GENDER ROLES IN KABUKI
Exploring “male” and “female” on stage in Japan

The traditional Japanese drama, kabuki, dates from 1603 and is still regularly performed. Kabuki was initiated by female performers. However, in 1629, the government introduced a nationwide ban on women appearing in any public performance. This lasted until the late nineteenth century. During the interim, older male performers dominated kabuki, and specialists in female roles perfected the art of onnagata. Kabuki retained its all-male cast even after the ban on female performers was lifted. All professional kabuki actors nowadays are men. Our Japanese Performing Arts course examines the portrayal of male and female gender in kabuki, focusing on the continued appeal of onnagata for contemporary audiences.

Okuni’s Kabuki
This statue in the centre of Kyoto commemorates Okuni, the woman who gave the first performances to be called “kabuki.” Her makeshift stage was the dry bed of the Kamo River, near the location of the statue.

Okuni is depicted here in the pose of a young man. She and her contemporaries often dressed in bizarre attire, including male clothing. Their shows involved sexually suggestive dances. This is why they were described as kabuki-nosono - extreme, outlandish people (written with a character meaning “excessive” or “too much”). Okuni’s performance style caused a sensation, and it also began to be emulated in brothels as a way to attract custom.

Okuni’s kabuki proved as controversial as it was popular. Concerns about prostitution beyond the licensed quarters and about public order prompted the government to ban all women from the stage.

Female and male in kabuki today
Many other forms of drama that originally had all-male casts, such as Shakespeare and Chinese Opera, have since introduced actresses as part of their modernization. Kabuki is typically very open to innovation, moving with the times by dramatizing manga or using the latest technology for lighting and stage effects. Even so, it maintains the tradition of onnagata. Male actors’ projection of the essence of femininity is a defining feature of the art.

Contemporary onnagata Bandō Tamasaburō follows Ayame in paying close attention to femininity in daily life - for example, by conducting interviews with women to observe their body movement. He also uses the performances of senior onnagata as a model. Both practices reflect the kabuki tradition of learning from one’s forebears, either through teaching or example. For most onnagata today, there is a sharper distinction between their offstage male identity and the female identity they perform when they are on character on the stage.

Through a highly stylized aesthetic, kabuki creates a space that is “like reality,” but separate. Here, players of male roles (tachiyaku) too perform a convincing yet exaggerated version of masculinity.

Words of Ayame
For a brief period afterwards, it was young men who played the roles of women in kabuki. However, the government was soon to issue another ban on performances by younger men in 1652. This was due to the homoerotic content of some performances, a continued association with (male) prostitution, and the fights that broke out among the spectators over the stars.

A celebrated early onnagata, or specialist in female roles, was Yoshizawa Ayame I (1653-1729). His disciple, Fukuoka Yagoshirō, recorded Ayame’s teachings on the subject of onnagata acting as secret traditions for future generations.

Words of Ayame contains detailed advice on how to behave and move as a woman, and rules of feminine conduct for onnagata. These come from close observation of women in everyday life.

Ayame’s words suggest that onnagata should assume female gender off stage as well as on stage:

“…if he does not live his normal life as if he were a woman, it will not be possible for him to be called a skilled onnagata. The more an actor is persuaded that it is the time when he appears on the stage that is the most important in his career as an onnagata, the more masculine he will be. It is better for him to consider his everyday life as the most important.”

The actor Yoshizawa Ayame I dancing with a flower-decorated umbrella. Artist: Katsukawa Terushige, active 1716-1736.


Some of our questions...

- Can kabuki tell us anything about gender roles in Japanese society?
- Do onnagata always perform female gender according to male ideals of femininity? If so, why do they have so many female fans?
- Recent performances in which the female-gendered vocaloid, Hatsune Miku, co-starred with live tachiyaku actors are recognized as a form of kabuki. How are these different from performances with human actresses in the female roles?

References:

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