

## A History of Japanese Theatre

Japan boasts one of the world's oldest, most vibrant, and influential performance traditions. This accessible and complete history provides a comprehensive overview of Japanese theatre and its continuing global influence. Written by eminent international scholars, it spans the full range of dance-theatre genres over the past fifteen hundred years, including noh theatre, bunraku puppet theatre, kabuki theatre, shingeki modern theatre, rakugo storytelling, vanguard butoh dance, and media experimentation. The first part addresses traditional genres, their historical trajectories and performance conventions. Part II covers the spectrum of new genres since Meiji (1868–), and Parts III to VI provide discussions of playwriting, architecture, Shakespeare, and interculturalism, situating Japanese elements within their global theatrical context. Beautifully illustrated with photographs and prints, this history features interviews with key modern directors, an overview of historical scholarship in English and Japanese, and a timeline. A further reading list covers a range of multimedia resources to encourage further explorations.

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*shuen* – *pafomansu to jenda* (The birth and the demise of the “actress” – performance and gender).

**IWAKI KYOKO** is a performing arts journalist contributing to media such as the Asahi Shimbun. She is currently a Ph.D. candidate at Goldsmiths College, University of London, focusing on post-catastrophic theatre, especially the post-Fukushima disaster. She published bilingual *Tokyo Theatre Today: Conversations with Eight Emerging Theatre Artists* and *Des rivages d'enfance au būto de Sankai Juku*, a biography of choreographer Ushio Amagatsu.

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## FOREWORD

JAMES R. BRANDON

I saw my first bunraku performance in Japan in 1951 and my first ever kabuki performance at the Shimbashi Embujō theatre in Tokyo in 1952. It was the height of the Korean War and I was a soldier passing through Japan. In addition to soldiering, I was a theatre-crazy young man. Having lived in New York City the previous year, with endless opportunities to see straight shows, musicals, ballet, and opera, I was confident that I knew what theatrical performance was all about. The two performances that I saw, and heard, in Japan shattered this misguided assurance. The vocal power of the kabuki actor and puppet narrator was beyond anything I could imagine. Nor could I take my eyes off the performers' expressive bodies, frozen into dynamic poses or moving with a powerful physical presence. The whole performance was imbedded within a web of music and sound effects, strange sounding but hypnotic. From those two experiences I set myself a goal of learning more and more about bunraku and, especially, kabuki.

Not only myself, but many others in the United States and Europe, have turned to Japanese theatre to learn new dimensions of theatrical art. As I've written elsewhere about the training in Asian forms:

[P]articipation in theatre provides the potential for a direct experience in alternative human, cultural, and artistic forms. No and kyogen show us alternatives to our often harried and fragmented lives. They show the possibility of beauty that derives from order, of quietude that comes from an appreciation of poetry, of peace that derives from submersion of the ego (of the actor) into the flow of life shaped by forces outside of ourselves, and finally of self-worth achieved through self-discipline of body and spirit.<sup>1</sup>

I have had the privilege to study with, and later invite, great masters to visit to teach at the University of Hawai'i.

Although not all are fortunate enough to study under great masters in Japan or overseas, we can see live performances; and today we all can enjoy kabuki or noh or butoh performance via DVD, film, or video documentaries. Numerous books devoted to a single genre of Japanese theatre have

<sup>1</sup> James R. Brandon, "Performance training in Japanese nō and kyōgen at the University of Hawai'i," *Theatre Topics* 3:2 (1993), 101–20.

been published. And in this electronic era, not a few actors maintain their presence on the web. However, it still remains difficult to gain a good understanding of the broad development of Japanese theatre through 1,300 years of history. How does *kagura* of the Heian court relate to *noh* or *kyogen* of the Muromachi period? How is plebeian kabuki of the Edo period a precursor of bourgeois modern theatre, *shingeki*, in the succeeding twentieth century? One of the most fascinating aspects of Japanese theatre is that all these genres are performed today, jumbled together, making the twenty-first century a kind of living museum of theatrical culture. How to make sense of it all? This is the right book.

It is extremely difficult for one author to properly cover the totality of theatrical creativity. Happily, this is not an issue with this publication: the text has been written by more than fifty theatre scholars, each a specialist in some aspect of Japanese theatre. In addition, each historical period or genre is examined and discussed by several specialists, often half-a-dozen or more. Each author thus is contributing to the creation of a fully rounded picture of the subject beyond what any one specialist could accomplish. The one (and only) previous history of Japanese theatre in English was published more than two decades ago. This is the right book at the right time.

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This book is dedicated to James R. Brandon (1929–2015), mentor and inspiration to so many of us.



## NOTE ON JAPANESE TERMS

Japanese personal names are written in the Japanese order, with family name first, unless the individual has chosen to reverse this according to Western name order. Macrons (ō) in Japanese words indicate long vowel sounds, but these have been omitted from capital letters, common placenames (Kyoto, Tokyo), and Japanese terms now accepted into the English language (noh, kyogen, butoh). Japanese terms are italicized only the first time they appear in each chapter, Interlude, Focus or Spotlight.