

## I N T R O D U C T I O N

Perhaps 25,000 theatre troupes perform traditional and modern plays in the enormous geographic area of the Asian mainland and the adjoining islands of the western Pacific Ocean. In fact, no one knows the full extent of performing arts among the two billion people who live in some 40 nation-states within the region. There are too many performers, too many remote regions, and there is too much daily change for anyone to know for certain. What is known, is that theatrical arts in Asian and Pacific-island cultures are ancient, highly developed, rich almost beyond imagining in their diversity, and very much alive today for large segments of the population.

From Pakistan in the west to the Hawai'ian Islands in the east, and from China in the north to Indonesia in the south, the theatrical arts have evolved into as many as 700–800 distinct forms or genres. Each is clearly different from neighbouring theatre forms. Each reflects the unique language, religious views, social structures and daily lives of the people – artists and audiences – who have created it. Each is distinguishable by its own constellation of music, movement, acting style and staging conventions, and by dramatic content and form. Even to the relatively uninitiated observer, *KYŌGEN* comedies in Japan stand apart from *KABUKI* or from *BUNRAKU*, also from Japan, and they are artistic and cultural worlds away from Indonesian *LUDRUK*, *BHAVAI* in India or Beijing opera in China, forms which also feature comic elements. The distinctiveness of each country's theatre forms and their historical development will be described in detail in the chapters that follow, each chapter contributed by a specialist author (or authors) and devoted to a single country.

At the same time, shared features link genres within and between countries. We can even, with considerable caution, identify interregional and even pan-Asian-Pacific traditions and patterns of

performance. In this chapter I will suggest some of the major commonalities among theatre forms in Asia and the Pacific islands that arose from centuries, even millennia, of interrelationships, and from similarity of race and ethnicity, of religion, of politics, of language or of literary traditions.

Four major geographic (and cultural) regions may be identified within this vast sweep of land and ocean. South Asia, which encompasses the present nation-states of Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, is the home of Hinduism and Buddhism, the source of dramatic themes from the epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, and mother to a pervasive and multifaceted classical dance tradition. The outpouring of fecund detail, a baroque love of brilliant theatrical display and the vibrant use of colour, emotion and rhythm in performance mark South Asian forms.

China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan and Korea comprise East Asia. They share cultures based on Confucian civil ethics, systems of imperial rule and Buddhist philosophy. The Chinese writing system of calligraphic characters was adopted in all these areas, and in the process Chinese literature and Chinese arts of brush painting, music and dance were introduced as well. In East Asia a spirit of decorum and restraint, and a concern for structural simplicity and clarity, are apparent in the performing arts.

The countries of Southeast Asia – Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam – have welcomed religions, literature and dance from both South and East Asia, and fused these with rich indigenous performance traditions. Malay peoples settled Indonesia, Malaysia, southern Thailand, Singapore and the Philippines, and these countries share many theatre traits in common. Related Chinese-influenced musics are heard in theatres in northern Burma and

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Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam, areas geographically adjacent to southern China, and in the island nation of Singapore. Oceania contains some 20 Pacific-island nations in the subregions of Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia whose original settlement can often be traced back to common ancestors. These Pacific voyagers brought with them their religious songs, genealogical chants, and dances, spreading them across the island groupings, through Fiji, Tahiti and Samoa as far east as Hawai'i.

Theatre performance is a social activity which must be sanctioned by the community in order to exist. We can identify three quite different social milieux that have nourished theatre forms within the countries that lie in and adjacent to the western Pacific Ocean. First, elite forms of theatre were created with the support of the ruling classes, propounding the ideology of rulers and serving audiences drawn from the elite at centres of political and economic power. In the past these were court forms, performed by court functionaries – actors, dancers, musicians, storytellers – for court occasions. Performance was a civic-political ritual demonstrating and confirming royal prerogatives and it reflected the culture's highest literary and artistic values (the status attained, for example, by Sanskrit drama in India, *BUGAKU* and *NŌ* in Japan, *WAYANG* in Indonesia, *ZAT* in Burma, *HAT BŌI* in Vietnam and hula in Hawai'i). In the course of time, and especially during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the royal courts which had supported these arts all lost power or were replaced, and performers were forced to turn to other audiences for support. Today, most former 'royal' theatre forms continue to be performed as important cultural artifacts, even as 'state' arts, preserved with modest levels of government support.

A completely different elite theatre was created in the 20th century by and for a new Western-oriented, university-educated, professional, managerial and student elite. The theatre of this elite was 'spoken drama' imported from the West and representing 'modernism'. It began as an amateur enterprise, idealistically motivated, in the manner of Europe's 'little theatres', and even today audiences are small and economic self-sufficiency is illusive. In the 1910s–30s, it was

primarily a theatre of realism, devoted to the gospel of social reform. By the beginning of World War II, artists were divided sharply into two opposing groups: those committed to humanistic, psychological drama of the individual (sometimes identified as 'non-political', 'psychological', or 'art' theatre), and those allied to 'progressive' or socialist ideologies who saw theatre as a means of promoting the struggle for socialist-communist societies. This division continues today, with profound consequences: countries with communist governments (China, North Korea and Vietnam) attempt to restrict or completely ban 'bourgeois' theatre, while many capitalist-democratic countries (South Korea, Taiwan, India, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand) censor or ban 'leftist' theatre. Perhaps no political control of theatre has been as total as that exercised by Japan during World War II at home and throughout its Asian-Pacific empire. Consequently, modern theatre occupies an anomalous position: though it is valued as a part of the modernizing process, its creators are nonetheless often at odds with whatever government is in power, because they tend to be independent-minded. Direct government subsidy is usually predicated on social and political conformity. Censorship of new plays is stringent almost everywhere (Japan and the Philippines being notable exceptions). Current modern theatre in Asia and the Pacific region encompasses the older realism, Western classical drama (especially Shakespeare's plays, which are performed everywhere), variations of 'socialist realism' in communist countries, avant-garde experiments with new forms often in international and 'intercultural' settings, as well as uniquely local movements. (See Japan, *SHINGEKI*; Korea, *SHINGŪK*; China, *HUAJU*, and for other countries 'modern drama'.)

Second, folk theatre is created by local villagers-turned-performers and performed by them for festival and religious occasions and for the entertainment of their own communities. Although the artistic quality may be high and a performer may enjoy social esteem, performing is occasional, not an occupation. In thousands of village communities, and in urban enclaves as well, folk performances continue to be organized as religio-civic rites, expressing the solidarity of the

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local community. Among such forms are *MANIRIMDU* in Nepal, *HAT CHEO* in Vietnam, *SANDAE-GŪK* in Korea, *KUDA KEPANG* in Indonesia and *KUTIYATTAM* in India. If the economic environment is encouraging, excellent folk performers may gain favour and become professionals, often today performing for national and foreign tourist audiences (Japan, Korea, Indonesia, India, Oceania).

And third, in urban environments very significant commercial theatre forms have evolved for a public audience of commoners, workers, artisans and merchants who live in Asia's large cities and towns. Typically commercial troupes perform regularly, perhaps daily, for the general ticket-buying public in permanent enclosed theatre buildings. Performers must be eclectic in choice of subject matter and style, for they have to respond to audience tastes directly or go out of business. Most important urban commercial theatre genres began as outcast theatres despised by the intelligentsia (e.g. *LUDRUK*, *BANGSAWAN* and *KETOPRAK* in Indonesia, *LIKAY* in Thailand, *LAKON BASSAK* in Cambodia, *TAMASHA*, *JATRA*, *MAACH* and *SVANGA* in India). Government suppression of these genres in the name of public order or upholding public morality was not uncommon. Ironically, some have seen their official standing metamorphose with the passage of time and today are considered reputable, even classical forms of 'national theatre' (Japan, *KABUKI*, *BUNRAKU*; China, *JINGXI*, *YUEJU*; Indonesia, *WAYANG orang*; Vietnam, *CAI LUONG*).

**Religion**

Everywhere in Asia and Oceania, early performance was associated with man's relations to the gods. In animistic belief performance is service to the gods, a request for good health or a good harvest, a channel to invite the spirits of the sacred world into the temporary world of mankind (Sri Lanka, *rata yakuma*; Thailand, *NORA*; Indonesia, *SANGHYANG*; Japan, *NŌ*; India, *RASLILA*, *KRISHNATTAM*, *KUCHIPUDI*, *KUTIYATTAM*). In Korea, shamans' husbands were specialists in masked plays (*SANDAE*) and in puppet plays (*KKOKTU KAKSI*). The belief that the human performer is a mere vessel of a god's appearance is widespread, and spirit possession underlies such performances as the

Indonesian *BARONG*, Indian *PRAHLADA NATAKA* and Burmese *NAT PWE*, among others. Re-affirmation of human bonds with spirits of the land (*'āina*) underlies the performance of dances and chants of Polynesia and Melanesia.

Tens of thousands of plays throughout Asia and the Pacific dramatize religious beliefs. Religious myths, legends, and stories, characters of saints, gods, spirits and demons, and underlying religious world-views provide the material of traditional drama in all countries. Buddhist *Jataka* stories, tales about Lord Buddha in a former life, are the source of scores of plays in Thailand, Laos, Burma and Cambodia. The Confucian ethics of fidelity to ruler, husband and father inform Japanese *BUNRAKU*, Chinese *JINGXI*, and Korean *SHINP'A* dramas alike. Krishna and Rama, incarnations of the Brahmanic god Vishnu, are heroes not only in India's regional theatres – *KATHAKALI*, *KRISHNATTAM*, *RAMLILA*, *RASLILA*, *KUCHIPUDI* and others – but they populate the plays of such genres as *WAYANG* in Indonesia and Malaysia, *KHON* masked drama in Thailand and *NANG SBEK* shadow plays in Cambodia as well. Persian and Arabic stories entered Pakistan and Bangladesh with the introduction of Islam, and the Arabian



Entrance of Ravana, centre, the demon king of Lanka, in a *kutiyyattam* version of a Sanskrit play.

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hero, Amir Hamza, appears in *BANGSAWAN* in Malaysia and, in Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim nation, in *KETOPRAK* and *WAYANG golek*. Muslim and Christian influences contend in Philippine *KOMEDYA*, and Christian biblical stories and later mediaeval romances are dramatized in Sri Lankan *PASKU*, Indian *CAVITTU NATAKAM*, and Philippine *SENAKULO*.

However, it should not be imagined that this dramatic material travels intact and unaltered from one culture to another. Just as Japanese Buddhism is different from Chinese Buddhism (to say nothing of Sri Lankan Buddhism), Chinese stories dramatized in Korea and Japan are greatly altered and acquire a local flavour. One of Asia's ur-myths tells of a celestial bird-maiden who, captured by a mortal, escapes to heaven by dancing in her angel's feathers: this basic story acquires an aesthetic expression in the *The Angel Robe (Hagoromo)* in Japanese theatre, while the conflicting human and sacred views are fundamental in *Manora* in Thai, Burmese and Malaysian drama.

The Hindu *Ramayana* contains one of the world's great mythic motifs: the withdrawal of the hero, Rama, from affairs of the world, initiation through asceticism and the gaining of spiritual power (*mana*, *sakti*), and return to temporal rule. In various forms, this philosophic-political quest theme occurs in dramas far beyond India. It is found in Thai *LAKON FAI NAI* and *LIKAY*, in Indonesian and Malaysian *WAYANG* and in Cambodian *LAKON BASSAK* in varied guises. When Rama himself appears on the Javanese or Balinese stage he is localized into a Javanese or Balinese king; in Buddhist Burma, Thailand and Cambodia, Rama is portrayed as Buddha in a former life. Events in the Chinese 'Three Kingdoms' stories are known not just in Chinese theatre forms, but are dramatized in Vietnam, Japan and Korea as well. The legend, originating in India, of the one-horned wizard who traps the rain gods and brings drought to the world, is dramatized in China and in Japan in *NŌ*, *KYŌGEN*, and *KABUKI*.

### *Historical intermixture of genres*

Asian and Pacific performance styles and content have been carried by performers to neighbouring countries often over periods of time, resulting in

performance similarities among cultures. Dancers, actors and musicians either carried their performance skills to foreign countries, or, conversely, learned performance skills while abroad and then brought them home. We don't know which of these two processes occurred but, a millennium ago, Indian-style dance became known to performers far beyond that country's boundaries. It fused with local dance styles, creating numerous related dance forms, among them, Indonesian *LEGONG* and *WAYANG ORANG*, Cambodian *LAKON KABACH BORAN*, Thai *LAKON FAI NAI* and Malaysian *MAK YONG*.

Javanese shadow-puppet performers carried their theatre to neighbouring Malaysia, Cambodia and Bali (perhaps Indian shadow players came to Southeast Asia earlier). Korean and Japanese artists learned masked dances at the Chinese court in the early Tang dynasty (618–907), returned home and transplanted the Chinese performing style to their own courts, in the process establishing in Korea *kiak* and in Japan *BUGAKU* and *gigaku*. The theatre music of Vietnam shows inescapable affinities with that of Okinawa, and of Taiwan and the Philippines as well, resulting from hundreds of years of small-scale artistic exchange along seafaring routes of trade. During national wars between Vietnam and China (11th–13th centuries), and among Cambodia, Thailand and Burma (15th–18th centuries), entire court troupes were captured as booty. As a result there are significant intermixtures of theatre forms and performance styles among these countries.

Finally, Western entrepreneurs and colonial administrations brought popular forms of Western music, dance and theatre into India, the Philippines and Japan beginning in the 16th century, and into other countries somewhat later. From these and later European and American contacts stem such urban popular entertainments as *bodabil* (vaudeville) in the Philippines, urban professional melodrama in Calcutta and Bombay, and all-female operetta, *takarazuka*, in Japan. In the early decades of the 20th century, Chinese and Korean students studying in Japan discovered Western melodrama and serious drama through Japanese productions and translations. By the time of World War II, a considerable

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number of Asian playwrights, directors and actors had travelled to Europe and the United States, learning Western spoken drama and realistic theatre. With Ibsen and Stanislavski as their inspiration, they returned to create a modern, serious, realistic drama in their own countries. English-language theatre became strongly established in Singapore and the Philippines, and, to a lesser extent, Hong Kong, Malaysia and Burma, all areas under long-lasting British or American colonization. Concurrently, traditional Asian artists were performing on tour in the West for the first time. Artists of the European avant-garde were able to see *Mei Lanfang*, *kabuki*, and Cambodian and Balinese dance troupes. Brecht, Artaud and Meyerhold were deeply influenced and artists in other fields as well – Eisenstein, Rodin, Loie Fuller, Isadora Duncan and others – responded to the vividly ‘exotic other’ of these epochal performances in the early decades of the 20th century.

In the nearly 50 years following the end of World War II, theatrical interchange between Asia–Oceania and Europe–America has become established as a continuous process of mutual interaction, so that recent developments in theatre anywhere in the world are quickly known to at least some theatre practitioners in every country of this area. Happenings, absurdism, deconstructionism and multiculturalism echo in theatre practice here as well as in the West. Concurrently, Western actors, dancers, musicians, directors and playwrights are seriously



American actor, James Grant Benton, performs a standard *kabuki* acting pattern (*kata*) in *Narukami the Thundergod*, Asian Theatre Program, University of Hawaii (1973), directed by James R. Brandon.

studying the performance forms of Asia and Oceania, often gaining considerable mastery in them.

### **Performance training and transmission**

A two-step process of performance preparation indicates the nature of most Asian traditional theatre. The process is centred in the actor, for the actor is the source and repository of most performance information. In many forms there are strong dramatic texts, written by elite, or at least knowledgeable, specialist playwrights, that exemplify local literary standards and forms. But in other genres the centrality of the actor extends to script composition: the actor may be a playwright, or improvise dialogue and, in some cases, song lyrics during performance. In order to function at this high technical level, the first task of the actor (dancer or musician) is to become proficient in the artistic and performance ‘codes’, the artistic languages, of the theatre form. One does not begin by training to ‘act’; one begins by training to be a skilled ‘artist’. The Indian *kathakali* actor spends his childhood forming his body into a pliable instrument for the leaps and whirls of dance, the eye, mouth and cheek movements expressive of emotion and the 600 hand gestures (*hasta*, *mudra*) that he must flawlessly execute when on stage enacting a role. ZEAMI, writing in 15th-century Japan, said the actor should spend from the age of seven to seventeen mastering the ‘two arts’ (*nikkyoku*) of chanting and dance before seriously studying role-playing, that is, ‘acting’. The Indonesian or Malaysian puppeteer learns the 100-plus battle movements of the shadow puppets. The *gamelan* musician who accompanies Javanese theatre learns 120 melodies and the Thai theatre musician learns 200–300 tunes, any one of which may be called for in performance. The Beijing opera student masters scores of movement techniques – ‘water sleeve’ (*shuixiu*) gestures, tumbling and acrobatics in the fighting arts (*wushu*) – and, at least in the past, carried out demanding vocal exercises outdoors at 5 a.m. summer and winter before the stone ‘sounding board’ of a city wall.

Second, and only after this firm artistic base has been laid, the actor learns to enact roles in plays. He or she acts within a generic role-type

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that has been developed by earlier generations of performers within the artistic codes and the subject matter of the theatrical form. Young male hero, older male authority figure, young woman, older woman, villain (often 'foreign' or an ogre, demon, or *jin*, a creature outside the human realm) and clown are roles found in most traditional theatre forms. A performance, then, is one momentary arrangement of pre-known elements, one in a series of performances which are rather like the changing patterns of a kaleidoscope. Performances are examples of an existing artistic form much more than they are the 'production of a play'. The 'play is not the thing'; the genre, the art form is. To put together a traditional performance does not require the special outside vision of a director, as we in Western theatre expect (except perhaps when a long-unstaged play is revived). Actors, dancers and musicians are themselves the source of knowledge of how to perform and they are capable of working as a self-directing ensemble.

In part because the musical, dance and voice technique is so highly developed, and so demanding, in Asian and Oceanic performance, systems for transmitting performance knowledge to the next generation are vital to genres' survival. The most common method of professional training is for a pupil to apprentice him- or herself to a master and learn by assisting, watching and receiving informal instruction over an extended period, perhaps a lifetime. The art may be passed from father to son (ICHIKAWA DANJŪRŌ is a 12th-generation *kabuki* actor), or within hereditary clans (Indian *KUTTYATTAM*). These master-pupil relationships are strongly formalized in India, Thailand and especially Japan, with severe penalties exacted on a disciple who abandons a teacher. In some cases a master may take a group of students and train them together in a school (in Hawai'i called *hālau*, 'temple', indicating the sacred nature of performance transmission). Today numerous formal academies also exist to teach young performers of Chinese opera, Indian classical dance, Indonesian, Thai, and Cambodian dance dramas, Korean *sandae-gŭk*, and other forms. They have formalized curricula, large classes, multiple teachers, and are for a fixed number of years. In Japan, training for *kabuki* and

*bunraku* is now offered in both systems because the master-disciple system could not produce enough actors quickly enough. Most governments in Asia today either run or subsidize academy training.

Unlike text-based Western drama, which can be transmitted by published books and stored for centuries, the art of traditional performance resides in the body of the living performer-teacher. Hence the critical nature of training: if even one generation fails to learn, a theatre genre will be lost irrevocably.

### *Song, dance, masks, puppetry*

It is often said that all Asian performance is 'dance'. This is true in the sense that all acting follows well-defined movement codes, and that every stage movement is carefully controlled. Beyond this, there are numerous theatre genres that fuse choreographed stage movement (steps, turns, stamps, jumps, hand and arm gestures, facial expression) with rhythmic music, and often with sung lyrics as well. The dance is a major structural component in the dramatic composition and story-telling of many forms. Formal set dances, with opening, development and conclusion, and specific placement within the play structure, are easily recognizable. There is good reason to call such performances 'dance dramas'.

Other forms can be said to be built around song. In these, sung lyrics are the major component of dramatic structure, and the 'actor' is required to have developed exceptional vocal skill. For convenience, we often call these forms 'operas' in English, for example, Korean *P'ANSORI*, Indonesian *ARJA*, Chinese *KUNQU*, Taiwanese *GOZAI XI*, Indian *KHYAL*.

Actors in scores of genres wear masks, the mask's transformative power allowing the performer to wholly transcend self and portray gods, spirits of the dead, demons, mythological figures and animals as well as ordinary humans. Certainly the beyond-human worlds that are evoked in Indonesian *TOPENG*, Indian *chhau*, Cambodian *LAKON KAWL*, Japanese *BUGAKU*, and various Sri Lankan, Tibetan and Nepalese forms, relate closely to the defining nature of the powerful masks that are worn.

A unique feature of theatre in Asia is the

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immense importance of puppetry, especially shadow theatre. Doll- or marionette-puppet theatre is known in almost every country of Asia (India, Pakistan, Burma, Indonesia, China, Korea and Japan). Vietnam boasts a unique form of puppetry performed on the surface of a lake (*MUÁ RÔI NUOC*). Dozens of varieties of leather shadow-play are seen throughout the arc beginning with India in the west, and running through Malaysia, Thailand, Cambodia, Indonesia and the Philippines to the south, and into China in the east. Probably doll figures were originally connected to animistic beliefs and they served as totemic representatives of a clan, while flickering shadows cast on a white screen allowed the shades of the spirit world to manifest themselves before human audiences. Puppets, devoid of mortality, were the ideal representatives for our human performative communication with the sacred realm. Among Asian puppet forms are some of the most sophisticated literary and theatre arts in the world (Japan, *BUNRAKU*, Indonesia, *WAYANG kulit*, for example). A 5-ft-tall shadow puppet of Thailand or Cambodia shows an entire scene with multiple characters in tableau. Puppet performance is steeped in ethical and spiritual ambience. Throughout Asia puppet theatre forms have served as progenitors and models for the later development of human theatre forms. Nowhere in Asia is this medium a 'child's' theatre.

When we use the English term opera, mask, dance or puppet to characterize a performance we of course do a disservice by simplifying. Our



The 'Pine Room' scene in *The Forty-Seven Loyal Retainers* (*Kanadehon Chūshingura*), in *bunraku* performance, National Theatre of Japan, Tokyo.

common use of such terms is perhaps necessary, but it should not obscure the reality that most theatre forms in Asia are interwoven fabrics of music, dance and acting, and after that perhaps also of masks or puppetry: the Chinese opera 'singer' speaks, dances and does acrobatics as well as sing; the *nō* 'dancer' chants, speaks and sings as well as dances. In an Indonesian 'shadow'-theatre performance, a spectator is treated to the puppeteer's singing, spoken dialogue and chanted narrative, to orchestral music accompanied by female and male choral singing, to sound effects and to colourful puppet figures, as well as the 'shadows' on the screen. Most Asian theatre is 'total theatre' in which all performance aspects are fused into a single form. The nature of each form is largely dependent upon the particular balance among its many components and constituent parts, what element is emphasized and what element is subordinated. (*Kyōgen* in Japan, primarily a prose dialogue form, is the rare exception that only occasionally uses masks or orchestral musical accompaniment.)

In contrast, in the history of Western performing arts we see an ever-increasing specialization via performance medium. The arts have been separated from each other, so concert music (orchestral music without lyrics), ballet or modern dance (dance with orchestral music), and spoken drama (speech without music, dance, or song) have become totally separate performance genres in Western culture. Drama is still largely equated with literature. In spite of a century of polemics against this limitation, we remain preoccupied with content and meaning, that is, with literary and intellectual concerns, when we consider theatre. Western musical comedy and opera, which might seem exceptions, only prove the strength of this critical bias. Because these forms are not text-based it is common to set them outside the boundaries of 'legitimate' drama, ghettoizing them to the status of 'other'.

**Artistic 'codes'**

Understanding and appreciating Asian-Pacific theatre requires knowledge of performance, and theatre is equated with performance not literature. All the theatrical means of expression are accorded value. In its diversity and richness of

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performance practice, theatre in Asia–Oceania has increasingly become a stimulus and model in the West, as it has to such contemporary theatre figures as Jerzy Grotowski, Peter Brook, Ariane Mnouchkine, David Henry Hwang and Peter Sellars.

Artistic codes reinforce the centrality of the genre, as opposed to the (Western) centrality of the individual piece being performed. The great performers in this region are like jazz musicians, who, steeped in the structural system of the music, are the source of creation. Also, although all structures are inherently confining, and therefore limiting, they also provide the base from which the great artist goes on to create new compositions.

It would be incorrect to assume these performance codes are matters merely of technique. Meaning adheres to them in several dimensions. In the broadest sense, the actor functions in a way parallel to the ritualist: an agent responsible in the aesthetic-symbolic sphere for precisely replicating received artistic forms, just as the priest is responsible in the sacred-symbolic sphere for correctly replicating received ritual forms. Hence, the need for the traditional actor to devote every fibre of his being to the forms of the art. This does not mean that performance is religious; it means that the actor's focus is almost never the self, but the genre. What is often called by Western observers an 'actor's theatre' is in fact an 'acting theatre' with the focus on the larger aesthetic of received structures and not on the individual actor.

Codes suggest a world larger than the specific world of the characters in a single play. The codes encompass all the plays in the repertory (or at least subgroups within the repertory). Characters as 'types' are larger than a single individual and speak for groups or classes of people. (We accept this concept in representative government, politically, but it is harder for us to see the value of this in our arts.)

The discipline and control shown by the performer promotes within the performance a sense of order and knowability. This could be connected to reification through story line of stasis within societies. It communicates to the audience, if only on the subliminal level, the values of control

and discipline in the individual.

Codes create 'stylization' in performance, a term that connotes something superficial, precious, and probably not serious, in much Western discourse. But art means artifice in a positive way: something artificial, something man-made, as opposed to occurring in nature. Plato was wrong, art is not false: art's function in human society is that its stage 'artifices' symbolically interpret our human and social condition in structured and elliptical ways. The artistic codes of music, dance, song, narrative, costuming, masking and the like in Asia and the Pacific are lenses through which human life is refracted into patterns unique to each genre. This is no simple mirror to nature, but a process much more artistically elaborate and symbolically complex.

Theatre's medium is the actor's living body; the actor represents another. Theatre is the only art form humans have devised which is based on transformation of the artist (actor) into a symbolic other. Transformation is socially important in societies where humans commune with the sacred realm in performance and codes play an important part of this enabling process. The most complete transformations occur in possession or trance, states in which the performer is understood to wholly lose conscious power over his or her actions on stage. Because the actor's body has undergone lengthy artistic discipline, a performer is enabled to undergo extreme states of transformation, becoming with relative ease a supernatural serpent in a Chinese opera, a demonic figure of rage in *kathakali* performance, or the witch figure of Rangda in Balinese *barong*. Pivotal *kabuki* scenes show the theatrical transformation of a human being into a god, demon or beast, via costume and makeup change. Such enactments would be difficult if not impossible to achieve within a realistic-based theatre, not because the transformation would strain audience credibility, but because the untrained actor is physically and mentally incapable of sustaining the suprahuman physical demands which extreme states of transformation require. Gender transformations are common – actresses portraying male characters in Indonesia, Cambodia, Thailand, China; actors playing female characters in India, China and Japan. These transformations



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are filtered through, and supported by, the strong artistic codes assigned to gender portrayal.

In the development of Asia and Oceania's many masked theatre forms, we can see a powerful impulse toward transformation of an extreme kind. The vivid makeup styles of red, green, black and white that evolved in *kathakali*, in *kabuki* and in Chinese opera, perform the same theatrical function of supporting a violent transformation of actor into a wholly different character. It is commonly said that 'an actor can play any role' in *kabuki*, because command of artistic codes allows any transformation, irrespective of actor personality or 'ability'.

Transformation is a socially dangerous event. In traditional societies that prize highly the maintenance of social stability, theatre is suspect (at the same time that it also promotes stability). The actor-artist, shaman-like, has the power to transform, if only symbolically, into a god or evil demon on stage before the community, and he, too, is suspect. The Asian performer has often been feared for being social misfit, outcast, wanderer in an agricultural society. To the extent that theatre as a social institution is based on the actor's transformative function, theatre is suspect in all societies and all ages. From a social perspective, puppet representation is 'safe' – the inanimate puppet can portray a god with a good deal less danger than can a human actor. It may be that realism was so readily accepted by Western societies in part because the dangerously liminal aspect of transformation virtually disappeared in plays about daily life and acting was rationally explained as a internal psychological task of the actor (not a public action).

### ***Aesthetics and structure***

There is no single Asian–Oceanic aesthetic of theatre nor is there a single structural pattern, but rather numerous, even opposing, aesthetics and structures. For example, Indian theatre's comprehensive *rasa-bhava* aesthetic, described by the writer BHARATA MUNI, is based on congruences. It is an elaborate and specific system to help the performer identify the means of expression that are most appropriate to convey one or more of the basic human emotions (gentle words and caressing gestures to convey love, for exam-

ple). The locus of the aesthetic effect, *rasa*, is in the mind and heart of the spectator. Quite different from this is the *in-yō* (*yin-yang*) principle of light-and-dark which ZEAMI recommends should regulate a *nō* actor's performance. He advised doing the unexpected in order to surprise the audience, to pique their interest: if it is a night performance, do a bright, lively play; if your competitor has just scored a success with brilliant dancing, emphasize the beauty of chant in your performance. The opposition, and balancing, is a property of the performance itself and rests directly with the performer. Different aims of performance are summed up in two expressions: in India a theatre-goer is 'one who sees' the play, while in China an audience goes to 'hear theatre'. Other examples could be given to illustrate that there is great variety within the hundreds of genres and language groups being considered later. Again it is important to repeat: 'Asia' and 'Oceania' are only words to identify conveniently broad geographic areas that encompass richly variant arts.

Performances are structured in time in sophisticated ways. The longest time cycle I am aware of is a Papua New Guinea dance play that extends over a decade. Many seasonal performances are timed to match annual celebrations of planting and harvesting, of the new year and summer solstice. A day's programme will almost always follow a well-known structural order: a 3-part structure in Indonesian *wayang*, in which musical pitch rises through the 9-hour evening performance (among other features), or, to cite another well-known example, a 4-part structure in Japanese *kabuki*, in which scenes are arranged so the audience will experience, in sequence over the 4–6-hour performance, strong, slow formality, languid elegance, lively casualness and colourful, rhythmic action. By custom, performance is usually limited to certain hours (this may be in part restriction, in part preference). Time may be structured in cyclical terms. In Javanese dance and music, it is said the audience should be unaware of any beginning or end points, and should be carried along by continuous movement and sound representing the never-ending cycle of life. An all-day *kabuki* play will conclude on an interesting tableau, cutting off

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the conclusion of the story. Within a performance, refined concepts of timing, dynamics and temporal flow regulate the actor and supporting musicians and singers in their interactions. One of the most famous of these is *jo-ha-kyū*, literally, 'opening-breaking (apart)-speeding up', which is easily observable in the continual tempo changes that occur in dance moment by moment and in song phrase by phrase throughout a *nō* performance. Spontaneity is achieved through the delicate balance between actor and music: the idea that in sophisticated performance movements should be slightly off the beat is widespread. Contrary to standard Western analyses of theatre, these structural systems organize performance elements - rhythm, emotional tone, volume, colour, mass, intensity, speed - to the exclusion, total or partial, of content.

### *The present situation*

A truly remarkable number of traditional theatre forms, some over 1000 years old, continue being performed for Asian and Pacific audiences today. But other theatre genres have been lost. If the historical continuity of theatre in the region is impressive, it is also true that change occurs without cease. Audience tastes, economic circumstances and social values change, and as long as human bodies are the carriers of the tradition, changes must occur in plays, performance style and 'codes' of performance. The rate of change is

also being profoundly influenced by the increasing interrelatedness of nations and people.

Two opposing currents swirl and push against each other. I do not believe there ever will be such a thing as one global village, but intercultural mixing of theatres is occurring at an unprecedented rate today. Asian and Oceanic artists regularly tour abroad and attend international symposia and conferences, absorbing the latest in world theatre happenings. Pacific governments are proud to host international and regional theatre festivals. And everywhere tourism is expanding exponentially. The walls that only a few decades ago still separated genre from genre, and culture from culture, are falling rapidly. And the impact of international television, via satellite and video-cassette, is increasingly important and apparent.

The opposing current is an intense pride in one's self and one's culture, often with a concomitant aversion to the import of foreign culture and arts. Not very long ago local intellectuals might have accepted Western theatre theories which held that Sanskrit drama was an inferior form of drama because it did not achieve 'tragedy', and *nō* was not even drama, since it was not based on 'dramatic conflict'. But no longer. In a replay of the early-20th-century polemic stance that 'Western science' must not contaminate 'national spirit', many want to accept Western political and economic systems while simultane-



A modern stage comedy starring the popular comedian, Fujima Kambei, as a working class hero, Nakaza Theatre, Osaka (1972).