the middle of the eighteenth century- As Louis XIV did at Versailles, the Shogun maintained an elaborate court and kept the most powerful lords near him in Edo for part of each year, Even when a lord returned to his domain, members of his family remained behind to ensure his loyalty. No high-ranking household in the capital could afford to look shabbier than its rivals; and no phalanx of laws could keep the idle ladies of these households from spending their days at a kabuki theater in their latest finery. Also in the audience were some of the city's half-million samurai, many of them masterless, who lived on a kind of government subsidy that did not begin to cover the costly diversions of city life which included gambling, drinking, and frequenting the pleasure quarter. When samurai ran out of cash, they ran up bills with the merchants, who were getting rich serving as middlemen between farmers and artisans and providing luxuries and loans to the overextended upper classes.

Not far from Edo's pleasure quarter stood the theater district, where kabuki was officially tolerated (except during outbreaks of "moral reform"). Performances started early in the morning and lasted till dusk; they constituted a kind of year-round festival of delights that must have seemed all the more delightful for being officially frowned upon. Like most Asian theater, kabuki made no rigid distinction between dance and drama. Words, music, spectacle, and movement were welded together in plays that dealt with unruly passions, violent revenge, mistaken identities, supernatural events, lamentable (and sometimes comic) misunderstandings. Staging was an amalgam of realistic effects and theatrical conventions. The huge papier-mache temple bell in The Dancing Maiden at Dojo Temple looked like a real bell; trapdoors and mechanical lifts were used for mysterious appearances and disappearances; the onstage attendants who manipulated props and costumes during the performances were considered "invisible" to actors and audience alike.

This was a people's theater. Beggars got in for free; others, who typically arrived in groups, paid admission that varied with the popularity of the play. For a big hit, spectators were "pressed together like human sushi," according to a contemporary account. Since performances lasted all day, people brought their own meals or purchased food and drink from roaming vendors or patronized the teahouses that surrounded the theater building. There were no chairs; everyone sat on straw mats. The cheapest tickets were for the pit, the area that extended back from the stage (where the orchestra in a Western opera house would be). For more money, spectators could sit in two rows of raised boxes that ran at right angles to the stage on either side of the pit. When demand warranted, theater managers even packed spectators into stalls at the rear of the stage, where they saw only the backs of the performers. By mid-eighteenth century Edo's biggest theaters were accommodating audiences of more than a thousand.

Despite its size, everything in a traditional kabuki theater is arranged to heighten a feeling of intimacy between audience and performers. The stage is wider, and the rear of the auditorium closer to the stage, than in a typical Western theater; this brings more people close to the action, which tends to be dispersed across the entire width of the performing area. Lighting is uniform throughout the theater; the house lights are not dimmed when the performance begins. The most important entrances and exits take place on a raised runway that runs through the pit from the rear of the auditorium to the front of the stage. A performer on this runway, surrounded by the upturned faces of theatergoers, is exposed to view on all sides. Because spectators have to keep turning their heads from one part of the stage to another and from the stage to the runway and back again, watching kabuki is an active, participatory experience. The effect is different from watching a ballet, where the performance is entirely contained within the proscenium arch and all sightlines tend to converge to a single focus on the stage. In kabuki, as scholar Earle Ernst has put it, "the focal point of the performance is created in the midst of the audience."

There have been times when members of the audience preferred to do their kabuki-watching incognito. Barring unusual circumstances, no one would attend a ballet in disguise; to be seen at the ballet has always been a mark of culture and refinement. But kabuki has had to live down its plebeian origins. Although the law barring samurai from the theaters (where they might rub elbows with the lower classes) was enforced only sporadically, they often wore straw hats to hide their faces and cover their distinctive topknots. When government regulations permitted, the more expensive boxes on both sides of the pit were fitted with wooden screens; hidden behind these the wives and daughters of respectable families could spend the day watching their favorite performers and picking up pointers on the latest fashions in dress and coiffure from the onnagatas, who had themselves been instructed in the arts of femininity by the courtesans of the pleasure quarter. (Given the close proximity of the pleasure quarter and the theater district, it is not surprising that the world of the courtesans and their patrons was a favorite subject of kabuki playwrights.) The screened boxes also concealed high government officials and landed aristocrats whose interest in kabuki was piqued by plays that chronicled the deeds and misdeeds of the high-born.

Kabuki's most avid fans, however, were the merchants for whom the theater district, like the pleasure quarter, offered a temporary respite from a tightly regulated existence. In the city proper, all but the richest merchants had to defer to the sword-wielding samurai. In the theater district, money talked. By the end of the eighteenth century a first-class ticket to a hit show cost enough to buy rice for two adults and a child for six months. The merchant who bought such a ticket might arrive at the theater wearing the drab kimono prescribed by law; once inside, he could turn back his outer garment to reveal a brilliantly colored silk lining. On stage, kabuki offered lavishly costumed spectacles that reflected the tastes and opinions of its audience (within the limits decreed by government censors). Drawing inspiration from ancient legends, traditional No plays arid contemporary events, kabuki conjured up a cast of characters whose confrontations with society's rules and rulers never overstepped the bounds set by a social code to which everyone, no matter what their caste, subscribed.

Kabuki audiences today come to see many of the same characters in many of the same plays that attracted audiences two hundred years ago. A heroic commoner (often a "good" samurai in disguise) turns the tables on an insufferable bunch of "bad" samurai. A quickwitted outlaw, as loyal to his Robin Hood-like gang leader as any samurai to his feudal lord, holds off battalions of constables. A woman of respectable parentage, sold into prostitution by her husband, falls in love with a customer {perhaps a merchant's son) who returns her love but does not have enough money to buy her out of servitude; unable to give each other up, the lovers are trapped by their circumstances: If she runs away with him she will be running out on her family obligations; if he stays with her in the pleasure quarter he will dishonor his family. Having transgressed society's canons with their love, they now accept the consequences and commit double suicide on stage. Originally based on actual incidents reported in Osaka in the early eighteenth century, plays about double suicide apparently triggered new waves of suicides by distraught young lovers—a case of life imitating art imitating life. In both art and life, the moral was the same; there could be no escape from the social code except in death.

Although kabuki marshals words and music to tell its stories, its most characteristic effects rely on an extensive vocabulary of stylized body movements. The primary appeal of kabuki is not intellectual but sensuous; the audience comes to the theater to see a series of striking images. These images have been so molded by years of give-and-take between performer and spectator that they convey powerful emotional messages to Japanese audiences. For example, a kabuki performer never sheds real tears on stage, no matter how doleful the events being enacted. While real tears might be appropriate in a representational theater—one that invites the audience to pretend that the action on stage is a literal reproduction of reality—kabuki never lets its audience forget that the performer is a performer, the stage a stage. In the middle of a scene a kabuki performer may turn his back on the audience to drink a refreshing cup of tea brought to him by an attendant. The "reality" that kabuki offers is a theatrical construct, a selective assembly of images that have much in common with the carefully crafted movement-sequences of ballet. To knowledgeable audiences, a ballet dancer can convey sorrow or joy, pathos or passion, with body movements alone. With a rhythmical shake of the head and a precise hand gesture a kabuki performer not only signals "weeping" but brings tears to the eyes of spectators who have seen the same scene dozens of times before and understand every nuance of the situation being anatomized on stage.

As with ballet, the movement-sequences of kabuki are divisible into traditional poses, gestures, and actions that performers, spectators, teachers, and critics know by name. These discrete units of stage technique are called kata, which means forms or models. Kabuki manuals list hundreds of kata. Some involve props, like the onstage costume changes that transform a woman into a demon or a man into a fox. Some require elaborate machinery (trapdoors, lifts, and revolving stages). Other kata are defined by a particular reading of a line, a way of lifting an eyebrow or twirling a fan. A special class of kata, called roppos, are spectacular entrances or exits in which a performer hurtles down the runway that connects the stage to the rear of the theater, his costume billowing out around him, while a stage attendant beats an accompanying tattoo with wooden clappers and the connoisseurs in the audience shout out their approval: "Matte imashital" ("This is what we were waiting for!").

The performers, rather than the plays themselves, have always been the focus of kabuki. The great acting families have produced dynasties of idolized stars whose stage names mimic royal lineages: Ichikawa Danjuro IX, Nakamura GanjiroII, Iwai HanshiroV. Dynastic names are not given at birth; they must be earned through years of performing a variety of roles with distinction. Only after a performer has mastered a specific role with all its inherited stage business does he feel free to make small changes in this or that kata. This may not come until he is in his forties.

While all kabuki can be likened to dance because of its emphasis on body movement, the Japanese have a special name for plays in which the narrative element is less important than what might be called pure dance. These pieces are known as shosagoto, which literally means "posture-business." Unlike ballet, where the dancer typically strives to negate the appearance of weight, the movement of the body in kabuki is directed down from the waist toward the floor. Dance pieces are performed on special wooden platforms whose smooth surface facilitates the fluid, gliding steps of kabuki dance, which is usually performed in thick cotton socks that look like mittens for the feet, The hollow structure of the platforms also amplifies the occasional stamping of the dancer's feet, a sound suggestive of the goddess Ame-no-uzume dancing on an overturned tub to lure the sun goddess out of her cave and restore light to the universe. As a technical device that literally resounds with mythological meaning, the dance platform typifies the care that kabuki brings to every detail of staging. In many kabuki dances the feet can barely be seen since they are concealed beneath a floor-length costume (which, in the case of the onnagata, serves to hide any parts of the body that would detract from the appearance of femininity).

Perhaps the most famous dance piece in kabuki is The Dancing Maiden at Dojo Temple which is based on a No version of an ancient legend. The legend tells of a young girl whose love is spurned by a priest who has taken vows of celibacy. In a vengeful fury, she turns into a snake-demon and destroys both the temple's bell and the priest. The Dancing Maiden at Dojo Temple enacts a sequel to this event; years later, an itinerant dancer named Hanako asks permission to enter Dojo Temple to view the new bell which is being installed. The priests admit her on the condition that she dance for them. As she dances, she keeps turning to stare at the bell. Little by little, she is possessed by the angry spirit of the earlier maiden. At the end, transformed into the snake-demon, she climbs atop the new bell to destroy it.

There are several versions of The Dancing Maiden at Dojo Temple. The hour-long solo version, first performed in 1753, is considered one of kabuki's most demanding roles, a tour de force in which onnagatas like Bando Tamasaburo display their virtuosity and interpretive skills. The challenge is to express in movement and gesture a complete portrait of a woman in love. The contrast to ballet's Sleeping Beauty is instructive. The European fairy tale shows innocence incarnate triumphing over worldly evil. The Japanese legend looks beneath the innocent surface to reveal "demonic" forces within the individual—a recurrent theme in a feudal society that equated morality with outward deference to a social code.

In Japanese folklore it is the snake, not the cat, that has nine lives. To portray a woman's passage from the joy of first love to the pain of love unrequited to jealous hatred of the rejecting lover, the dancer goes through a series of onstage costume changes reminiscent of a snake shedding its skin. She comes on stage wearing several layers of kimonos, each held in place by a few strategically placed basting threads. At key moments in the dance, a stage attendant pulls out some threads, releasing the outer garment and revealing another layer beneath. Hanako first appears in a black kimono decorated with white flowers; on her head she wears the white cloth that a Japanese bride wears at her wedding. At the climax of her dance, she is wearing a white kimono with dark flowers; the upper half of this kimono is folded down to reveal a silvery triangular pattern that resembles scales.

While an onstage "chorus" chants the traditional story and onstage musicians play drums, flutes, and the three-stringed instruments called samisen, the dancer illustrates and comments on the words of the text with movements and gestures. The pace is slow at first, but gradually increases in tempo as the climax approaches. At times Hanako mimes incidents from the past, using simple props like a small drum, a hand towel, and a fan. With a few waves of her fan she conjures up a long journey through high mountains; twisting the towel around her neck, she suggests the ties that bind true lovers. There are no off-the-floor pyrotechnics equivalent to ballet's leaps and lifts. One of the eagerly awaited moments in The Dancing Maiden at Dojo Temple comes when Hanako faces the rear of the stage and bends backward slowly from the waist until the audience can see down the back of her kimono—a pose that has strongly erotic connotations for the Japanese. Tamasaburo is famous for the long, graceful curve of his body as his head dips toward the floor.

The standard kabuki repertory consists of some 350 plays or parts of plays, some dating back to the seventeenth century. Few changes have been made in content or style since the nineteenth century. Like balletomanes who return to The Sleeping Beauty again and again to watch a favorite ballerina dance the Princess, kabuki audiences go to see a favorite performer bring his special touch to a well-known role. Since many of the details of production and performance are fixed by tradition, it takes an experienced eye to distinguish between differing interpretations, or to note how a performer has slightly altered a gesture or pose from his last performance.

Even kabuki plays not classified as dance pieces are distinguished by varying styles of body movement. Aragoto, or "rough stuff," is a bravura style of acting that originated in Edo in the seventeenth century. Many aragoto characters represent supermen of the Hercules type, whose physical prowess is symbolized by vivid red "strength lines" painted on their arms and legs to indicate bulging muscles. Aragoto heroes often wear outsized costumes; some carry three swords. They strut, swagger, and boast. They speak their lines in a high-pitched, bombastic manner, the louder the better; at peak moments they shout out nonsense syllables. The contorted postures and facial antics of aragoto owe something to the cult of Fudo, a Buddhist demigod whose cross-eyed, snarling visage was familiar to every temple-goer of the Edo period. The inaugurator of the aragoto style, Ichikawa DanjuroI (1660-1704), a devotee of Fudo, once said: "Even in front of lords you must never be afraid, or it won't be aragoto." Seen through the lens of aragoto, strength, heroism, purity, foolishness, and evil all appear larger than life. Aragoto characters occupy the top rung of the kabuki caste-world; they are superior to other men in power and prestige and they act accordingly.

Only in matters of love are they sometimes bested. The beautiful (and often doomed) women of kabuki tend to fall in love with a type of man so different from the atagoto ideal that it calls for an entirely different style of acting, known as wagoto, or "soft style." If aragoto characters are the Clint Eastwoods and Arnold Schwarzeneggers of kabuki, wagoto characters are the James Deans. A wagoto lover sports no "strength lines"; sensitivity is his strength. His movements are refined; his way of walking incorporates elements from the onnagata's pigeon-toed shuffle, He may or may not be brave; his eagerness to give up all for love may even seem faintly comic; but it is his gentle, considerate wooing that wins the hearts of kabuki's most desirable heroines— and of the women in the audience who come to swoon over his tender ways and to weep over his often pitiful fate.

The most characteristic device used on the kabuki stage to heighten dramatic tension is the mie (rhymes with "we say"). In a mie, the performer freezes his body in a pose that may last as long as ten or twelve seconds. This is called "cutting a mie." It signifies that the character is in the grip of an overpowering emotion like anger or defiance, or is struggling for equilibrium while being pulled in opposite directions by irreconcilable motives. Some kabuki plays have as many as seven or eight mies; the narrative is designed to build up to each of these dramatic moments, which regular theatergoers await the way a ballet audience awaits a particular solo or duet. In the more spectacular aragoto-style mies the actor may fling out his arms and legs, cross his eyes, and twist his features into a grimace. Other mies achieve their effect through subtler means.

One of the most popular plays in the kabuki repertoire is The Village School (actually a long scene from an even longer play). Matsuo, a samurai dubbed "the heartless" because of his zeal in carrying out his cruel lord's commands, is torn between two life-and-death obligations. The nine-year-old son of his lord's enemy is to be beheaded. Matsuo is sent to verify the execution. Through family ties Matsuo also owes allegiance to his lord's enemy. He feels obligated to save the boy, but in order to satisfy his lord's command, he must produce a head that resembles the boy's. He chooses to sacrifice his own son. There comes a moment when Matsuo, acting as his lord's agent, is called upon to verify that the right victim has been executed. A box containing the severed head of his own son is handed to him. He extracts the head from the box, examines it, declares it to be the "right" head, and then turns to the audience and cuts a mie: his unblinking stare, strained face, and rigid body seem to distill the essence of his feelings at this terrible moment.

Like Hanako the temple dancer, Matsuo is not what he seems on the surface. As he explains in a scene following the head inspection, the apparently heartless manner in which he has behaved in the service of his lord does not reflect his true nature; he has a heart indeed, and it is breaking now. Kataoka Takao, one of today's leading kabuki performers, likens the mie to a movie closeup: "It's an enlarged vision shown in frozen motion that reveals heightened emotion." During the Tokugawa Shogunate, depictions of famous performers cutting mies were a specialty of Japanese woodblock artists; kabuki enthusiasts collected them the way baseball fans today collect cards of their favorite players.

By the time of the Meiji Restoration in 1868, when a government in the name of the emperor replaced a moribund Shogunate, kabuki was well on its way to achieving classical status. It had evolved a standard repertoire played in carefully delineated styles using traditional kata that audiences came to savor. The merely faddish themes, the purely quirky mannerisms had been weeded out. What remained was a self-image that Japanese audiences enjoyed seeing enacted in public time and time again. The opening of Japan to Western influences in the late nineteenth century led to a reappraisal of all the arts of the Tokugawa era. Japanese advocates of modernization attacked kabuki for being "full of absurdity and nonsense, obscenity and vulgarity." But the militaristic government that began preparing Japan for war in the late nineteenth century recognized that kabuki had captured something fundamental to Japanese society; the plays that had survived the long winnowing process could still make audiences laugh and cry and catch their breath in wonder. Government ideologues paid kabuki the high compliment of trying to subvert it to their own propaganda objectives.

Ever since The Village School was first performed in Edo in the mid-eighteenth century, the schoolteacher who actually beheads the innocent child has offered this comment on his own and Matsuo's actions: "It is painful indeed to serve one's lord!" But during the period of rampant militarism, this line was transferred to the schoolteacher's wife and the schoolteacher himself was made to respond: "It is only now that we can truly serve our lord."

After World War II, the Japanese might have abandoned or radically altered kabuki. Instead, the tradition was revived, with the reluctant approval of the American Occupation forces (who worried that kabuki would indoctrinate new generations of Japanese with "feudal," i.e., undemocratic, values). Today's kabuki theaters sell large blocks of tickets to Japanese corporations which pass them along to deserving employees. For some of these theatergoers, the stage conventions of kabuki are as unfamiliar as they would be to a Western tourist. Yet the popularity of a Tamasaburo would seem to confirm the ability of all-male kabuki, at its most tradition-bound, to speak to modern Japanese audiences. A glimpse of what it says to today's fans, who are mostly female, can be inferred from contemporary performances of The Village School in which the schoolteacher's line has been restored to its original sense of tragic resignation, of shouldering the heavy burden that a rigid moral system places on even its most willing adherents: "It is painful indeed to serve one's lord!"