

Asian

Theatre



An overview of the Japanese Theatrical forms of Noh Drama. Bunraku puppet theatre, Kabuki, and Chinese Drama.

Noh Drama

Noh is a classical Japanese performance form which combines elements of dance, drama, music and poetry into one highly aesthetic stage art. Largely based in the cities of Tokyo, Osaka, and Kyoto, it is performed throughout the country by professional artists, mainly men, who have passed down the art among family members for numerous generations. There is also a wide following of both male and female amateurs who practice and perform its chant, dance, and instruments.



History of Noh

- **Noh developed into its present form during the 14th and 15th centuries under the leadership of the distinguished performer - playwrights Kannami and his son Zeami. Zeami, in particular, wrote numerous plays which are still performed in today's classical reper-tory of some 250 plays. He also wrote a number of secret works which explain the aesthetic principles governing Noh and give details on how the art should be composed, acted, directed, taught, and produced.**

- Today, like many classical performance forms throughout the world, Noh cannot be described as a popular art among the Japanese people as a whole. Yet its supporters are enthusiastic and its professional performers are highly trained and extremely busy performing and teaching throughout the country. There are today approximately 1,500 professional performers who make their living largely through performing and teaching Noh.

Noh Today

NOH KYOGEN
能 狂言



Categories of Noh Plays

There are five categories of Noh plays. In order, these feature gods, warriors, beautiful women, miscellaneous (notably mad-women or present-time) figures, and supernatural beings. During the Edo period, a full day's program consisted of the ritual piece Okina-Sanbaso followed by one play from each category in the above order. One Kyogen play would be presented between each Noh. Of the five categories, the women plays are the slowest in tempo but the most poetic, and of the highest level in expressing yugen, an aesthetic term suggesting quiet elegance and grace, and subtle and fleeting beauty.

Characters in Noh Drama

- The main character of a Noh play is called the shite (pronounced sh'tay) who sometimes appears with one or more companion characters called tsure. In many plays, the shite appears in the first half as an ordinary person, departs, then appears in the second half in his true form as the ghost of famous person of long ago. The former is called the maejite and the latter the nochijite. They are traditionally performed by the same actor.

Characters in Noh Drama

- The secondary actor, the waki, is often a travelling priest whose questioning of the main character is important in developing the story line. He also often appears with companion waki-tsuredo. An interlude actor called ai or aikyogen also often appears as a local person who gives further background to the waki, and thus to the audience, in order to understand the situation of the shite.
- A chorus called jiutai, usually consisting of eight persons, sits at the side of the stage and functions to narrate the background and the story itself. It also sometimes describes the character's thoughts and emotions or even sings lines for the characters.

KOUKEN

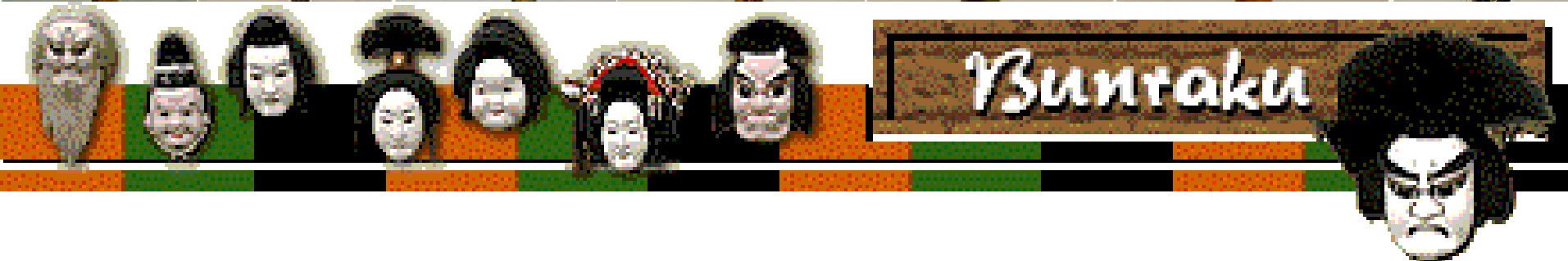
HAYASHI

JIUTAI

SHITE

WAKI







An Introduction to Bunraku

- Bunraku is the name commonly used for *ningyo-joruri*, literally puppets and storytelling.
- This simple name not only describes a puppet performance, but also alludes to its predecessors. There was a long tradition of travelling storytellers who used biwa as their accompaniment. There were also travelling puppeteers. When these two art forms were joined is not exactly clear, but the beginning of what is now called Bunraku was 1684, when Takemoto Gidayu set up his own theater in Osaka.

- **Bunraku puppet theater, which is the most refined form of puppetry in the world, is a combination of three skill:Puppet manipulation, joruri recitation and shamisen music, each of which requires many years of training to master.**
- **The dolls that appear in a bunraku puppet show are about half life-size. Their eyes move, their eyebrows rise in surprise, their mouths open and shut and their hands and arms gesture gracefully and realistically.**
- **Each of the principal dolls is operated by three manipulators who work in perfect unison. The manipulators carry the dolls on to the stage and are visible throughout the play.**
- **The chief manipulator holds the puppet from the back with his left hand by a special grip in the figure's chest and directs the puppet's right arm with his right hand. The second operator moves the left hand and the third, the legs. As a female doll has no legs as a rule the third**

- **The joruri narrator, who tells the story to which the puppets perform, chants, shouts, whispers or sobs the dialogue for all characters appearing in the play.**
- **The narrator sits with his shamisen accompanist, each resplendent in traditional kamishimo dress, in full view on an elevated dais at the right side of the stage. The shamisen accompanist is no less important an element in the puppet show.**
- **The shamisen provides not only a musical accompaniment to the joruri narration but also an indication, where appropriate, of the sound of rain or wind or other effects to heighten the atmosphere of the scene.**

- **Most of the plays in the Bunraku repertoire are classics written in the 18th century. Although about 50 new plays have been presented since World War II, most of them are not likely to be staged again, whereas most of the classics are certain of constant repetition.**

The Government is giving great support to Bunraku puppet theater, designating it as an important intangible cultural asset. In 1984 the National Bunraku Theater was established in Osaka, the birthplace of Bunraku. Six series of Bunraku performances, each lasting about two weeks, are scheduled to be held every year at the theater.

- ***Narrator and Shamisen***

- **The origins of the narrative form**

- **While the narrator tells a story, his main job, of course, is to convey emotion, motivation and the essence of each character-his "kokoro". The shamisen is not simply his accompanist. He musically expresses each emotion, each mood, giving the drama emphasis, punctuation and texture. The shamisen and narrator's art are the results of rigorous training based on some three hundred years of tradition. It is never a question of who leads. The shamisen and narrator play off each other, creating a tension that heightens the dramatic setting. When the puppeteers join and play off this tension, it results in a solid, dynamic and moving performance.**

- *The shamisen*
- **C**ompared with the shamisen used in other genres of traditional songs and storytelling, the shamisen used in bunraku is especially large and heavy, giving it a superlative resonance and fullness of tone.

Pictured at right is Takezawa Danroku, who was designated as a living national treasure in 1996. He heads the troupe of shamisen players.



- ***The puppeteers***

- **For minor roles, one puppeteer still mans one small puppet, but for most characters, three puppeteers are now employed to move one puppet.**
- **The head puppeteer (omo-zukai) operates the toggles on the headgrip to change the facial expressions of the puppet. With his right hand, he moves the puppet's right arm.**
- **The left-hand puppeteer (hidari-zukai) moves the puppet's left arm with his right hand while using his own left hand to take props from the prop man to be used by the puppet.**
- **The leg puppeteer (ashi-zukai) must constantly adopt a bending-over posture to grasp the leg grips of the puppet.**



Bunraku



Kabuki Theatre



Kabuki is one of Japan's traditional theatrical arts, with extensive and continuous evolution, it has now been perfected into a state of classical refinement.

Created around the year 1600, around the same time the English began to form colonies on the American continent, the history of Kabuki is as long as that of the United States and just as multi-faceted.

Though not as flourishing as it once was, the kabuki theater has a wide popularity among the people, and draws large audiences even now.

- Kabuki was created by Okuni, a shrine maiden from Izumo Shrine. Her performances in the dry river beds of the ancient capital of Kyoto caused a sensation and soon their scale increased and a number of rival companies arose. Early Kabuki was much different from what is seen today and was comprised mostly of large ensemble dances performed by women.



- **During the Edo Era, during which much of the development of kabuki took place, distinction between the warrior class and the commoners was more rigidly observed than at any other time in Japan's history. The art of kabuki was cultivated mainly by the merchants in those days. They had become increasingly powerful economically, but had to remain socially inferior as they belonged to the commoner class. To them kabuki was perhaps most significant as the artistic means by which to express their emotions under such conditions. Thus, the fundamental themes of kabuki plays are conflicts between humanity and the feudalistic system. It is largely due to this humanistic quality of the art that it gained such an enduring popularity among the general public of those days**



No women allowed!

- **A unique feature of the kabuki art, and perhaps the most significant and in keeping with the kabuki spirit of unusualness, is the fact that it is all male. All female parts are played by male impersonators known as onnagata. The players of the kabuki drama in its primitive stage were principally women, and with the increasing popularity of kabuki, many of the actresses began to attract undue attention from male admirers. The authorities felt that this would lead to a serious demoralization of the public and in 1629 the theatrical appearance of women was officially banned.**

- **Since kabuki as an art form was already accepted by the public, men immediately took over and have continued performing to the present. The ban on actresses was in effect for about 250 years. In the mean time kabuki brought to perfection the art of the onnagata. As a result, there was no room for actresses in kabuki when the ban was lifted. Moreover, the art of onnagata had become such an integral part of kabuki that, if deprived of this element, the traditional quality of kabuki could be lost forever.**

- **Kabuki incorporated parts of all the preceding theater forms of Japan. Among the traditional arts from which kabuki has drawn for stage techniques and repertoire are the noh drama and the kyogen play. Another area from which kabuki has borrowed is the puppet theater, often referred to as bunraku.**
- **In kabuki, the primary importance has always been placed on the actor rather than on any other aspect of the art, such as literary value of a play.**
- **There was a period during the early 17th century when puppets overshadowed actors and the puppet theater was more popular than kabuki. To meet this competition, kabuki adopted all the puppet plays. As a result, today more than half of the conventional kabuki plays except for a group of dance-dramas are of puppet theater origin.**

Until kabuki, the people of Japan had never seen theater of such color, glamour, excitement and general extraordinariness.

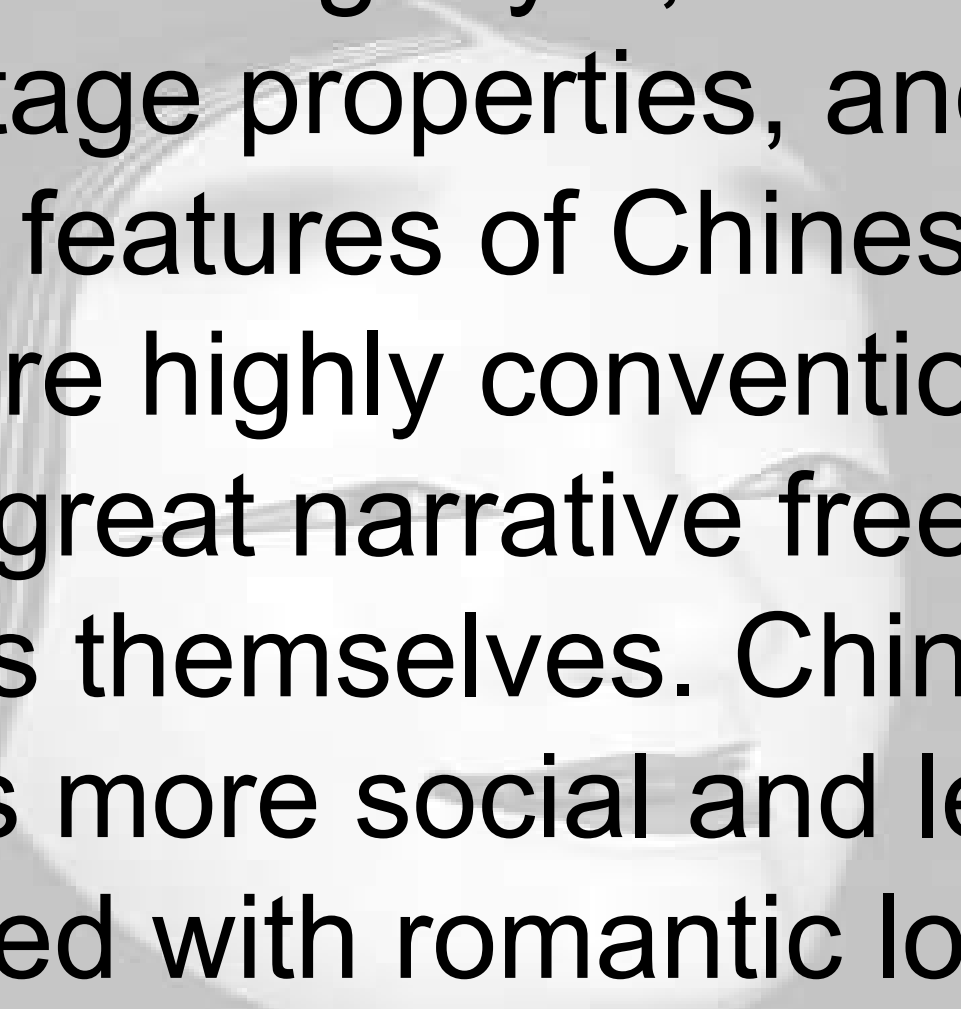
In these qualities, perhaps no theater elsewhere in the world can excel the kabuki

Kabuki

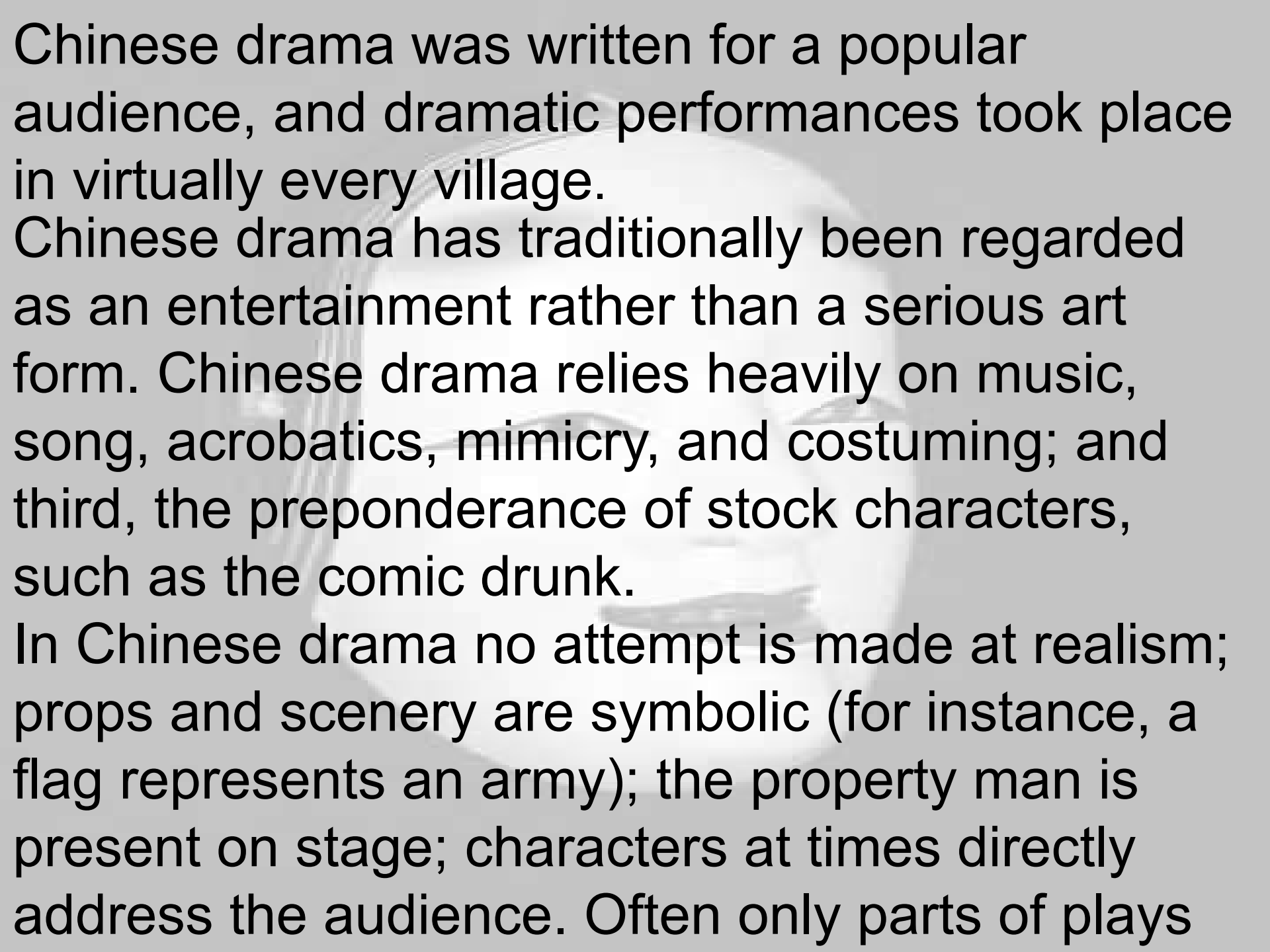


CHINESE THEATRE

The classical Chinese theater developed during the Yüan dynasty (1260–1328). Springing from story cycles made familiar by professional storytellers, These plays relied on romantic or sentimental plots. During the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) the drama utilized the plots of popular novels. Until the 19th cent., Chinese drama was not spoken in dialogue form; it was a mixture of music and speeches. Chinese drama avoids tragedy but the stories often involve the deaths of women.



Although acting style, character types, stage properties, and other external features of Chinese drama are highly conventionalized, there is great narrative freedom in the plays themselves. Chinese drama is more social and less concerned with romantic love. Family and country are frequently regarded as of more importance



Chinese drama was written for a popular audience, and dramatic performances took place in virtually every village.

Chinese drama has traditionally been regarded as an entertainment rather than a serious art form. Chinese drama relies heavily on music, song, acrobatics, mimicry, and costuming; and third, the preponderance of stock characters, such as the comic drunk.

In Chinese drama no attempt is made at realism; props and scenery are symbolic (for instance, a flag represents an army); the property man is present on stage; characters at times directly address the audience. Often only parts of plays





