

A Kabuki Reader

History and Performance

EDITED BY SAMUEL L. LEITER

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In *A Kabuki Reader*, Samuel L. Leiter, Professor of Theatre at CUNY, scholar of Japanese theatre, and editor of the *Asian Theatre Journal*, draws together twenty essays on the *kabuki* theatre with, as he claims, “no particular agenda to address other than to bring together some of the best English-language writing focusing on this outstanding art form” (p. xx). This rich collection of essays achieves a sophisticated deepening of *kabuki* scholarship and makes accessible to students of the genre passionately informed, non-encyclopedic reflections on the topics of *kabuki* history, performance, and scholarship. Critical considerations and historical investigations of established Western *kabuki* scholars stand side by side with those of English-language Japanese scholars, and of relative newcomers to the field of *kabuki* studies.

Leiter presents the book in three parts: *Kabuki* History, *Kabuki* Performance, and Surveying the Field. For the purposes of this review and to guide potential users of *A Kabuki Reader*, the articles may be divided into three user-level categories as well: articles for students of Asian theatre who seek a cursory introduction to *kabuki*, articles for those students who spend a full term studying *kabuki*, and those articles which, in addition to the previous articles, must be read by teachers and the more serious students of *kabuki* studies who seek to acquaint themselves with the best English-language scholarship available.

Editor Leiter’s introduction to *A Kabuki Reader*, and Donald Shively’s article, “*Bakufu* Versus *Kabuki*,” are worthwhile reading for every college student of *kabuki* theatre, no matter how briefly the subject will be studied. Leiter’s introductory “*Kabuki* History Essays: A Closer Look,” provides an overview of *kabuki*, including the history of its development and its artistic process, essential terms, and the current state of *kabuki* artistry. Leiter’s survey is an ideal lead-in to Donald Shively’s brief but engaging essay “*Bakufu* Versus *Kabuki*.” If only one chapter from this book is assigned to introduce Asian theatre students to *kabuki*, it must be Shively’s as he skillfully places *kabuki* within its socio-political context by relating the many ways stringent government regulations helped shape the art. The *bakufu* (the Tokugawa government of the sixteenth century), aiming to “protect society at large from the corrupting influence of actors” (p. 43), took steps to quash the popular entertainment form, separate it from the rest of society, and impose strict sanctions and requirements on the actors which, of course,

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only served to fuel their creativity. Students will be enthralled to learn of *kabuki*’s subversive sexuality and the ways in which society’s outcasts created a widely seen, wildly loved, controversial, and now, governmentally embraced, theatrical art form.

For university students with the opportunity to study *kabuki* for a full term, a number of articles from the history section are indispensable, beginning with Andrew T. Tsubaki’s “The Performing Arts of Sixteenth Century Japan: A Prelude to *Kabuki*.” Tsubaki suggests that, as much as “the emergence of Okuna and her *kabuki odori* was not mere accident” (p. 3), *kabuki*’s lineage may be traced to the earlier forms of *nō* and *kyōgen*. Tsubaki establishes “the significance of the sixteenth century as the foundation for the emergence in the following century of the *kabuki*, Japan’s most popular and enduring traditional theatre form” (p. 4).

Other essential reading for a course on *kabuki* includes Laurence R. Kominz’ article, “Origins of *Kabuki* Acting in Medieval

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BOOK REVIEWS

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Japanese Drama.” Kominz establishes the origins of the two distinctive styles of acting in *kabuki*, the *aragoto* (rough business), in Edo’s ritual dances, puppet plays, and literature, and the *wagoto* (gentle business), in Kyoto’s *nō* plays. In “Flowers of Edo: Eighteenth Century *Kabuki* and Its Patrons,” C. Andrew Gerstle examines the fascinating world of commercial *kabuki* promotion and actor fan clubs that elevated famous actors, such as Danjuro I, to cult status beyond belief.

With “*Kabuki* Goes Official: The 1878 Opening of the Shin-tomi-za,” Yuichiro Takahashi describes a major turning point in the history of *kabuki*. Takahashi examines purpose-built theatres and their effects on the actor/audience relationship and on the overall atmosphere of the *kabuki* event. He examines changes made in 1878 that led to the type of staging we see most often in today’s *kabuki*, and points to the potential for ossification of an originally socially-responsive art form. Brian Powell’s “Communist *Kabuki*: A Contradiction in Terms?” explores the “powerful impact of Marxism on Japanese arts and letters in the 1920s” (Leiter, xxvi), and the *Zenshin-za kabuki* troupe, founded on communist principles and still vibrant today.

Two articles from the section on *Kabuki*: Performance round out my recommendations for term-length studies as they introduce both the origins of *kabuki* texts and the practice of the female impersonators, the *onnagata*. Editor Leiter’s article, “From Gay to Gei: The *Onnagata* and the Creation of *Kabuki*’s Female Characters,” surveys the various female role types artfully played by men since women were outlawed from *kabuki*’s stage. Leiter’s description of the courtesan in sixteenth century Japan explains why she became a central figure in *kabuki* dramas, and his exploration of other female types, such as the jealous woman, the cruel woman, the virgin, and the mother, describes many *kabuki* plots. Stanleigh H. Jones’ “*Miracle at Yaguchi Ferry*: A Japanese Puppet Play and Its Metamorphosis to *Kabuki*” is the only play text included in the book. Jones translates this puppet play-cum-*kabuki* text, and describes changes made to it for use by the *kabuki* theatre. He points out differences and similarities between *kabuki* and one of its sources (the puppet play), and between the requirements of a script performed for puppets and for actors, and includes the alternate endings for the two distinct genres. Together, these many disparate articles comprise a progressive history of *kabuki* theatre and illuminate some of its endearing quirks.

The remaining articles in *A Kabuki Reader* are best suited for teachers of *kabuki* studies and for the most serious students. Holly Blumner’s article “Nakamura Shichisaburo I and the Creation of Edo-Style *Wagoto*” delves into the development of the *wagoto* (gentle business) acting style, its most versatile and exemplary actors, and its component parts: “*nuregato* (love scenes), *keiseigoto* (scenes amidst courtesans), *kuzetsugoto* (lovers’ quarrels), and *yat-sushigoto* (scenes in which a samurai hero is forced by circumstances to assume a commoner’s guise)” (p. 61). Charles J. Dunn’s “Episodes in the Career of the *Kabuki* Actor Nakamura Utaemon

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III, including His Rivalry with Arashi Rikan I" is a complex and fascinating history of the potentially confusing progress of actors' names, which function as titles attesting to levels of achievement and lineage. Natsuko Inoue's "New (Neo) Kabuki and the Work of Hanagumi Shibai" presents current experiments with *kabuki* and future goals of today's artists working in traditionally-styled *kabuki*, as well as in fusion-style *kabuki*.

Other *Kabuki History* articles depict the extreme devotion of fan clubs and clapping clubs, the hierarchy of acting lineages of *kabuki* players, the unionization of *kabuki* actors, and various reforms within this extraordinary art and entertainment form. Additional articles in the *Kabuki Performance* section describe the functions and effects of doubling and disguise, identity-conferring speeches, and the recurrence of the enigmatic fox figure. Two articles by Leonard Pronko advocate *kabuki* as a model for Western theatre and draw parallels between *kabuki* and its contemporary—English Renaissance theatre. The section titled Surveying the Field consists of two chapters, offered by James R. Brandon and William Lee, that address the current state of *kabuki* scholarship, the constant East/West dialogue, and the socio-political-commercial nature of *kabuki* reform.

At any level of involvement, *A Kabuki Reader* is a welcome addition to an already rich field, and for the most serious students of Japanese theatre, it is a spur to and an inspiration for further research. Teachers of *kabuki* will find the 400-plus pages well worth the investment of time, for Samuel L. Leiter has indeed offered the highest level of scholarship on the subtleties, nuances, and checkered history of this most theatrical of arts. ■

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