

FILM REVIEWS

The Written Face

DIRECTED BY DANIEL SCHMID

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1995, 89 MINUTES/COLOR

The *Written Face* is a poetic meditation on femininity as seen through the world of Japanese performing arts. In the traditional performing art of kabuki, men play all of the roles, male as well as female. The male kabuki actors who play female parts (*onnagata*), have often created idealized female characters on stage. It is this idealized femininity that the film addresses.

A kabuki actor who specializes in playing kabuki's female roles, Bando Tamasaburo (born 1950), is at the center of this film. Tamasaburo has a beautiful face and a graceful manner, creating a stunning female persona that is more charming than most women could ever hope to embody. Extremely popular in Japan, Tamasaburo has crossed over into films and stage, a rare achievement for actors in the world of the traditional performing arts.

The film is a dreamy patchwork that interweaves several stories in various settings. Tamasaburo is seen in extended sections of three kabuki pieces at different times during the film. The film

The most fascinating parts of the film are the brief interviews with Tamasaburo and three legendary beauties of the entertainment world in their twilight years. These three paragons of art epitomize the femininity that Tamasaburo strives to create in his own art.



Photo courtesy of First Run/Icarus Films

opens and closes with Tamasaburo dancing *Sagimusume* (*The Heron Maiden*), the story of a girl, abandoned by her lover, who transforms into a heron and perishes on a snowy night. In *Orochi*, Tamasaburo is the character of Inada, the youngest daughter of an elderly couple, who is about to be sacrificed to an eight-headed serpent. Through an instantaneous, on-stage change of costume, Tamasaburo also dances the serpent's part. The last kabuki piece is *Seki no To* (*Barrier Gate at Ōsaka*) in which Tamasaburo is the female spirit of a cherry tree being threatened by an arch villain. In all of these stories, the actor brings to life the poignant emotions of women who are sad, deserted, sacrificed or dying.

Another piece of the patchwork is *Twilight Geisha Story*, a wistful dramatic vignette. In this story, Tamasaburo plays an older, modern-day geisha who is jealously desired by two young men—one, a gangster-type and the other, a preppy businessman. Tamasaburo playfully takes his "feminine mystique" to its limits but never crosses the line to being vulgar. True to form, the geisha in this story is deserted in the end.

The most fascinating parts of the film are the brief interviews with Tamasaburo and three legendary beauties of the entertainment world in their twilight years. These three paragons of art epitomize the femininity that Tamasaburo strives to create in his own art. Takehara Han (92), geisha and dancer, does a short "dance" while sitting on the floor. To Takehara, movement is the

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portal through which she expresses her heart. Asaji Tsutakiyomatsu (101), geisha, asks her listeners to relax while she plays an interlude on the *shamisen*, a banjo-like instrument capable of expressing a wide range of emotions. Ironically, Sugimura Haruko (88), actress and film star, claims she learned to be feminine from watching the heightened femininity of kabuki's *onnagata*. This is a case of a woman looking at men who are looking at women for inspiration. The results are that a certain type of femininity is magnified and encompasses the entire definition of being a woman. Absolute selflessness and treacherous jealousy are key elements of kabuki's idealized women.

The final actor in this feminine-masculine dreamscape is Ohno Kazuo (88) who seems to appear out of nowhere, dancing on water in a flouncy dress and flowery bonnet. Mr. Ohno is the "grande dame" of *butoh*, an original, highly expressive form of dance that developed in Japan in the 1960s and 1970s. His ethereal femininity is that of a startled child who is delighted by the summer breeze.

Faces are of particular importance in this film. Tamasaburo is seen transforming from his feminine face to his masculine face, and back again, through the application and removal of make-up. The elderly women's faces and that of Mr. Ohno's, while being gently expressive, are also composed into iconographic masks of beauty. One feels the ceremonial, unhurried quality of life in the theater. There is nothing spontaneous, yet every gesture is true to their minds and hearts.

This is not a usual documentary or educational film even though the audience will learn about Japanese performing arts. In its entirety, it will be enjoyed by kabuki aficionados, Tamasaburo fans, and theatergoers interested in the multiple



Photo courtesy of First Run/Carus Films

forms that theater and dance take around the world. However, it can be used for teaching in the classroom. Tamasaburo is seen dancing and musicians are shown performing in extended clips without any interruption or voice-over commentary, something rarely afforded in educational films. It can most readily be used in dance classes to illustrate the ideal of feminine beauty as rendered by an *onnagata*. There are also scenes of the inside of the Uchiko, a small classic kabuki theater on the island of Shikoku where a Shinto priest "blesses" or purifies Tamasaburo and the assembled staff before a performance. A visual delight, *The Written Face* is sure to provoke discussion on many levels. ■

ELAINE VUKOV is the Director of Educational Outreach at the Japan Society, New York. Her work at the Society is focused on K-12 teachers and students in the New York area.

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