Performance for/from a global city? Kabuki in Tokyo and abroad

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In this paper I explore contemporary kabuki from the perspective of its contribution to the culture of Japan’s capital city. The focus is on the idea of cities as sites of innovation and innovative thinking. I also look at how kabuki relates to the urban economy and attempt to evaluate its role in Japan’s cultural diplomacy.

Kabuki is a form of traditional Japanese drama that originated as popular entertainment for artisans and merchants in the Tokugawa or Edo period (1603-1867). These people were at the bottom of the four-tier shi-nō-kō-shō [士農工商] socio-political order, ranked below the samurai and farmers, but were relatively powerful in economic terms due to the demand for their trades that had arisen from the construction of a new capital in Edo, the power base of the Tokugawa military leaders; the rapid growth of other cities, especially Osaka and Kyoto, into some of the largest metropolises in the world at that time; and the requirement under the new regime for the provincial lords [daimyō 大名] to maintain a residence in the capital, and to travel there regularly from their domains. From its inception, kabuki was part of an emergent mercantile economy, and from the early eighteenth century, it was based in purpose-built, commercially run theatres in Edo and other large centres of population. An example is the Ichimura-za theatre in Edo, run by the Ichimura family from 1643 and granted an official licence from the government in 1670. The theatre was destroyed by fire and rebuilt several times, and also went through financial difficulties which resulted variously in closures due to bankruptcy, changes of management and temporarily giving up its licence to another theatre: all common occurrences for kabuki theatres in the Tokugawa period. The illustration shows a performance of the play Shibaraku [暫, Wait a Moment!] in July 1858.

From the Meiji period (1868-1912), the time of Japan’s modernisation and “reopening” to the west, kabuki began to be identified and promoted as a representatively Japanese, classical performing art form - entertainment fit for the most important people in society, including the imperial family, and for showcasing to foreign dignitaries (Parker 2006: 42). On 21 November 1889, at the height of the Theatre Reform Movement’s quest to improve the quality and reputation of Japanese theatre, including kabuki, the first Kabuki-za theatre opened in Ginza. The founders, intellectual and playwright Fukuchi Gen’ichirō (pen name Fukuchi Ōchi; 1841-1906) and businessman Chiba Katsugorō (1833-1903) built the theatre on the site of the former residence of the Kumamoto (Hosokawa) Clan in Kobiki-chō, which they had purchased from the government (Leiter 2016). Fukuchi, who had travelled to Europe twice under missions sent by the Tokugawa shogunate, as well as attending to the 1872 Iwakura Mission through his service in the Ministry of Finance, had direct experience of the cultural impact of theatre in the west, and was keen to raise Japanese theatre to a corresponding level.

During the early Meiji period, Tokyo as a whole was being reinvented as a modern capital - occupying the same location, but distinct from the “old” capital of Edo - and the Meiji government had undertaken a major project to rebuild the Ginza district, which had been destroyed by a fire in 1872, as a “brick town,” demonstrating modernity in the part of Tokyo
they regarded as Japan’s “gateway to the world” because it was a major route for visitors from abroad travelling to and from the port of Yokohama. For Meiji statesman Inoue Kaoru (1836-1915), this reconstruction was a “shortcut to civilization and enlightenment,” prominent ideals of the new government (Fujitani 1998:71; Grunow 2018). Although the project was not as successful in establishing a busy, prosperous and cosmopolitan district as the literary and graphic representations of the time suggest, these “very myths of Ginza Bricktown” served - and still continue to serve - an important purpose in fashioning the development as a widely acknowledged symbol of Meiji modernity (Grunow 2018). It was in this setting that the new Kabuki-za came to be recognised as a major venue for a national performing art form that “was to Japan what…Drury Lane and Covent Garden were to London, the Comédie Française to Paris, the Bolshoi to Moscow and the Metropolitan Opera House to New York” (Leiter 2016).

Performance for a global city

Since 1889, there has continued to be a dedicated kabuki theatre at the same location in Ginza. The area is in some respects still definable as a cosmopolitan centre within Tokyo, where international hotels and headquarters of high profile companies such as Sony and Mikimoto are to be found. The current “Ginza Kabukiza,” which opened in April 2013, is the fifth theatre to occupy the site, and the first planned rebuild. In 2010 Shōchiku, the company that has managed the Kabuki-za since 1914, took the deliberate decision to demolish the fourth theatre and reconstruct it for practical reasons, to improve such aspects as the structure of the building and its resistance to earthquakes, the disabled access and the seating and other audience facilities.

The design by Kuma Kengo (best known to us in Scotland as the architect of V&A Dundee, which opened in September 2018) fulfils a stated aim to “combine tradition and innovation” (McDougall 2012) in a fusion building. The exterior of the theatre at ground level incorporates the façade of the previous Kabuki-za theatre, which was restored in 1951 according to the model of the 1924 theatre after suffering heavy damage from bombing during World War II, and is strongly identified with both the venue for kabuki performance and the urban landscape of Ginza in general. This is set against the backdrop of the Kabukiza Tower, a twenty-nine storey building which offers a literal interpretation of the “curtain wall” style of architecture (Parker 2015). This edifice should be against the rules for the height of new buildings in Ginza, which are concerned with preserving the traditional character of the area and do not favour the erection of skyscrapers. However, Kuma argued for an exception to be made on the grounds that the tower was necessary precisely to ensure the future of kabuki and its associated activities, which contribute significantly to the character of the Ginza district and its economy and society. This can be seen most clearly in the cultural facilities in Kabukiza Tower that serve theatre audiences and other visitors to Ginza. Around its fifth floor roof garden, it houses an exhibition space, the Kabukiza Gallery, as well as the Jugetsudō traditional tearoom, specialist souvenir shops and a kabuki-themed branch of Studio Alice photography. It is also of note that, continuing the practices of the Tokugawa period, Shōchiku runs the complex as a commercial venture, and defrays part of its income from renting offices in the tower to finance the theatre and maintain the Grand Kabuki with new programmes each month, consisting of a matinee and an evening performance almost daily (Parker 2015). As a result, some of the office space is occupied by companies with no particular connection to kabuki, but the initial ideal was to find tenants with an interest in sustaining and promoting traditional culture, and in a few cases this worked out extremely well. The leading example is DWANGO, which runs the online video sharing service Niconico. This company has successfully collaborated with Shōchiku in
several experimental ventures, including a special performance at the Niconico Chōkaigi festival in which kabuki actors appeared on stage with the vocaloid Hatsune Miku. These joint efforts were a crucial factor in the award to Shōchiku in February 2017 of the inaugural Cool Japan Matching Award grand prix, which recognises excellence in collaborative initiatives between various industries seeking to spread Japanese culture overseas (Public Relations Office, Government of Japan 2017).

In tandem with the reconstruction of the Kabuki-za, Higashi Ginza subway station was redeveloped to allow immediate access to the theatre without leaving the building. A box office for Ginza Kabukiza is now located within the station concourse, and kabuki’s consumer culture has become far more visible in the adjacent area, the underground Kobiki-chō Plaza, where there are shops and stalls selling kabuki-related merchandise. The wider community that lives and does business in Ginza has become better integrated with the Kabuki-za economy and consumer culture, and so has a vested interest in the events inside the theatre, as seen, for example, in the mascot at the Gunma prefecture satellite store just across the road, dressed in kabuki-style costume on the day of the grand opening (Parker 2015). There is also an emphasis on safety and well-being for the community, as the underground plaza is designed to be used as a temporary shelter in the event of a major disaster (Mitsubishi Jisho Sekkei 2013).

Performance from a global city

What happens when kabuki and its surrounding culture are taken out of their usual environment of Tokyo’s Ginza district? Kabuki tours in summer 2018 to Spain, Russia and France, which in each case formed part of a wider programme of cultural events celebrating relations between Japan and the host nation, offer scope to investigate how far kabuki was presented to overseas audiences as part of the culture of Tokyo and Japanese cities.

Heisei Nakamura-za in Madrid

To celebrate the 150th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Japan and Spain in 1868, Heisei Nakamura-za, led by Nakamura Kankurō and Nakamura Shichinosuke, performed the dance piece Fuji Musume [藤娘 The Wistaria Maiden] and Renjishi [連獅子 Two Lions], a kabuki version of a noh play, in the Sala Roja at the Teatros del Canal in Madrid in June/July 2018. Heisei Nakamura-za is a project initiated in 2000 by the late Nakamura Kanzaburō XVIII (1959-2012). When working in Japan, the performers typically use temporary outdoor theatres in an attempt to recreate the atmosphere of pre-Meiji times (Japan Foundation 2007). On foreign tours the company normally performs in theatres, but the adaptability of its approach is often an advantage. It was notable that, right from the press conference to announce the tour to Madrid, the key actors involved began to forge a connection between kabuki and flamenco as a channel towards understanding of their art by a Spanish audience (eldiario.es, 2018). This was reflected in the selection of the plays - particularly Renjishi, with its parallel rhythmic patterns and derivation from a piece written for a dance recital performed in the smaller scale and more intimate context of the Nakamura-rô restaurant in Ryōgoku, Edo (Griffith 2003:40) - and reinforced in interviews and media commentary on the tour, suggesting that the performers were actively seeking common points that would help the audience relate to kabuki. The company also arranged goken nagaya [五軒長屋] stalls outside the theatre exhibiting traditional arts from the Edo period (see Figure 1), which fostered interest in kabuki culture outside as well as inside the theatre. On the one hand, this was part of reconstructing the festive atmosphere of pre-modern Japan (Edo rather than Tokyo), but on the other, it also
transposed to the Madrid context something of the presence of kabuki’s consumer culture around the Ginza Kabukiza in contemporary times.

Figure 1. Goken Nagaya outside Teatros del Canal, Madrid. Photo by Helen S E Parker.

Chikamatsu-za in Russia

Chikamatsu-za, a troupe founded in 1981 by Sakata Tōjūrō (then Nakamura Senjaku II), to revive and promote the plays of Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653-1724), performed kabuki in Moscow and St Petersburg in September 2018, at the invitation of the Chekhov International Theatre Festival, marking the Japan - Russia Year 2018. The leading actors were Nakamura Ganjirō and Nakamura Senjaku, and the programme consisted of Keisei Hangonkō [傾城反魂香, Stuttering Matahei], written by Chikamatsu in 1708, and Yoshinoyama [吉野山, Mount Yoshino], from the later (1747) play Yoshitsune Sembonzakura [義経千本桜, Yoshitsune and the Thousand Cherry Trees] by the playwriting team Takeda Izumo II, Miyoshi Shōraku and Namiki Senryū I.

Although the host theatres, the Mossovet Theatre in Moscow and the Bolshoi Drama Theatre in St Petersburg, and their global city contexts could be considered broadly equivalent to the Ginza Kabukiza, these performances did not particularly emphasise kabuki as part of

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1 2018 is also the ninetieth anniversary of the first official kabuki tour outside Japan, to the then Soviet Union in summer 1928, which was commemorated separately on 29 July 2018 with a special event in Vladivostok (whence the performers travelled by sea in 1928 before taking the Trans-Siberian Railway to Moscow) featuring the current Ichikawa Sadanji, Ichikawa Tsutanosuke and others (NHK World - Japan 2018). The Bolshoi Drama Theatre in St Petersburg (Leningrad) was a venue for the kabuki tours in both 1928 and 2018.
Tokyo’s city culture. Integration with the Chekhov International Theatre Festival seemed to be a more important factor. This was evident from the choice of performers with a special interest in the works of a nationally representative playwright (comparable to Chekhov, after whom the festival is named) to appeal to audiences already curious about world theatre. It is likely that regular attendees at the festival would have experienced Japanese theatre or the work of Japanese performers and directors in previous years. Accordingly, the activities surrounding the kabuki performance focused on supplementing the knowledge of audiences with some background in Japanese performing arts. For example, Nakamura Ganjirō gave a lecture and demonstration on the art of onnagata [女形, specialising in female roles] at the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow. Another lecture and demonstration of dance and shamisen music was held for students at the Moscow Tchaikovsky Conservatoire (Shōchiku 2018a). Kabuki in Russia was all about cultural exchange between global cities.

Shōchiku Grand Kabuki in Paris

Nakamura Shidō and Nakamura Shichinosuke headed the cast for a Shōchiku Grand Kabuki performance at the Théâtre National de Chaillot in Paris in September 2018 as part of Japonismes 2018: les âmes en ressonance, an eight month season to celebrate 160 years of friendship between Japan and France. The kabuki pieces Kasane [かさね, Kasane] and Narukami [鳴神, The Thunder God] were billed first in a three-week cycle of performances of various kinds of Japanese dance at the theatre. For this production too, there was a strong focus on placing kabuki in the context of other Japanese performances the Paris audience would be likely to see, particularly in dance. On the night before the official opening, a press conference and preview was held at the host theatre offering background to kabuki and its appreciation. Noma Ippei addressed the gathering on behalf of Shōchiku, followed by Fujima Kanjūrō introducing the choreography, and Tanaka Denzaemon, the music. There were also some attempts to export elements of the Tokyo kabuki to Paris, such as the traditional custom of ‘the first drum’ on the opening evening at the theatre entrance, to announce that the performances were about to start and to pray for their success (Shōchiku 2018b). Such activities tended to encourage comparison between the different experiences of viewing kabuki in Paris and Tokyo.

The location of the venue right next to the Eiffel Tower also made for an interesting parallel with Ginza Kabukiza and its adjacent tower. On the first night, which Crown Prince Naruhito attended as part of his official visit to France, this turned out to be quite apt. During an extended intermission of one hour, the Crown Prince switched on the lights for a special illumination of the Eiffel Tower commissioned for Japonismes 2018, which members of the audience were invited to watch through the windows of the grand foyer of the theatre. The ten-minute light show on the themes of liberté, beauté, diversité was put together by Motoko and Akari-Lisa Ishii (Blondel 2018), who also designed the lighting for Kabukiza Tower.

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2 Chikamatsu-za were also invited to perform kabuki at the International Chekhov Festival in 2003. The festival hosted noh and kyogen in 2005, and bunraku in 2009. Additionally, Japanese director Tadashi Suzuki has participated in the festival on several occasions, bringing a production of Chekhov’s play Ivanov in 2005 (Chekhov International Theatre Festival 2018, passim).
This final image (Figure 2) is from a different kind of performance from a global city: Tokyo’s presentation at the closing ceremony of the Rio Olympics, which, of course, looks forward to Tokyo 2020 and so takes us back to performance for that global city too. Apart from the memorable appearance of Prime Minister Abe as Super Mario, this presentation also showed images of Olympic sports against the backdrop of some well-known landmarks in the city, including a few seconds of the Kabuki-za. I invite you to consider what this might foreshadow, for the 2020 opening ceremony, for the future of Tokyo and global cities, and for innovation in the art of kabuki.
References:


