



Kabuki

by Douglas Blair Turnbaugh

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Kabuki, a classic Japanese theatrical form using common or comic themes, with fantastical costumes, stylized gestures, music and dance, and with all-male casts, is still popular today. Initially, it was a showcase for female and boy prostitutes.

Boy-love was a given in ancient Japan. The love of *chigo* (a boy aged 10 to 17) by Buddhist priests was a tradition, as, in the mode of ancient Greece, was the love of *wakashu* (a youth aged 13 to 20) by *samurai* warriors. *Shudo*, the love of young men, became a staple feature of *Kabuki* literature.

By the early seventeenth century, at the end of a long civil war, the power of the *samurai* declined and a merchant class emerged. For the merchants' pleasure, dances and dramatic routines, often performed by female prostitutes, began to be performed in Kyoto, Edo, and Osaka. *Samurai* and court aristocrats were forbidden to attend, but they donned disguises to join the fervid audiences.

This illegal mingling of classes and the deadly violence caused by jealousy over prostitutes disturbed the peace. The response of the alarmed Tokugawa authorities was to ban women from the *kabuki* stage in 1629.

This began the era of the Grand Kabuki, or *wakashu kabuki*, where adolescent boys played both the *wakashugata* (male roles) and *onnagata* (female roles).

The authorities inadvertently created an ideal vehicle for showcasing the physical charms of beautiful, sexually available youths. These pretty boys, gracefully bending to the dance in long sleeved kimonos, evoked great enthusiasm. They became the highly sought trophies of their *nouveaux riches* admirers, who were thrilled by the idea that *shudo*, formerly reserved for the upper classes, was now within their reach.

Many of the merchants were so swept away with passion that they bankrupted themselves over the boys. Thus, the social problems created by the carnal nature of the *Kabuki* had not been solved, but exacerbated by the decree of 1629. And to the chagrin of the moralistic censors, the situation could be addressed no further, because Iemitsu, the Shogun, was himself a connoisseur of boys.

After the death of Iemitsu in 1651, boys were banned from the stage, but not for long. *Kabuki* was a large and profitable enterprise and the owners negotiated to reopen their theaters. They agreed to certain conditions, including the reduction of the repertoire's erotic content.

Moreover, in an attempt to end prostitution, the boy actors were forced to shave their most distinguishing feature, their long forelocks, leaving only sidelocks, in the style of *yaro* (adult men), as men were disqualified from prostitution. This had, however, the effect of extending the age for prostitutes.

As a character in *The Great Mirror of Male Love* (1687) explains: "It used to be that no matter how splendid the boy, it was impossible for him to keep his forelocks and take patrons beyond the age of twenty. Now,



An adaptation of *The Actor Matsumoto Shigumaki as a Woman* (circa 1715) by Torii Kiyomasu. Northwestern University Library Art Collection.

since everyone wore the hairstyle of adult men, it was still possible at age 34 or 35 for youthful actors to get under a man's robe." The new theater form was called *yaro kabuki*.

From 1868 onward, the process of westernization in Japan meant the rapid decline of *shudo*. By 1910 homosexuality in any form had disappeared from social visibility. Although the all-male *Kabuki* theater survives, all the *shudo* plays are excised from its repertoire and long forgotten.

Today, *Kabuki* presents non-erotic, spectacular musical entertainment. In the mid-twentieth century, novelist Yukio Mishima wrote and directed several *Kabuki* plays. His involvement with *Kabuki* reflected his fascination with sadomasochism, but his plays had no lasting effect on the form.

A special fascination for contemporary audiences is to see a man expertly performing as a woman, assuming the *onnagata* role. Even *geisha*, women trained to please men, attend *Kabuki* performances to learn from these actors the essence of femininity.

A famous contemporary *onnagata*, the wildly popular Bando Tamasaburo, has also played such western characters as Ophelia and Camille. Also popular in Japan today are the "male stars" of the all-girl Takarazuka operettas.

As Shakespeare knew, audiences love gender confusion, and in such confusion many gay men, lesbians, and transgendered people have found refuge.

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