Japan, Kabuki, and Bunraku: Crash Course Theater #23

Crash Course: Theater
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===== (00:00) to (02:00) =====

(PBS Digital Studios intro)

Hey there, I'm Mike Rugnetta, this is Crash Course Theater, and today we're gonna be raising the curtain on a form of Japanese theater that actually used a curtain. It's Kabuki. We're also gonna look at Bunraku, an uncannily life-like form of puppet theater that gained popularity at about the same time as Kabuki. Get your hooded narrators and your 12 best kimonos ready--it's lights up.

(Crash Course Theater intro)

Kabuki developed during the Tokugawa Shognate, a military government that ruled from 1603 to 1868. After a series of disastrous civil wars, the government finally achieved peace and prosperity while practicing a strict isolationism that allowed native arts to flourish, but all that repression needed an outlet. No just wasn't enough anymore, especially now that the new middle class wanted to go to the theater, too.

So how did Kabuki begin? Oh hey, it's lewd mime! Welcome back, lewd mime. Haven't seen you since the advent of liturgical drama. Around 1603, a female dancer from the Izumo Grand Shrine named Okuni began to perform publicly on a makeshift stage in a dry riverbed in Kyoto. Her programs got really popular and eventually Okuni began mixing dance with little playlets and occasional cross-dressing to create lengthier shows.

Courtesans began adopting her style and making increasingly elaborate performances set to the music of the shamisen, a three-stringed lute-like instrument. These performances included dances, jokes, and a lot of sexy costumes with scenes set in bathhouses because, I mean, you know. Courtesans.

This style was eventually called the Onna Kabuki, or women's Kabuki. An alternate name was prostitute singing and dancing. Even though this was supposedly a theater for the emergent middle class and samurai were supposed to be above this kind of thing, samurai weren't. Concerned about the corrupting influence, authorities outlawed women performers in 1629.

===== (02:00) to (04:00) =====

But Kabuki, which means 'to tilt' continued. Now restricted to the red light district of Edo, where it could be regulated. This red light district was called Ukiyo or 'the floating world' and it was pretty much the naughty pre-1990s Times Square of its day, except, you know, with more tea houses.

Since women could no longer perform, the roles were played by young boys who also prostituted themselves to Samurai. The Shogun hated this and kept trying to regulate it, so in 1642, men playing women's roles were outlawed and in 1648, homosexuality was outlawed and in 1652, all young male actors were outlawed. It's almost like theater isn't the problem. Anyway, it was at this point that a men's Kabuki formed. All the actors were grown dudes and just to make sure that they wouldn't attract Samurai, laws required them to shave their foreheads and abstain from making themselves attractive and sexy scenes were also vetoed. Sorry, lewd mime.

A typical Kabuki program lasted 12 hours until 1868, when the government passed more laws and required that there be an eight hour maximum. A performance usually began with a historical drama called a Jidaimono which featured battles and Samurai. This was followed by a dance, which was in turn followed by a ripped-from-the-headlines domestic drama or Sewamono, and for dessert, a comic dance. The performances were highly physical, with lots of stage combat and martial arts. Occassionally, actors would stop and hold a pose called a 'Mie', which signaled a heightened moment in the narrative. While only women's' roles were danced at first, eventually dance became so important to the form that in the 1700s, choreographers were added to Kabuki companies.

Now, perhaps you're curious how exactly Kabuki differs from Noh, then. Well, Kabuki plays are full of plot and spectacle, sword fights, mystical creatures and special effects. They're less concerned with enlightenment and more about just having a good time.

===== (04:00) to (06:00) =====

As theater professor Peter Arnott wrote, "Noh is austere, kabuki flamboyant; noh ritual, kabuki spectacle; noh offers spiritual consolation, kabuki physical excitement; noh seeks chaste models, kabuki delights in the eccentric, the extravagant and the willfully perverse; noh is gentle, kabuki cruel; noh is concerned with the hereafter, kabuki bound by the here-and-now."

Kabuki may have been fun, wild, cruel, and contemporary, but actors took it very seriously. Most kabuki actors were born into the profession, training from age 6 or 7 and not considered mature artists until 40. While the plays are extravagant, the acting is often very restrained. As Chikamatsu Monzaemon, the greatest and most famous kabuki playwright, once wrote, "Since it is moving when all parts of the art are controlled by restraint, the stronger and firmer the melody and words are, the sadder will be the impression created."

Actors were social outcasts, you are perhaps unsurprised to learn. For the most part, they could only marry into other actor families and were ordered to live near the theaters. But acting families were famous for their unique kata, or style, and kabuki actors were rock stars of their day, attracting obsessive fans who lived for gossip about their lives and rivalries, and who would offer them presents on opening night.

Male actors who played female roles, called onnagata actors, were especially popular. A lot of them lived as women even offstage, which is very method. If an onnagata threw a used towel into the crowd, it could cause a riot.

In kabuki, there are few basic types of roles: the onnagata; tachiyaku, brave hero types; katakiyaku, mean villain types; and koyaku, children's roles. Unlike noh actors, kabuki actors don't wear masks, but each character type has specific makeup associated with it.

===== (06:00) to (08:00) =====

Actors start by painting their faces with a white base, and then they add red and black, with blue and brown if you happen to be playing a demon. Onnagata actors draw on fake eyebrows and, if they're playing married women, they blacken their teeth. The costumes are...elaborate, and can weigh as much as 50 pounds. Onnagata playing court ladies wore 12 kimonos, one after the other. But because actors were outcasts and the shogunate had a lot of laws, actors could actually be jailed if their costumes were too nice.

The kabuki stage was somewhat different from the noh stage. It was wider, extending the full width of the auditorium, and, at some

point, a curtain was added. It was also built for exciting special effects and quick scene changes. It used elevator traps, and the stage revolved on a turntable. The biggest difference was the hanamichi, or flower way, a runway that ran from the back of the theater right up to the stage and allowed the actors to walk through the audience. This was the 18th-century equivalent of 3D, and fans loved it so much that some theaters added a second hanamichi.

Kabuki was a literary form, though the script was usually secondary to the acting, and actors were encouraged to improvise. Unlike noh, most early kabuki plays were set in the present, and a lot of them took place in the ukiyo, "the floating world of smut", the same place that you would go to see these plays. A narrator was present onstage, and sometimes the actors would speak their own dialogue, but often the narrator would do it.

We're going to look at one of these plays, but first we're going to look at Bunraku, the puppet theater, which developed around the same time as kabuki. The two forms often influenced each other.

Initally, these puppets were just heads. [Yorick drops down] Well, yeah, but like, with eyes and hair and skin and stuff. Eventually, the heads grew hands and feet, and then someone was like, "Let's go nuts and give them bodies!" The more sophisticated puppets also have moving eyes and eyebrows, and in action, Bunraku is some uncanny valley stuff.

===== (08:00) to (10:00) =====

[Yorick drops down again, with eyes this time] Oh! God, stop staring at me.

Puppet theater stages were big, 36 feet by 23 feet, and also pretty innovative. Like kabuki theaters, they had elevator traps to move props and scenery on and off stage. As in kabuki, an announcer, hooded in black, told the story. Three puppeteers manipulated each puppet. By the 1730s, the puppets were about four feet tall. One puppeteer controlled the head and the right arm, one the left arm, and one the feet. If you were a puppeteer, you had to spend ten years doing the feet, and then ten on the hand, before they would even let you touch the head. In case you hadn't picked up on the trend, Japanese theater doesn't mess around.

The most famous of the Bunraku playwrights was Chikamatsu Monzaemon, who you may remember was also the most popular kabuki playwright. He's often called the Japanese Shakespeare, but did Shakespeare master the puppet arts? He did not. Take that, Billiam!

Chikamatsu liked to pull sensational plots from the newspapers and then dramatize them, especially love-suicide plays. Basically, these do what they say on the tin: it's a whole genre of plays about forbidden love that end in death. They were eventually banned as too sensational and too likely to inspire copycat suicides.

The following 1703 play is a domestic tragedy, based on an actual event: the double suicide of Tokubei, a dealer in soy sauce, and Ohatsu, a courtesan. Now, maybe you're thinking that the death of a soy sauce salesman doesn't sound that tragic, but let's remember that the audience was full of soy guys, and this really happened. Help us out, Thought Bubble.

Tokubei loves Ohatsu, but he's being pressured to marry the boss's daughter, and his mom has accepted the dowry. "It's a miracle I'm still alive. If they make my story into a three-act play, I'm sure the audience will weep," he says.

===== (10:00) to (12:00) =====

Nice, Tokubei. Subtle.

Tokubei manages to get the dowry money back, but because he's not the smartest, he lends it to his friend Kuheiji. And when he's like, "Kuheiji, I need that money back," Kuheiji's all, "What money? You forged that IOU, and also, I think you stole my wallet!"

Tokubei's like, "Well, now I have to marry the boss's daughter for real, but also I'm dishonored, and I'll never be able to see Ohatsu again. Guess my only choice is to kill myself." And Ohatsu is like, "Same." Oh, and by the way, this is a conversation they have just with their feet while Tokubei is hiding under Ohatsu's skirt.

Tokubei spends the night under the porch of Ohatsu's brothel. Just before morning, the couple put on death clothes, go to the Sonezaki shrine, where they listen to late-night revelers in the teahouse across the river, and sing a song about love-suicide. Again, subtle. They have a kind of marriage ceremony and tie themselves to a tree. Tokubei slits Ohatsu's throat, and then his own. The narrator tells us that "their story whispers through the Sonezaki wood and today, high and low alike gather to pray for these two lovers who, beyond a doubt, will in the future attain Buddhahood. They have become models of true love."

Thank you, Thought Bubble. Have they, though? Buddhahood aside, you can see how different this feels from noh. It's swift, it's contemporary, it's full of plot. It's far more emotional than philosophical, and there's a lot to cry about. The excitement of these plays may explain why kabuki is still being performed today. Bunraku, too. [points at Yorick] There's hope for you yet.

Next time, we're going to investigate another form of Eastern dance-drama: the southeast Asian party-all-night kill-the-demon dawn form called Kathakali. But until then, curtain. And [points at Yorick] maybe a haircut.

[Crash Course outro music]

PBS Digital Studios is conducting its annual audience survey. The survey is one of the most important projects we do every year because it helps us understand who you are and what you like and don't like, beyond what we can see in analytics.

===== (12:00) to (12:39) =====

35,000 responses last year helped us make decisions on what experiments to try and even what shows to make. If you have a few minutes, please click the link. 25 random participants will receive an awesome PBS Digital Studios t-shirt.

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