

# PERFORMANCE ART IN THE CLASSROOM

## Teaching Through Kabuki and Chinese Opera

By Margaret H. Lonsetta



Stage where many Chinese operas were performed in the Ch'ing Dynasty (1644–1911). Source: *The Art of China's Peking Opera* by Jianying, Huo 1997 Beijing: China Today Press.

**P**erformance art is a fundamental part of culture. Nations and regions of the world incorporate elements of music, dance, drama, puppetry, martial arts, and other active forms of “performance” into their cultural fabric. A very good way to introduce the study of a particular culture in today’s classroom is by using performance art as the vehicle.

Both China and Japan have a rich tradition of performance art, with some of the most stunningly beautiful examples of staging and costuming in the history of theater. Kabuki and Chinese opera have thrilled audiences for almost five centuries, from their popular beginnings in the Ming Dynasty in China (1368–1644) and the Tokugawa (1603–1867) period in Japan to performances on Eastern and Western stages today. These two cultures, with thousands of years of recorded history, challenge teachers to “cover” them in the usually inadequate time allotted in the school year. Introducing Chinese opera and Japanese Kabuki in the classroom is a creative way to look at history, economics, art, and society in these two countries.

Kabuki and Chinese opera, both drama forms, differ widely from their Western counterparts. The emphasis of both are on highly stylized acting techniques, elaborate costumes, and intricate facial make-up. Symbolism is more important than realism in both. The

audience is expected to make full use of its imagination. The purpose is more than to entertain theatergoers: it’s to invite them to reflect on the meaning of life, loyalty, family, and other strong human experiences.

The Ming Dynasty, when opera was introduced in China, was a period of imperial splendor and the flourishing of culture. Chinese opera has many forms, all incorporating a combination of song, dance, acting, acrobatics, and martial arts. Operas were traditionally performed in city theaters and throughout the countryside, both inside and outdoors. In this way, oral tradition, myths, and folk tales were passed on to generations of Chinese people. One very popular tale is the story of the Monkey King, which has regaled audiences in Chinese theaters through the ages. Based on the true story of the journey of a Tang Dynasty (618–907) monk to the birthplace of Buddhism, this work incorporates Buddhist, Confucian, and Daoist influences throughout the monk’s celestial and earthly experiences.

In Japan, Kabuki, which literally means song, dance, and acting, was introduced in the Tokugawa period, also a time of great economic growth and urban cultural development, and the longest period of peace and stability in Japanese history. Kabuki, like Chinese

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Scene from a Kabuki performance of *Chushingura*, Kabukiza Theater, Tokyo.  
Source: 2003 Kabukiza Theater program.

opera, was popular drama, incorporating a whole range of human emotions, moral dilemmas, and fantastic adventures. Popular Japanese audiences also learned about their traditions, legends, and historical happenings through Kabuki plays. For example, *Chushingura*, known today as the story of the 47 Ronin, is a frequently-performed tale.<sup>1</sup> Relating the well-known adventures of samurai and master banished from the Shogun's court in eighteenth-century Edo (Tokyo), this story is one of anger, intrigue, moral choices, passion, and loyalty in Japan's feudal history.

Many points of comparison can be made between Chinese opera and Kabuki theater. These comparisons can help teachers craft interesting lessons about China and Japan, providing students with learning opportunities that go beyond dates, places, and names. The similarities in the environments in which these art forms developed—in a time of prosperity that promoted the development of the arts—has already been mentioned. Here are nine other topics for discussion, using a creative approach that will bring East Asia alive for students:

■ Both of these drama forms reflect *regional* and *historical diversity*. There are over 300 forms of Chinese opera, using completely different language dialects and incorporating stories from throughout China and Chinese history. Local opera troupes were spread far and wide, from Canton (Guangzhou) north to Peking (Beijing), and west to Wuhan and Shanxi, to name but a few places associated with this art form. Military and historical developments, and intrigue and conflict in various dynasties, were also communicated to the Chinese people through opera. In *The Empress's Wrath*, a work set in the Song Dynasty (960–1277), the audience is exposed to the recurring themes of evil, loyalty, family intrigue, and filial love. In this story, the bereaved widow of the first Song Emperor sees the throne usurped by her husband's evil brother, causing her eldest son to commit suicide.

While opera was performed throughout China, Kabuki tended to be centered in Kyoto and Edo, although there were performances in all the castle towns and many rural areas of Japan. Kabuki also incorporates legends and stories from Japanese history, like the struggles of the Fujiwara, Minamoto, and Taira clans in the twelfth century Heian (794–1185) period. Focusing on where opera and Kabuki were traditionally performed helps students understand the rich diversity of these two lands, and can be part of an introductory geography lesson. Teachers can ask their students to look at geographical differences between China and

Japan by looking at relative size, location of major cities (inland or on the sea, mountain areas or flat land), transportation routes, etc. Students can also research some of the main legends and stories on which Chinese opera and Kabuki are based, including those mentioned previously.

- *Storytelling* is a fundamental component of Kabuki and Chinese opera. The audiences already know the background material in both of these performance art forms, so the element of surprise is not a fundamental feature. Here the Monkey King provides another good example. The journeys and tribulations of the Tang Dynasty monk are well known, but each time the audiences see it, they can gain new insights into the stories and traditions of that period of Chinese history.

Kabuki and Chinese opera are the perfect vehicles for transmitting history, tradition, fables, and myth. A unified culture develops as people get to know their own history and tradition. How do these drama forms reflect periods of Chinese and Japanese history? What was taking place in these two countries as these arts were being developed? A good way to present twentieth-century Chinese history is through the study of *Farewell My Concubine* (available as a novel and a film). Through the eyes of two opera performers, students can learn about the Japanese invasion of China in 1937, the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, and the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s.

- Chinese opera and Kabuki are “*operatic*” in form; that means all are set to music and “sung.” Music is a universal language. “For millions of people around the world, regardless of cultural background, social status, profession, gender, or national affiliation, music occupies a special place in life.”<sup>2</sup> Musical forms around the world are vastly different. Have students compare and contrast these forms from East Asia with Western music with which they are more familiar. Are there comparisons that can be made with Western opera? What was the music of the “elites” vs. that of the “masses” at this time? The musical component of Kabuki and Chinese opera can lead to good discussion of these topics in the classroom. The students can compare and contrast elements of operatic forms of performance art and form their own opinions. (Video suggestions are listed at the end of this article.)
- In both art forms, the *character types are very strong*. All characters belong to role types. One actor can spend his whole life playing just one role. There is little opportunity to show creative abilities between roles. Roles are often constructed to show various individuals at different levels of society. There are four major roles in Chinese opera: *dan* (female), *sheng* (male), *jing*, (painted face), and *chou* (clown), and several subdivisions within these roles. The clown actor is the only one who can go “out of character” and speak of current and local events, and often makes social and political commentary.

In Kabuki, the role of the samurai is an interesting study. Is the actor portraying the modern day “salaryman” caught between obligations to the family and the corporation? A great deal can be observed about society through drama. Traditional Chinese opera and Kabuki are no different. Through video representations of these dramatic forms, students can observe and discuss traditional elements in these societies and compare them with what is happening in these societies today.

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## ESSAYS

■ *Staging* is an important feature of both Chinese opera and Kabuki (as it usually is in performance art). There are, however, unique features to these drama forms of East Asia. Compared to many Western performances, there's a certain element of simplicity. In Chinese opera there is a free sense of time and space. When the first actor appears, it's his responsibility to make the time and setting clear through song or dialogue. For example, journeys are accomplished by having an actor walk in circles on the stage. A chair is no longer a chair when it's placed on its side; it becomes a bench, a mound or something totally different. The traditional audience knows by the actor's gestures what he's trying to communicate. The Chinese use a square stage for their performances. The curtain serves as a backdrop that enhances the stage, not as a way to hide the set from the audience as is the custom in Western theater. A great deal of imagination and visualization is demanded of these Chinese audiences—which is the reason that Chinese operas are difficult for Western audiences.

Kabuki, first performed on a simple stage, often outside, is full of its own rituals and symbols. Kabuki borrowed techniques from the Nōh drama, utterly simple and bare in its presentation. The two special features of Kabuki in the last 200 years are the *hanamichi*, the flowering path, and the revolving stage. These two dramatic inventions allow different scenes to take place, maintaining the overall simplicity and starkness of the stage. They also allow the Japanese to manipulate time and space in their staging of Kabuki.

Props are also simple in the staging of these two types of dramas. The actor and his movements are key to the audience understanding the plot in a far greater way than they are in Western theater. This can be a good entry point for students to compare Kabuki and Chinese opera with drama forms of the West, for example, the plays of Shakespeare. There are similarities—stories with deep human emotions, audience reaction, local environment in which the plays were produced—but there are also differences. Have the students research these differences and find other similarities as well.

In addition to using Kabuki and Chinese opera to compare cultures through a political, social, and artistic lens, these art forms can elucidate courses in literature. Folklore, myth, and poetry can be further explored using Kabuki and Chinese opera as a basis. In the compelling words of one teacher: "I have always gravitated to theater—one reason is because of my interest in literature—so a highlight for me was (working with) Chinese and Japanese theatre. Because of my interest in folklore, I appreciate the fact that many Chinese and Japanese dramas are based on folk stories. The element of surprise—how will this drama end?—is not an important feature because the audience already knows the hero from its literature."

■ The *importance of the audience* is fundamental to both Kabuki and Chinese opera. These drama forms could not have succeeded without the strong role the audience plays. "Good audiences are essential if drama is to come into being as an art, and equally essential if it is to achieve maturity."<sup>3</sup> These two entertainment forms reflected the style and tastes of the audiences which they attracted. And those audiences were, for the most part, popular,

composed of "common people." The audiences were often raucous and very much a part of what was happening on the stage. Here, students can make a comparison with Shakespeare's time. Also, how does the quote on "good audiences" apply to theater today? Have students discuss appropriate theater behavior then and now.

■ With the growth of popular audiences, *social criticism* began to be a part of opera and theater. Because the social order changed dramatically in Tokugawa Japan with the introduction of a new class structure, there were opportunities for additional groups to have access to a range of cultural offerings. Although Kabuki was originally the purview of the aristocracy, it was popularized by the urban masses during this period. The Ming Dynasty in China also produced a merchant class, thereby opening up the arts to a whole new segment of society.

The introduction of popular audiences to Kabuki and Chinese opera is a good topic for leading students to a discussion of the concept of social order and social change in China and Japan during these periods. They can compare and contrast it with what is happening today. Classes can also explore the philosophy of social order in other nations, comparing East Asia, the Middle East, and the West, as some examples. They can discuss how the development of theater in these periods reflected economic as well as social change. Theater traditionally provides a vehicle for the expression of views on current political and social conditions, and actors make social and political commentary. In the Western tradition, think of Shakespeare in England, Moliere in France, and Tennessee Williams and August Wilson in the US. The Monkey King in Chinese theater was expressing rebellious ideas against the feudal system and its rulers at that period in Chinese history.

■ The *role of gender* in both Kabuki and Chinese opera is one of the most interesting similarities between these two theater forms. Gender is a distinguishing feature of this theater. Since early in its development, the roles in Kabuki have been played by *onnagata* (men). These roles are often passed down through families, and the role of the *onnagata*, the female role specialist, is highly prized in Japan. Males have traditionally played the main roles in Chinese opera, and those roles, too, have been maintained in families. The practice of exclusive male role playing in the opera, however, was not always followed in China during the revolutionary period of the twentieth century. Jiang Qing, wife of Chairman Mao and herself a former actress, denounced traditional Chinese opera and introduced plays about the common people that promoted the values of the Communist Party of China.

There are examples of all-male theater in the West, and female impersonation is not unique to Kabuki and Chinese Opera. But these East Asian art forms can be a good place to start a discussion of gender roles in China and Japan—then and now. How are gender roles portrayed in drama and literature today? How do these roles reflect what is going on in society?

Ennosuke and Tamasaburo are famous *onnagata* in Japan today, and both are designated National Treasures. China's best known opera actor of the twentieth century was Mei Lanfang, a male worshipped like a female star because of roles he played. Students interested in theater could research these individuals and share their findings with the class.

■ There is a traditional *relationship between government and theater* in both art forms. In fact, it is a tradition in many countries for the national government to support the arts financially. During the Ming Dynasty there was a great tradition of government patronage of opera. Opera troupes were often summoned to Beijing to celebrate the emperor's birthday. Government-sponsored training of various opera artists grew in the twentieth century



American actor, Charlie Chaplin with Mei Lanfang in 1930. Source: *The Art of China's Peking Opera* by Jianying, Huo 1997 Beijing: China Today Press.

and continues today as there is growing concern that, as China has opened up to the world, opera is becoming a dying art.

In Japan, the relationship between the government of the Tokugawa period and Kabuki was mixed. Often the government tried to suppress and prohibit these plays. However, the new merchant class embraced Kabuki and gave it support. The Meiji government tried to support plays because they improved "social consciousness." Today, Japan's system of National Treasures, which includes many Kabuki actors, is a clear measure of support for the arts.

Government support of the arts is a huge area for discussion. How does a national opera/theater benefit a country and its people? Students can investigate the question of government support (or lack thereof) in the US. They can research the current situation in China and Japan with respect to the role of government, and compare and contrast it with such entities as the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities. This can be a good introduction to a discussion of public policy issues in the three countries.

The development of culture is important to all societies; when culture flourishes, the quality of life for many is improved. Students can use this feature as an entry point for talking about the role culture plays in society. Who has access to cultural elements? What is "high culture"? What is the role of "popular culture"? What were the societal norms of these periods in China and Japan? How does a nation develop its cultural heritage?

Clearly there's an interconnectedness between all these topics of discussion, and teachers and students are encouraged to look for other points of comparison to provoke lively classroom discussion. What is the future for these two spectacular art forms of East Asia? While Kabuki and Chinese opera suffered oppression during different periods of history, perhaps television, movies, DVDs, videos, pop music, and other forms of modern entertainment, "soft culture," challenge these art forms today. A stimulating area of discussion for today's students is the role of "pop culture" and its many social, economic, political, and global implications. ■

#### EDITOR'S NOTE

This article emerged from the 2003 NCTA Seminar organized by Joan Arno, World History teacher at Central High School in Philadelphia, and Margaret Lonzetta of the World Affairs Council of Philadelphia. Ayako Kano, Associate Professor of Japanese Studies, and Tina Lu, Assistant Professor of Chinese Language and Literature, both at the University of Pennsylvania, were the presenters.

#### NOTES

1. John Allyn, *The 47 Ronin Story* (Boston: Tuttle Publishing, 1970).
2. E. Taylor Atkins, "Edifying Tones: Using Music to Teach Asian History and Culture." *Education About Asia* 8, no. 1, Spring 2003, 17.
3. Masakatsu Gunji. *Kabuki*. (Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd., 1969), 48.

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- Zung, Celia. *Secrets of the Chinese Drama*. New York: Benjamin Blom, Inc., 1937. Includes good biographical sketch and photographs of Mei Lanfang.

#### RECOMMENDED VIDEOS

*Farewell My Concubine*. A twentieth-century political epic that covers fifty years in the lives of two Chinese opera stars. Two and a half hours with subtitles. Available at Amazon.com and at video stores.

*Kabuki*. Films for the Humanities and Sciences. Introduces this form of Japanese theater. 60 minutes.

*Portrait of an Onnagata*. Films for the Humanities and Sciences. Explores the history of the female role in Kabuki. 30 minutes.

*The Education of a Singer at the Beijing Opera*. Films for the Humanities and Sciences. The story of the rigorous training of an actor in traditional Chinese opera, 1985. 54 minutes.

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