BY THE SAME AUTHOR
An Introduction to the Greek Theatre
Greek Scenic Conventions
Three Greek Plays for the Theatre
Plays without People: Puppetry and Serious Drama
An Introduction to the Greek World

TRANSLATED BY THE AUTHOR
Aeschylus: Oresteia
Aristophanes: Birds and Clouds
Plautus: Menacechmi and Pot of Gold
Sophocles: Oedipus the King and Antigone

The Theatres of Japan
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Historical Perspective

The theatre is the microcosm of society, and the history of any drama is bound up with that of the audience for which it was written. This is nowhere more true than in Japan, where social and artistic movements have gone hand in hand, and it is impossible to discuss the one without reference to the other. Noh and kabuki, the two main forms of the traditional drama, came to be identified with distinct social groups and mirrored their tastes, philosophies and aspirations. The modern theatre was born from the enthusiastic rapprochement with the West, and its manifestations have often worn a political label. Those in power, whether Shogun or Emperor, native or conqueror, have viewed this connection with alarm, recognizing its strength and its dangers. Accordingly, the Japanese theatre has been a perpetual ward of court, growing up under the watchful eye of the law and plagued by restrictions—sometimes on political, sometimes on moral grounds, though the appeal to morality has more often than not concealed political manoeuvring. Foolish though many of these restrictions now appear, their imposition—whether by the Shogunate in the sixteenth century or the American Army of Occupation in the twentieth—was dictated by the common realization that for the Japanese the theatre has always been more than an entertainment. Such attitudes, of course, are not peculiar to Japan. They have appeared, sporadically, in other times and places—in the Greek theatre of the fifth century B.C., for all its vaunted freedom; in the England of Elizabeth and that of Walpole; in Napoleon’s France; and in totalitarian Russia.
But in Japan they have been consistent. Kabuki, the popular theatre, with its early reputation for lawlessness, was particularly liable to interference. Segregated by the Shogunate, lectured on its morals in the Meiji Restoration, banned or censored by the American Occupation, it has rarely, until the last few years, been left to ply its trade in peace. And yet it has thrived. There are many who feel that a theatre which flourished amid restrictions will wither and die in freedom. Even noh had its troubles from censorship during the Second World War, while the new plays, many of them identified with Leftist movements, served as ideological battlegrounds in which the quality of the production was a minor consideration. All these things spring from the perception of drama’s intimate contact with society, and its function as a rallying point. To know the plays, therefore, we must know something of the history. The brief summary which follows is concerned, primarily, with the periods from which the plays took their subject-matter and the social conditions under which they were composed and performed.

Japanese history begins in myth. For a long time there is no distinction between myth and history. The sky is full of deities. Gods beget gods in diverse and fantastic ways: through the nostrils, by parting the fingers, or by the act of undressing. They reach down from heaven, stir up chaos like a pudding, and create the earth. From the water-drops spilling from the divine spear the islands of Japan are formed, and they are populated by the gods’ descendants. Anthropologists talk more soberly of a prehistoric race, the Ainu, and of their subjugation by various waves of migrants, mostly by way of the Korean peninsula, but also from the south. The people organized themselves into clans, one of which, centred on Yamato (its exact location is now disputed), emerged as the imperial line. 660 B.C. is the traditional date of the first Yamato Emperor, though most historians would place him several centuries earlier. The Imperial House claimed direct descent from the gods, and its power was transmitted in unbroken succession. Hirohito, the present Emperor, is by Japanese reckoning one hundred and twenty-third in line; he is also the first to have renounced his divinity.

The Yamato dynasty did not command absolute allegiance. Other clans were strong, claimed similar divine descent, and at times paid only formal respect to the Imperial House. This forebodes the position of the emperors in much of Japan’s subsequent history, not least in our own day. Although their titular power was protected by tradition and religious sanctions, the real power was usually in the hands of others. Around the noble families, skilled workers formed their own clans or guilds, though the life of the times was centred around agriculture and warfare. Farmer and soldier were one. The same man served in both capacities, working the fields when possible, taking up arms when necessary. This intimate connection became the basis of the Japanese economy. Later society recognized only two classes, the farmer and the warrior, the latter acting as the former’s overlord. The merchant class, when it developed, was regarded as an irregular intrusion into the traditional pattern.

Early religion was animistic. It saw gods and spirits everywhere: in streams and mountains, in animals and trees. It worshipped the forces of nature. These beliefs survived the introduction of later cults, produced a wealth of folklore, and greatly influenced the drama. In noh the spirits of the iris and the cherry can take human form and speak, and dead lovers assume the shape of trees. In kabuki, men can be metamorphosed into animals, and animals into men. Even material objects were regarded as invested with a divine presence. The imperial sword and mirror possessed their own sanctity, distinct from that of the Emperor who used them. This attitude persists. The treasure-house of the Meiji Shrine, in Tokyo, houses relics which are not ‘treasures’ at all, in terms of their material value. They are the simple domestic objects used by the Emperor and his Empress during their lifetime - desk, books, mirror, inkstand, kimono. The visitor is commanded to venerate their austerity and apply to his life the virtues of dignity, simplicity and devotion which the royal family applied to theirs and strive to inculcate among their people.

This religion, at first anonymous, came to be called Shinto, ‘The Way of the Gods’. It owned no sense of sin; the guilt-feelings which pervade Christianity had no place here. It was
concerned more with uncleanness in the purely physical sense; with the health of the body and the avoidance of acts which might be considered contagious. Ceremonial ablation was important. Certain acts, notably death and childbirth, were regarded as bringing pollution and had to be followed by purgation. The gods themselves were said to have separate abodes in which they cohabited and gave birth, to avoid contaminating the others. Shinto accordingly became prolific in ritual, and concerned itself largely with etiquette and propriety. It taught reverence for the dead and for the past, and worshipped the Emperor as divine. By its own diffuseness it was tolerant of other religions. When, after some centuries, Buddhism was introduced into Japan, it found little real opposition. On the contrary, the two religions soon merged, for it was perfectly conceivable that one could be a Shintoist and a Buddhist at the same time. Shinto thus forms the substratum of the Japanese religious life. It has never disappeared, and from time to time, encouraged for political or militaristic reasons, has enjoyed high peaks of popularity.

Japanese society in its formative years could hardly avoid influence from its larger and more venerable neighbours, any more than the emergent Greeks could escape contact with Egypt and Asia Minor. By A.D. 200 China had developed her distinctive philosophy, literature and art, her own industry and commerce. The Chinese rulers of the Han dynasty brought their civilization to Korea, and established diplomatic contacts—sometimes testy, usually benign—with Japan. Korea thus became a path of cultural, as it had been of racial, transmission. From the Chinese came writing and the precepts of Confucius. This influence received enormous impetus from the spread of Buddhism, which was to leave an indelible mark on Japanese culture and give its classical forms their philosophy.

The new religion had been founded in northern India in the sixth century B.C. by Goutama Buddha, normally known simply as the Buddha. Born into a noble house, he could look forward to eminence as a temporal leader. All this he renounced. The tradition represents him as looking at the world about him, seeing its poverty, pain and suffering, and giving up earthly ambition for the work of the spirit. After long contemplation he decided that the cause of suffering was earthly passion and desire. Only by eliminating these could the individual liberate his spirit and attain Nirvana, the blessed afterlife. The material world was impermanent, corrupting and delusory. Buddha's disciples deified him, propagated his teachings and amplified them with non-Indian elements, often to the embarrassment of Christianity, which found Buddhist ceremony and doctrine so akin to its own that it was forced, in self-defence, to attack the foreign faith as a diabolical parody. In the latter part of the fourth century A.D. Buddhism had already reached Korea. In 532 Buddhist monks, travelling from China to Japan, advised its adoption. This did not come about immediately. The first conversions were followed by a pestilence, interpreted as a sign of divine anger. When the pestilence continued after the converts had recanted, a new interpretation was offered: this was the wrath of Buddha himself at the half-hearted Japanese. Shrines were erected for the new cult, and leading families took responsibility for maintaining them. Prominent among these were the Seigas (a name famous in Japanese history), who survived the rioting and civil war that followed to control the imperial throne and ensure the success and continuity of Buddhism.

Bound now by a common religion, Japan seized eagerly on Chinese culture and adapted it to her own needs. Buddhist temples proliferated, and large monastic communities, charged with important ceremonies, grew up around them. The priests undertook long journeys as missionaries; the travelling priest who sees visions or hears stories of the holy places is a familiar figure in the noh play. Shinto was not abandoned, but lived side by side with Buddhism and learned from it. The traditional respect for the past, already reinforced by Confucianism, was now extended by the Buddhist doctrine of reincarnation, by which a soul may undergo a series of mortal existences before attaining Nirvana. Learning followed religion. Chinese writing brought a new vocabulary, and access to Chinese history, poetry, philosophy and science. This period saw the beginnings of Japanese literature, leaning heavily on Chinese precedent.
Prince Regent Shotoku, a strong supporter of Buddhism, introduced various civil reforms to reorganize the government, strengthen the power of the Imperial House and apply Buddhist principles to official life. Set out in a ‘constitution’ promulgated in 604, they gave new importance to the monarch, whose position had by this time become ambiguous. Identified with the deity, he was safe from overthrow, for rebellion was tantamount to sacrilege, but exercised little control over the actions of his supporters. Now a new civil administration was erected around him, which took the law out of the hands of the old ministers and created a new governing class. Its members were chosen partly by birth, but principally, as in the Chinese system, according to ability. Codes of law were formulated and military conscription made universal. The land was declared state property, though every man and woman was entitled to a share. Redistribution every six years prevented individual aggrandisement. (In a country as small as Japan, with an ever-increasing population, land-ownership has been a continuing problem: the redistribution system has been periodically revived, with the last taking place a quarter of a century ago.) Japan began to mould Chinese traditions to her own ways, instead of swallowing them whole. A native syllabary (each character standing for a syllable) supplemented the Chinese characters, which each represented a whole word. This combination has continued in use to the present day. The syllabary is known as kana (‘substitute letters’) and is itself complex; coupled with the Chinese characters, it presents a written language of formidable difficulty, mastery of which, as in so many things in Japan, becomes a mark of breeding and education. Using kana alone, though not impossible, brands the writer as inferior. One other important event of this period was the relocation of the Imperial Household. In 794 it was moved from Nara to nearby Kyoto, where it remained until the nineteenth century.

The real seat of power, however, usually lay elsewhere, for the governmental reforms backfired. Far from increasing the power of the throne, they surrounded it with an inner circle of power-hungry nobles who juggled for prestige and influence. The Fujiwara family, the second most illustrious in Japan and boasting of its own divine descent, controlled the emperors through a series of regencies. Controlled, but did not remove them: the throne was still sacrosanct. They gradually acquired most of the important offices, and made them hereditary. Their women were chosen as the emperors’ wives, and royal heirs from the sons of Fujiwara mothers. An Emperor who became too independent was forced to retire, and replaced by a younger, more tractable figurehead. Often there were several retired emperors alive at the same time; the conflict between allegiance to them and to the present incumbent, or the royal house and the de facto ruler, is the background to many plays.

The governmental class thus became self-centred and evolved its own luxurious life around the court, losing contact with the provinces. Genji Monogatari (Tales of the Genji), written by the Lady Murasaki in the eleventh century, and one of the most famous works of Japanese literature, describes this aristocratic life though the adventures of its hero, the Don Juan-like Prince Genji, whose amours figure prominently in later plays. Local lords took advantage of the preoccupation of the court to increase their holdings. The six-year redistribution plan fell into abeyance, and a handful of powerful figures secured new and ever larger estates. Often these lords were exempt from taxation. Smallholders, seeking the same relief, surrendered their lands to the aristocracy and received them back as fecks. By such means the country in time came to be made up of huge fiefs owing allegiance to a local landlord and outside direct governmental control. The landowners themselves, though bound by formal allegiance to the Emperor, were largely independent. Japanese society had assumed a pattern very like the feudal structure of the European Middle Ages, and, by the end of the eleventh century, the central government was on the point of collapse. The lords were free to fight for power among themselves.

Each had a private army, professional soldiers who had come to think of themselves as a separate military caste. Some of these samurai had been recruited from the police, others from the lord’s dependants; some came from the younger nobility, others
were *ronin*, unemployed men; but they were united by their source of income and way of life, and evolved their own code, structure and hierarchy. It was with such armies that the lord struggled for power. Their aim was not the deposition of the Imperial Family, but the right to dominate the country in the royal name. The history of these feudal wars is long and extremely complex; there is no need here, fortunately, to consider it in detail. Military families assumed control in turn. Particular rivalry existed between the Minamoto and Taira houses. The former was almost completely suppressed, but a few escaped, led a successful countermovement and eventually triumphed. Prominent among them were Yoshitsune and Yoritomo and the former’s retainer, the warrior-priest Benkei. Their names live in Japanese history and drama. *Heike Monogatari* (*Tales of the Heike*), written in 1233, told the story of the rise and fall of the Taira clan in fact and legend, and served as a source-book for several *noh* plays and a great deal of *kabuki*. The work is still popular, and has recently appeared in a modern version by Yoshikawa Eiji.

Yoritomo did not use his victory to interfere with the Emperor, or even to unseat his administrators. While preserving the form of the Fujiwara government, he established a separate military administration, loyal only to himself and the real centre of power. His name for this was *bakufu*, literally ‘tent-office’. In 1192 Yoritomo was named Shogun. This was not a new title – it meant ‘general’ and had been frequently held – but it now assumed a new significance, that of generalissimo, or military dictator. (The word ‘dictator’, with its shift of meaning from early Roman times to the present day, is, in fact, roughly analogous.) The centre of the *bakufu* was removed to Kamakura, near Edo (modern Tokyo), which became a separate capital.

Yoritomo was supplanted by the Hojo family, who presided over a period of civil strife and important cultural advances. *Zen*, one of the many sects of Buddhism, flourished at this time. More will be said about this in its proper place. For the moment, it need only be noted that *Zen* found particular favour with the warrior classes who were now in power, because of its simplicity and insistence on self-reliance, and had a major influence on *noh*, the form of drama that they espoused. In this period, *noh* began to shake off its rustic antecedents and emerge as a distinct, and highly sophisticated, dramatic form: taken up by the *samurai*, and protected by them as the Imperial Household preserved the old court dances, it was to flourish in comparative seclusion and to face its first real threat only with the Shogunate’s demise. It was in this period, too, that Japan faced its one major threat of foreign invasion. The Mongols, sweeping over Asia, attacked and were repulsed. The Japanese won through shrewd generalship and luck. They were aided by a storm which scattered the enemy fleet, and which they gratefully called *kamikaze* – ‘the divine wind’ – a name later to be given to the suicide pilots of the Second World War, and, by analogy, to Tokyo taxi drivers.

There were further upheavals. The Emperor tried to regain control, in vain, and a reconciliation was eventually worked out with the Ashikaga family in power. They ruled from 1392–1603, and established their Shogunate in Kyoto. Though weak rulers, they were great patrons of the arts; under their influence *noh* was brought to its perfected form. Rival lords, however, were almost as strong, and further interference came from monastic communities whose religious interests were, to say the least, perfunctory. Armed monks operated as private armies, and were as great a menace as the *samurai*. Although Japan has never produced a dominant priestly caste, the religious organizations were important both in politics and in cultural transmission. They fought, but they preserved; in the anarchy of civil war the monks, like their less aggressive counterparts in Europe, treasured precious manuscripts and passed them on. The ordinary people paid for the wars, as ordinary people have always done, and protested unavailingly against the increasing oppression. More money was needed to support the government, and the burden fell upon an increasingly narrow segment of the populace. The riots which ensued did not make the task of the authorities any easier. One desperate Ashikaga Shogun even accepted Chinese suzerainty in return for trading rights.

Out of this anarchy came three remarkable leaders, Nobunaga, Hideyoshi and leasu, who brought peace by a series of military
and political coups. Hideyoshi is frequently called the Japanese Napoleon, the unique example of a commoner rising to supreme power. Ieasu re-established a central government and, in 1603, founded the Tokugawa Shogunate, with its capital at Edo. This marked the beginning of more than two centuries of peace for Japan—but peace at a considerable price.

At Edo Ieasu had a firm base, surrounded by fiefs under the control of daimyo (lords) from his own family, and secure against surprise attack. But this was not enough. He saw that, to retain power, he must eliminate the factionalism that had so often brought down the central government. One source of danger was the Imperial House. Although the emperors were personally powerless, others might use their name. It had happened before. He therefore decreased the royal family’s influence, paradoxically, by increasing their importance; he debarred them from participation in practical politics by emphasizing their sanctity. The Emperor, being divine, must not be soiled by mundane affairs. Cut off from profanation by the common people—and therefore deprived of any effective contact with them—he was to content himself with his proper business, the distribution of honours and the ordering of religious ceremonial. Access to him was rigidly controlled, and the Emperor became virtually a prisoner in his own palace. Seeing only a few high officials, he was carefully segregated from the larger world. Thus the Imperial Family developed an increasingly rarefied life, pursuing its own amusements (notably music and the dance), and speaking its own language; a pampered symbol, a prestigious anomaly.

The Emperor was not the only one to be so treated. The Tokugawas’ political philosophy was ‘divide and rule’. Since combination spelled danger, all channels must be closed. Since alliances brought revolution, they must be prevented. Ieasu strove to divide the country into the largest possible number of self-contained units and to restrict all communication between one and another.

His task was made easier by the deep-rooted clan instinct of the Japanese people. Once again he turned a potential danger into an advantage. Family loyalties had brought about the feudal wars; the idea of the closely knit, self-sufficient group could now be used to stifle rebellion at its source. In the new order, the interests of the individual were confined within a narrow and strictly regulated sphere. He was given no opportunity to look wider, or to acquire allegiances other than to his immediate superior. This held good for all ranks of society, which led in an intricate chain of command to the virtually inaccessible position of the Shogun. Provincial lords (daimyo) were carefully watched and kept within their own domains. Conspiracy was impossible. They could not travel unobserved, for barriers and check-points brought any movement to the attention of the police. Thus the towns were largely segregated from each other and developed artificially what classical Greece developed naturally—distinct local styles, traditions and attitudes.

Since Edo has now come into the picture, and is, with Kyoto and Osaka, one of the cities principally concerned in the emergence of the Japanese theatre, it may be appropriate to say something about the characters of these places. Each was different; and the difference is easily apparent, even today, beneath the superficial similarities of modernization. Kyoto had the oldest traditions. Refined by association with the Imperial Household, which resided there for centuries, it claimed a polish and courtliness which its rivals lacked. These qualities are still there. They are not obvious on the grand boulevards, choked with cars and clattering trams, but one need only turn off into a side street to find a pool of quietness that has known no disturbance for hundreds of years. Kyoto is a city dedicated to worship and contemplation. It is said that one could stay three years and visit a different shrine or garden every day. Some of them have fallen into disuse now, and others have passed from private into public hands. The Abbot of Ryoanji, site of the most famous garden of them all, is currently waging war against the hordes of school-children brought on educational trips and who, he says, disrupt the serenity of the place and make contemplation impossible. But, in spite of the tourist traffic, Kyoto on the whole maintains its calm and sophistication. Sheltered by the mountains which surround it on three sides, it remains proud and exclusive. In the
The centre of the city stands the Old Imperial Palace, where the emperors still come to be crowned and visitors must still be vetted by the Imperial Household before they gain admittance. Kyoto, as we shall see, was instrumental in preserving the courtly arts. Behind the toy walls of the palace, dances and ceremonies were treasured and kept free from profanation by the outside world.

Osaka, by contrast, is a merchant’s town. It profited from its position. On one side was Kyoto and the luxury of court; on the other the port of Kobe, one of the principal centres of foreign trade. Osakans were brisker and noisier than their Kyoto counterparts. It is a depressing city now, full of factories and overhung with smoke, but its pulse is still lively. The traditional Osaka greeting is ‘Are you making money?’ and the traditional lying answer, ‘Not at all.’ Osaka jokes are the Aberdeen jokes of Japan. It is no accident that the favourite form of entertainment, and one which, supposedly, was born there, is nanjai, quick-fire repartee between two stand-up comedians. Osaka is now the city where most things in Japan are made. One of the things it helped to make was a traditional form of theatre.

Edo was a brash newcomer. Though it has changed its name and was legitimized when the Imperial Household left Kyoto and settled in Chiyoda Castle, the former stronghold of the Shogunate, in the nineteenth century, it still has this reputation. It first became important when the Shogunate seized power, and its population rose sharply. Iseu had some eighty thousand retainers, not all of whom could be accommodated in the city as it then stood. They were joined by the families and retainers of more than three hundred daimyo, and thousands of priests flocking to the new shrines and temples. Traders and artisans followed, and by 1718 the citizen population had already passed the half-million mark; by 1787 it had risen to 1,367,000, larger than the London of that time, and nearly twice as large as Paris. It is now a staggering eleven million. Edo was a city that had to be constantly on the defensive, alert to any rumour of trouble. This was also the one city in Japan where a man might rise through his own merits. Its illegitimacy and its arrogance fostered what came to be known as the typical Edo spirit – flamboyant, where Kyoto was suave; full of braggadocio, where Osaka came straight to the point. These qualities became important in the development of kabuki, and produced a distinctive Edo style.

Within the cities the formation of the merchants into guilds (za) was encouraged, and areas were set apart for each trade. Something of this still survives – for example, in the bookshops of the Kanda district in Tokyo or in Osaka, where whole streets are devoted to the sale of electrical goods; it survives, too, in the modern equivalents of the ‘gay quarters’, of which more will be said later. The life of the average citizen was so hedged about by minute rules and regulations that he had no opportunity to protest, and no initiative. Bureaucracy in its worst form was the major instrument of government policy.

One small example may stand here for the whole. One of the most impressive buildings in Kyoto is Nijo Castle, built by the Shogun in 1603 for use as a residence during his conferences with the Emperor. The building exemplifies the conditions under which he lived and ruled. Visitors were conducted through a series of rooms, each with its own precise function, and linked by a ‘nightingale floor’, so constructed as to squeak musically at the slightest footfall. A familiar ornament of Japanese domestic architecture, it had an ulterior motive at Nijo, to betray any unauthorized approach. It is a small but significant example of how often, in this age, art served politics. In the first room, visitors were searched by the Shogun’s inspectors. Next they were ushered into a waiting-room, the golden walls of which were appropriately decorated with crouching tigers, beasts known to the Japanese from Korea. Finally they reached the reception chamber where the Shogun’s ministers interviewed them. This was the closest most of them could come to the Shogun himself. More important visitors, the hereditary lords, passed into another anteroom and, at last, into the presence chamber. Even here they were forbidden to look upon the Shogun, or to address him directly. The ruler sat in solitary state on a dais at the far end of the room, surrounded by secret doors from which guards could rush out at the first sign of an attempted
assassination. At the other end knelt the lords, eyes fixed on the floor; between them and the Shogun sat the intermediaries, his ministers, through whom all questions were put and answered. This inaccessibility of the Shogun's person and the harsh punishment reserved for those who ignored it provide the background for one famous protest play, *Sakura Gimin Den*, which will be discussed at greater length in Chapter 4. It deals with a courageous farmer who, ignored by his immediate superiors, commits a massive breach of protocol by presenting his petition directly to the Shogun. For this crime he and his family are crucified.

On the far side of the suite was still another chamber, reserved for meetings with the imperial messenger; and in the heart of the castle were the Shogun's private rooms. Here he was attended by the ladies of the court; no other man was permitted access. The layout of the castle epitomizes the history of the country as a whole for over three hundred years. In the centre the Shogun, secure behind barriers of protocol and etiquette, no less strong for being intangible. Around him, in an immutable hierarchy, the officials, from the highest to the lowest, each with his carefully defined authority and responsibilities. On the fringes the people, divided and subdivided so that any popular impulse would be dissipated before it could gain momentum. The atmosphere of the police state is often felt in the plays. Works of actual protest are rare; to question the authorities was to invite immediate retribution. *Sakura Gimin Den* could be written only in the nineteenth century, when the Shogunate was already tottering. But the mechanics of state supervision are often present - the police patrols; the guards at the bridge, the popular hero who escapes arrest by disguise. There is often a sinister undercurrent to *kabuki* stories which now appear merely picturesque, like the grim realities of the Terror romanticized in the exploits of the Scarlet Pimpernel.

At the same time Japan was firmly cut off from the outside world, and entered the long period of seclusion which was not to end until the late nineteenth century. Only an island could have initiated such a policy, and only a police state could have enforced it. To us this segregation seems arbitrary and astrously shortsighted. For the Shogunate it was essential if the internal equilibrium was to be preserved. People would accept the new order if they had no basis for comparison. Foreign influences, however benign, could only confuse and distract, and might set up new bonds of sympathy running counter to the approved associations. In the Shogun's defence it must be said that a closed-door policy was the only hope of healing the country after its bout of civil war. The rulers knew their subjects and the essential contradiction inherent in the Japanese character: on the one hand reverence for the past, on the other susceptibility to whims, fads and crazes. The Japanese are somewhat akin to the Welsh in temperament, capable of enormous bursts of enthusiasm followed by equally sudden disillusionment. This tendency is strongly marked in the history of the theatre, particularly in the evolution of *buuraku*. But such fanatical enthusiasm could be dangerous when applied to political ideas. Novelty must be prohibited.

In its foreign contacts the Shogunate had some grounds for apprehension. The events of the preceding century had been disturbing. In 1542 Japan had been accidentally discovered by three Portuguese traders, shipwrecked on a neighbouring islet. This led to organized trading visits and, in 1549, to the arrival of Francis Xavier and two other Jesuit missionaries, who landed at Kagoshima and began to preach Christianity. At first the authorities were sympathetic. They saw the commercial advantages of religious contacts and hoped particularly for a source of Western firearms. There was no hostility to the new religion as such. The nebulous concepts of Shinto could embrace virtually any belief, and Buddhism, in many of its observances, was sufficiently similar to Christianity to offer a common meeting-ground. Some Japanese were, in fact, ordered to turn Christian, just as their ancestors had been ordered to become Buddhists. Nobunaga continued well disposed, but his successor, Hideyoshi, saw in Roman Catholicism a new loyalty that might diminish his own authority. In 1587 he declared all missionaries *persona non gratae*, though traders were still admitted. The missionaries clearly paid no attention, and the following years saw increasing animosity to-
wards them, fostered by Hideyoshi’s suspicions that they were working as political agents. Nine were executed. From 1612
leasu pursued a consistent anti-missionary policy, which came to
include traders as well. Finally Iemitsu (1603–51) closed Japan
to the rest of the world and the rest of the world to Japan.
Nationals were forbidden to leave the country. This prohibition
has substantially continued in force until the present day.
Though the regulations were eased with the coming of Meiji,
strict exchange-control has kept the majority of Japanese at home,
and it is only in recent years that travel agencies have been able
to woo them with the delights of Honolulu and Las Vegas.

The remaining Christians were massacred in 1638, the victims
of a political ideal. The Shogunate distrusted Christianity for the
same reason that the Romans had done. While prepared to tolerate
the new god, they could not countenance a group that cut
across existing class loyalties and claimed a higher allegiance.
After 1641 Japan was almost completely isolated. Chinese mer-
chants were allowed to trade at Nagasaki, and the Dutch re-
mained on a small island in the harbour, but could not penetrate
inland. The limited circulation of Dutch books was Japan’s only
surviving contact with Europe.

The new order, rooted in ancient prejudice and formulated by
law, shaped the arts of Japan and the habits of its people. An
almost pathological resistance to change sanctified the old and
inhibited experiment. In the Imperial Palace ancient dances
continued to be performed in their original form. Noh drama,
the increasingly esoteric nature of which had already removed it
from the larger public, was soon to be restricted by dictum to the
samurai class. The development of noh stops, to all intents and
purposes, at the beginning of the sixteenth century; from this
point it was simply a question of imposing a rigid form on old
material and codifying what had previously been left to the
artist’s inspiration. History records that commoners erected an
illicit noh stage and hid it with the same care that bootleggers
devoted to their stills. Any sort of popular theatre was suspect.
The playhouse and the geisha house were danger-spots where
social barriers might be broken and the orders mingle and con-
spire. They were therefore forbidden to the samurai, who had to
taste these furtive pleasures in danger and disguise. But the
Shogunate found, like every other government, that the theatre
can never be completely suppressed. The lower orders evolved
their own entertainment, kabuki, and countered the exclusivity
of noh with a snobbery of their own. This was their theatre,
their self-expression. But even kabuki recognized its boundaries,
developing and guarding traditions at least as complex as those of
noh. Subjected to continual harassment, building restrictions and
sumptuary laws, it adopted a defensive posture, created its own
hierarchy and became as closely identified with one class as noh
was with the other.

The stratified society, with its intricate subdivisions, created a
taste and need for classification. Identified with a recognized
group, the individual was safe, and the appropriate social distinc-
tions were embodied in language, dress and deportment.
Spoken and written Japanese evolved distinct levels of formality:
nothing so simple as the French tu-vous or German du-Sie, but
drawing on different vocabularies and honorific affixes. One
modern play, Gozonji Ishin Tasuke (The Famous Ishin Tasuke),
turns these distinctions into comedy. It is a story of the third
Tokugawa Shogun, the young Iemitsu, who escapes his assassins
by changing places with his double, an Edo fishmonger. The
humour arises from their differences: ruler and merchant in
those days were worlds apart in speech and behaviour. Not the
least difficulty of noh is its preservation of a highly formal lan-
guage completely divorced from ordinary usage. These speech
distinctions endure in today’s society, though the modern tend-
ency is to simplify. The most famous example is Emperor
Hirohito’s radio speech announcing Japan’s capitulation at the
end of the Second World War. Everyone listened, and no one
understood, for the Emperor was speaking in High Court
Japanese.

The habits inculcated by the Shogunate have left other endur-
 ing marks on the national character. Official business is still
transacted through a labyrinthine bureaucracy. In spite of the
enthusiasm for Western ways, official suspicion of the foreigner
Japanese visa regulations are set up on a complicated *quid pro quo* basis. Resident aliens in the United States may report changes of address by mail to a central bureau; in Japan they must report to the local ward office in person. Social behaviour is still governed by the need to identify with the group. In Japanese practice the family name is given first and then the personal name; you first establish the group to which you belong and then which particular member of it you are. In business it is the same: the Japanese must ascertain his milieu to know which rules apply. All Japanese of professional standing—and many with no professional standing at all—present their cards at first acquaintance and expect a card in return.

This explains the apparent inconsistencies of Japanese etiquette and the boorishness of people in the mass. Five minutes in a Tokyo rush-hour induce an agonizing reappraisal of Japanese courtesy. But the private formality and the public rudeness are part of the same pattern. Etiquette involves introduction and identification. By these standards the casual passerby does not exist, and it is every man for himself. It follows logically that the Japanese are the world’s most dangerous drivers.

It often seems impossible to trace an address in Japan. Towns are divided into wards, wards into districts, districts into blocks; within each block houses are numbered haphazardly, in order of erection. The resident is familiar with the arcania of his own district, but outside may easily be lost. Taxi drivers need detailed local maps, or have to stop several times for directions. Journeys to any but the most familiar landmarks assume the hazards of a trek across the uncharted Kalahari. When the destination is, after several errors, located, the driver is modestly triumphant. He never expected it to happen.

In restaurants the same is true. Most Japanese eating-places specialize in a single dish. For *tempura* you go to one place, for *sukiyaki* to another. Even in those which operate on the Western pattern, individuality is frowned on. Order the set lunch without one item and you cause consternation. Out-of-towners keep their group identity even when eating; there are restaurants which cater to local preferences and allow the commuter to keep the

habits with which he was brought up. Everywhere one sees the love of clinging to a pattern, even though the pattern may be outmoded.

This fondness for classification has complicated theatre scholarship. Plays are divided into types, and though the divisions may be arbitrary and inaccurate it is thought good that they should exist. The traditional grouping of *noh* plays into five categories, for example, is often misleading. This is particularly true of the Fourth Group, usually labelled ‘madman’ or ‘obsession’ plays. They might more properly be called ‘miscellaneous’, for any play which does not obviously fit the other categories is included here. Similarly *kabuki* is conventionally divided into historical and domestic plays, with a subdivision for works dealing with low life. This ignores the fact that many plays involving historical characters deal solely with domestic intrigue. The categories are, in fact, often interchangeable. Another venerable *kabuki* classification is based on merit: the so-called ‘eighteen best plays’, an honour roll of the finest productions. The classification of masks is often complicated to the point of absurdity. There are in fact only a few basic types, but scholars have elaborated the list to over a hundred. Scholars and critics themselves specialize to a degree unknown in the West. There are *noh* specialists, *kabuki* specialists, *bunraku* specialists; they confine their critiques to their adopted field, and are wary of committing themselves, even on the most elementary points, on matters which lie outside their narrow province.

Japan’s isolation lasted over two hundred years, and was finally broken down by increasing pressure from the West. As long as access was difficult, the country could remain aloof. Now, with improved communication, the probing became more urgent and ultimately irresistible. In the first half of the nineteenth century other countries had multiplied their requests for trade relations. Russia was close at hand and vaguely threatening, while the acquisition of California by the United States removed another barrier. In 1853 Commodore Perry made his famous visit to Japan, returning the following year to support his requests with armament. Japan took its first tentative steps towards re-
The Theatres of Japan

union with the world. Trade agreements were signed in 1854 and 1859, an American consulate was established in 1857, and Townsend Harris, consul-general, continued by finesse what Perry had begun by threat of force. It was at this point that the Imperial House came into its own.

The Shogunate, as we have seen, had removed the throne from the political arena by emphasizing its sanctity. To this end, Shinto, which worshipped the Emperor as divine, was revived and encouraged. It proved to be a two-edged weapon. The respectful attention directed towards the Imperial House and the study of its history showed up the Shoguns for the usurpers that they were. In the turmoil of the 1860s, with Japan under increasing external pressure, many turned for support to the Emperor, the man they now regarded as their legitimate ruler. There were three principal factions. One accepted the superiority of Western, as their remote ancestors had of Chinese, culture, and argued that Japan must inevitably bow before it. A second hoped for some sort of compromise, in which Japan could accept what was best from outside and blend it with her own traditional ways. A third, the diehards, urged the maintenance of the status quo, and tried to keep the door as tightly shut as it had been before. Each faction sought support from the personal dignity of the Emperor, and it was the reactionaries - unhappily for them, as things turned out - who were most vociferous, seeing in the antiquity of monarchical rule a safeguard against the Westernizing tendency of the Shogunate.

They received indirect support from the British, who, in their own demand for treaty rights, insisted on negotiating directly with the Emperor and not with the Shogun. Yielding to popular sentiment, the Shogun resigned in 1867, and in the following year the Emperor Mutsuhito was restored to full power. The Imperial Household was moved to Tokyo ("Eastern Capital") continued to be the centre of government.

Mutsuhito promptly disappointed his supporters by initiating sweeping governmental reforms. Feudalism was abolished, and local administration reverted to him. Most of the lords surren-dered their fiefs voluntarily; there was some armed resistance but it was soon put down, and in 1876 those samurai who had not already laid down their swords were compelled to do so by law. The breaking up of the Shogunate, and the wanderings of the new ronin, the unemployed samurai, have provided the modern Japanese film with many of its plots. Numbers of them were, however, retained in the new elaborate bureaucracy. It was inevitable that they should be; they were the only class that had been trained to rule. In this way the military caste continued to dominate the Japanese government and was responsible for much of its later policy. Political parties came into existence, and the Constitution was proclaimed in 1889.

The reign of Mutsuhito, later given the name of Meiji ("Enlightened Government"), saw the sudden and often painful transformation of Japan from a feudal state to a modern industrial power. For all the vast amount that has been written about the era, the most impressive testimony is pictorial. It may be found in the Meiji Memorial Picture Gallery. Enshrined after his death, the Emperor continues to be worshipped in one of the most beautiful gardens in Japan. Somewhat apart in a park of its own, the Picture Gallery records the principal events of his life. Eighty large canvases show the Emperor’s career from birth to the grave. They begin by recording ceremonial events in the flat, formal style of traditional Japanese painting. We see his birth, his growth, his investiture as Crown Prince, and his accession to the throne. In the last the Emperor sits in state on a dais, clad in full and formal robes, with the court prostrated on the steps below. In 1868 we see him giving audience to foreign diplomats: the Emperor is still in formal Japanese attire, the ambassadors in frock coats. In 1871 Prince Iwakura sails on his mission to Europe and America. Japanese and foreigners crowd the shores and some of the frock coats are now worn by Japanese. In 1871, for the formal opening of the Tokyo-Yokohama railway, the Emperor has abandoned the palanquin which carried him in earlier pictures for a horse-drawn carriage. The first conference of prefectural governors, in 1875, shows the rapidity of the revolution. All are wearing Western dress. The officials are no longer prostrated,
but standing respectfully, and the Emperor presides from a small table. The elaborate court ceremonial is succumbing to Western procedure. In 1877 the Empress visits the Tokyo Charity Hospital; by this time she too has forsaken the kimono for Western dress. So we move through the realistic scenes of the Russo-Japanese War, to the final picture which obliterates change; the palanquin bearing the Emperor’s body, surrounded by weeping, parasol-carrying mourners.

The subject-matter of these paintings is fascinating enough. Modern industrialism suddenly intrudes. We see the Emperor at the railway and in a coal mine, and his Empress visiting a silk mill. These modern scenes are continually juxtaposed with others rooted in Japanese tradition. Among the conferences and the flaming battleships we find ‘the Empress, sending a poetic epistle to the Emperor, who was travelling in the North-Eastern provinces. The poem is on the flight of Autumn geese.’ But hardly less fascinating is the way the style of the paintings changes. We move from the flat decorated panel to the heavy textures of Victorian realism. Looking at the earlier pictures, we could only be in Japan; with the later we could as easily be at Balmoral. And in this shift of attitude we see the transformation of a country.

The artistic upheaval caused by the Meiji Era will be traced at length in the chapters which follow. The change of rule was the first serious blow to the traditional dramatic forms, and one which they survived only after considerable heartsearching. In comparison, the restrictions and censorship imposed by the American Occupation were no more than a trivial annoyance and produced few lasting consequences. In some ways, indeed, the Americans helped: their enthusiasm restored the flagging popularity of the kabuki and created a wider audience for the traditional art. The effects of the Meiji reforms have been more durable. Divorced from the social background which assured their prestige, the traditional dramatic forms have been forced to justify their existence on purely artistic grounds. It is to their honour that they have, so far, continued to do so, though not without considerable sacrifice. How long they will continue to survive is another question. There are many who argue that noh is already moribund and predict the imminent demise of kabuki. The introduction of the Western theatre created a new and formidable rival. This sometimes merged with the old, to produce the bastard forms known as new, or mixed, kabuki and shimpai, modern treatments of traditional themes. More often it has supplanted it; on rare and valuable occasions, as in some of the productions described at the end of this book, new inspiration has fertilized old forms to create a theatre which is at the same time distinctively modern and characteristically Japanese.

The state of the theatre is the state of the country; as usual, one mirrors the other. Japan now lives in its own past and in another’s present. To call it a land of contrasts is to use the weariest of travel-book clichés; but when the cliché is so patently founded on the facts, and the facts so constantly obtrude on the attention, due respect and acknowledgement must be paid. The segregated state leapt with a bound into the nineteenth century and since then has made up in industry what it lost in time, with results that are everywhere apparent. Modernity, sometimes beautiful, often strident, jostles, overlays or mingles with traditions hallowed by the centuries. On every side there is testimony to the two contradictory strains in the Japanese character: the abiding reverence for the past and the wild enthusiasm for the new. Japan is a museum of living history, though largely stocked with replicas. Shrines, temples and pavilions still stand where they have stood for centuries, but only rarely are they the original structures. Buildings destroyed by war, fire or natural disaster have been rebuilt, again and again, exactly as they were. The impressive feudal pile of Osaka Castle has been reconstructed in concrete. Most of Nara has been rebuilt, plank by plank, stone by stone, as it originally was. Tokyo, delighting in its antiquity, has almost twenty times transplanted or rebuilt the shrine of its seventeenth century Shogun, Iesu; at the same time, defiant in its modernity, it has torn down the Imperial Hotel designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, one of the few buildings to withstand the earthquake of 1923.

Often, modern practices cloak old assumptions. In the northwest corner of the city stands Tokyo’s newest hotel, glittering,
Westernized, efficient. It would be equally at home in Los Angeles. It is called the Otani unofficially and the New Otani officially, since the latter combination of letters is numerologically more propitious. In its shadow stands the Kyo Inn, a traditional Japanese inn. To enter it is to cast off a hundred years. The walls are paper, the floor is covered with tatami mats, there are no chairs, the table stands a foot off the floor. In one corner, in the alcove reserved for the traditional scroll and the guest of honour, stands a tiny transistor television. In a curious way it harmonizes. An overhead expressway is being built, cutting through the heart of the city. Shrouded in bamboo scaffolding, its towers of structural steel contrive, somehow, to resemble a giant’s calligraphy.

Other things do not harmonize so well. A technology which has imitated, borrowed from and often surpassed its Western rivals is still bound to a written language which is a preposterous amalgamation of Chinese and indigenous script, and where the average typewriter has 2300 characters with more in reserve. In a country which has traditionally paid grave respect to age and learning, a nucleus of fifty dissidents, as I write, has closed a university for months and driven professors from the campus with stones and broken bottles. It is not enough to sigh nostalgically for the past, to blame the urban ugliness on New York or the student riots on Berkeley. These things are inherent in the Japanese character. From the beginning the Japanese have been both imitative and exclusive, keen to adopt the latest fad and jealous in guarding the old ways, obedient to order without question and prone to violence without warning. The ugliness, the grotesquerie, the love of the freakish, abnormal and bizarre, is often present in the plays beneath the surface tranquility. Whatever we may think, as historians or sociologists, about the three centuries of restrictive rule imposed by the Shoguns, in which every activity was policed, every journey controlled and every gathering suspected, no-one has ever suggested that the Shoguns were fools. They knew the national temperament and sought to restrict any loyalty other than to themselves by forestalling combination and breaking down the social structure into the maximum number of component parts. The Japanese insistence on protocol, obedience and discipline is somewhat akin to the ancient Greek reverence for moderation: both strove to encourage by artifice virtues to which they were not prone by instinct.

It is against this background that the contemporary Japanese theatre operates, and it is in the theatre, perhaps, that the contrasts are most clearly revealed. It is an amalgam of the most ancient and the most modern, reproducing its own past and simultaneously copying the West. As Hello, Dolly opens in Osaka, a noh theatre in Kyoto performs a play that has been in the repertory for six hundred years, and whose present form would be almost immediately comprehensible to the original audience. In the Asakusa district of Tokyo a chorus line kicks its legs a garter’s throw from shrines preserving dramatic rites of immemorial antiquity. The Bayreuth Opera brings Wieland Wagner’s production of Tristan und Isolde to Japan as a Japanese company takes noh to Norway. It is hard to say which audience is the more puzzled, though both are polite. ‘We do not need to go anywhere else,’ a proud Tokyoite said to me, ‘because, in the end, everything comes here.’

Japan, obviously, is a theatre historian’s delight. It has preserved its rites and performances as assiduously as its shrines and palaces. One may see, in living performance, the whole gamut of the country’s theatrical history, from the kagura dances which began it all to the present day: on one stage Okina and on another MacBird. The sense of felicity is tempered with the sad knowledge that it cannot last. There is a growing fear that the oldest shrines will soon decay from lack of interest and support. Already, dances that were once performed by adults are now being performed – and not so well – by children; women may be seen as noh musicians, because there are not enough men to go round. Japan is full of societies for the preservation of noh, kagura and bunraku. Experience unfortunately teaches that the formation of such societies is the last kick of the dying art. It is all the more necessary to record and compare, and to suggest the analogies and the differences, between the traditional Japanese concept of theatre and our own.
A NOTE ON CHRONOLOGY

The history of Japan, particularly during the feudal wars, is already complicated enough without the complications that have been added by historians. A notable source of confusion is in the various ways of naming reigns and eras. Some writers distinguish periods by reference to the presiding family (e.g. the Ashikaga Shogunate, the Tokugawa Shogunate). Others use the conventional chronology in which eras are named after the seat of the de facto government (not necessarily the residence of the Imperial Family, which was most of the time in Kyoto). A simplified scheme follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ERA</th>
<th>DATE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Legendary</td>
<td>A.D. —604</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yamato</td>
<td>604–710</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nara</td>
<td>710–794</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heian</td>
<td>794–1185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(from Heian-kyo, the old name of Kyoto, remembered in the Heian Shrine. Kyoto simply means ‘Capital’)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kamakura</td>
<td>1185–1333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muromachi</td>
<td>1333–1568</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(a quarter of Kyoto, seat of the Ashikaga Shogunate)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Momoyama</td>
<td>1568–1600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(on the outskirts of Kyoto, site of the Fushimi Palace)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edo</td>
<td>1600–1867</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Tokyo (Edo) continued to be the centre of government after the Imperial Restoration, succeeding eras, beginning with Meiji, are distinguished by ‘auspicious names’.

In the Beginning was the Dance

Of all my memories of the performing arts in Japan, one of the most vivid concerns something that was slight, accidental and not connected with the professional theatre at all: a visit on 5 May to a Tokyo kindergarten. This is Boys’ Day in Japan, the fifth day of the fifth month. Every family with a male child hangs out paper carp, the symbol of courage and manliness. Miniature suits of samurai armour are on display in schools and houses, with all the accoutrements of the warrior — his sword, spear, drum and fan. The kindergarten had arranged a dance programme for us, and I went, like most of my fellow-guests, in a mood of amused condescension. It turned out to be enthralling. There was none of the oafish romping that passes for children’s dancing in the West. These Japanese tots were perfectly disciplined and amazingly precise. There were more than sixty five- or six-year-olds involved, the boys in blue shorts, the girls in kimono or white frocks. They gave several dances. The first was an ensemble performance, in which two ranks passed, repassed and intertwined with bells and tambourines. Then came a masked mime, a story of an old man and a flock of sparrows; dances by girls with fans; and a short ballet set in a restaurant, where couples chatted and four balletic cooks made omelettes. Japanese children are set to dance as Western children are set to read and write. From the earliest possible age they learn to move to music, and after centuries of tradition the rhythmic sense has become instinctive. You may see it in a gang of workmen erecting a telephone pole;
returns the old man's stick; all rise. Hitomaru crosses to her father. Hand on her shoulder, he bids her go. The Servant leaves first, then Hitomaru, in the same solemn procession by which they arrived. Kagekiyo looks after them, makes the weeping gesture, and follows. When he has reached the shite pillar, the Villager brings up the rear. The musicians are putting up their drums and turn to face each other in their own farewell ritual. Attendants carry off the hovel, and the musicians follow them out as the Chorus chants the closing lines.

What this bald description, like most descriptions, completely fails to convey is the hypnotic quality of noh. Writers have not dwelt on this, perhaps through fear of being thought subjective and unscholarly; but it must be mentioned, for it dominates the performance. The grouping of the Chorus and musicians about the central figure recalls that of the acolytes around their priest in Buddhist ceremony. The throbbing of the drums, the ritual gravity of the performers, and the measured choral recitation - which has been compared to recitative, or sprechstimme, or Gregorian chant, and is all of these but none, having no precise Western analogue - induce a hallucinatory sense to which the stage, existing in a void beyond time and space, contributes. At every performance one may see several of the audience asleep. Not from boredom: you do not attend noh without knowing what to expect. They have succumbed to the atmosphere; they are in a trance. An American friend, making her first visit to a noh play in my company, remarked that noh must be the Japanese equivalent of LSD. This sums up, quite accurately, the mood that is engendered by the performance, and the frame of reference in which the happenings on the stage must be appreciated. We have seen how, on the bare and uncommitted platform, the dramatist may control space and time at will. The characters similarly merge with each other. Shite and Chorus interchange personalities. The Chorus may speak the shite's lines or give voice to his unspoken thoughts; the shite may act as his own Chorus and speak of himself as of a being apart.

But this is to say no more than that noh is, simply, ritual. Its aim is to illuminate something that is already almost completely known. The plots are all basically the same, and all familiar. There are no surprises or unexpected twists, any more than there are surprises in the Mass - which is, like noh, a dramatic presentation of an act of faith and a state of mind. In Japan a society which already operated largely in terms of ritual and ceremony evolved another ritual in its drama.

It is the shite's performance by which the play stands, and the plays are classified according to his character in them. Zeami recognized three basic divisions: Old Man, Woman and Battle plays. The earlier cycles appear to have included one of each type, corresponding to the tripartite division of the individual play (the number three has always had a particular symbolic significance in Japanese thought) with kyogen between. Later, the number of categories was changed to five - God, Battle, Woman, Madman and Devil - and the length of the programme was correspondingly increased to five plays, again with intervening kyogen. The latter have the same function in noh as the satyr plays of the classical Greek theatre: to provide relief and relaxation for the audience after the drama.

The origins of kyogen, like those of any popular comedy, are obscure. Traditions that they were first performed by prisoners of war impressed as actors may be discounted. Such stories probably derive from the snobbish conviction that the lower art forms must have base origins. Later kyogen performers countered these charges - and compounded the obscurity - by fabricating their own histories of their art. Conscious of their own inferior social status, they sought to increase their importance by inventing a genealogy as illustrious as that of noh. In fact kyogen ('mad words') probably developed, like noh, out of san'yaku, and retained some of the earthy characteristics that the more refined form had shed. There are considerable problems, also, of text and authorship. The first authors were actors, concerned more with assembly than with originality, who put various pieces of comic business together and gave them a rudimentary plot, and the plays were for some time transmitted orally. In this they resemble the kyogen monologues in the noh play proper. In 1638 two hundred and three kyogen texts were written down and
classified, with strict instructions that they were to be kept secret. A new transcription was made in 1792; the manuscripts are still in the hands of private families, which preserve the traditions of their art as the Kanze and other schools do those of noh.

Kyogen plays vary in length—from ten minutes to three-quarters of an hour or more—and draw their material from various sources. Some are vignettes of everyday life, often in the form of humorous dialogues with a bare minimum of action. Their closest Western equivalents are the Greek ‘mimes’ of Herodas, which clothe domestic conversation in dramatic and poetic form. Older and younger brothers are familiar characters. One, for instance, show the elder trying to persuade his junior to go fishing in his place. He has hurt his leg, he claims, and ‘the circulation is stopping’. A comparable and still highly popular form exists in the comic dialogue known as manzai, an Osaka favourite, and by tradition born there; in its present state it is indistinguishable from a music-hall cross-talk act.

Other kyogen have literary sources in Buddhist parables, or such works as the Tale of Genji. Some are parodies of noh, as the satyr plays parodied the themes and characters of Greek tragedy. They resemble the medieval mime-farcies still seen at the Mibu Shrine in Kyoto, though with the addition of a text, and like them may be compared to the early Italian popular comedy which preceded the work of Plautus and Terence. These plays (the fabulae atellaneae, or Atellan farces) drew both on their native folklore and mythic-tragic material; the development in both countries runs on parallel lines, though the Roman precedes the Japanese by several centuries. Kyogen makes no claims to be a literary form. Its humour is broad and largely visual. The following are some of the best-known titles and subjects:

Bo Shibari (Tied to a Pole). One of the most popular. A master has two servants who love to break into his sake cellar. When he has to leave the house he ties them up, one with hands behind his back, the other with his arms strapped to a long pole. Their resourcefulness is equal to the situation. They mime the action of opening the cellar door, going downstairs and removing a keg of sake. The stage assistant brings on a bowl. Their problem now is how to get the sake to their lips. They solve this by cooperation, each holding the bowl for the other. They soon become staggering drunk, sing and perform a burlesque noh dance. The master comes home and drives them out.

Fuzuma. A lord has acquired a new servant, and tests his ability by challenging him to a bout of sumo wrestling. The servant wins easily. Humiliated, the master produces an enormous scroll and reads up on the subject. He is now confident of winning, and expresses his pleasure by leaping high in the air and coming down with his legs crossed. But he loses the second bout also. Tearing the scroll in a slow pantomime of disgust, he seizes a second servant, whom he knows he can beat, and drags him off the stage, shouting, 'In future, I'll only wrestle with you!'

Utsuhozar (The Monkey and the Quiver). A daimyo, going hunting, meets a travelling entertainer with a performing monkey, and demands its skin to make a quiver. The trainer reluctantly prepares to kill his pet, but the monkey thinks it is just another rehearsal and begins to perform its tricks. At this the trainer bursts into tears. The daimyo too is moved, spares the monkey's life, and gives it lavish presents—his fan, his sword and even his ceremonial outer robes. This play is particularly interesting for several reasons. One of the monkey's tricks is to mimic a sacred dance, with a gobeti (a prayer-stick hung with cut paper) in its paw. This may hark back to an early function of sarugaku, the parody of religious ritual to provide relief. The play illustrates, alos, how even kyogen observes the Buddhist precepts. In sparing the monkey and divesting himself of his cloak of authority, the daimyo demonstrates that temporal power is as nothing beside the sanctity of life. The monkey is a traditional beginner's role. Four living members of the Nomura family, the leading kyogen actors in Japan today, chose it for their debut. In the performance that I saw, the monkey was played by a small girl (a sign of the times): Nomura Hatsue, a six-year-old, making her first appearance on the stage.
Roku Jizo (The Six Stone Images). A man wants to purchase images of the gods. His friend and two accomplices, in masks, try to fool him by pretending to be statues. As there are only three of them, and the man wants six, they have to double repeatedly across the stage and take up new positions, until the masks slip and their imposture is discovered. A variation of this for smaller companies involves only two actors, with one man pretending to be several deities at once.

Shido-Hoyaku (A Spell to Stop a Horse). A daimyo intends to enter a tea-making contest, and sends his servant to his uncle to borrow tea-leaves, swords and a horse. The uncle lends them grudgingly, but warns that the horse has a peculiar vice; it bucks when anyone clears his throat, and can be calmed only by a certain formula, which the servant learns. Master and servant start off for the ceremony, and the servant, who feels he has been bullied enough, amuses himself by making the horse rear. When the master has been thrown several times he chases the servant off the stage. The chief attraction here is the kyogen horse, which looks like no animal that ever was; it is played by a man in skin-tight costume, on all fours, with a human mask and a shaggy mane.

Naki Ana (The Crying Nun). A priest covers up his bad preaching by always taking with him a senile nun who can be relied on to cry at the sermon. Ordered to preach before the abbot, he summons his accomplice to help him. The nun is a wonderful character. She hobbles onto the stage bent almost double, like a walking corpse. Her mask is green and wizened, and a yellow shawl covers her bald head. But the sermon is so bad that even she cannot stand it. The rattling of her beads grows slower and slower, her head droops, and she dozes off. The priest coughs indignantly, and she twitches into wakefulness. This process is repeated frequently as the dreary sermon (appropriately, on death) drones on. At the end the priest is coughing like a machine-gun and hammering on the lectern with his fan; the nun, oblivious, curls into a ball and sleeps. The only thing that wakes her is the bell signifying the end of the sermon, at which she sits up and demands part of the priest's fee for services rendered. They go off in angry argument.

Futari Daimyo (Two Lords). Two noblemen setting out on a journey and feeling disgraced because they have no one to carry their swords press a passer-by into service. As soon as he has the swords, he threatens them, makes them perform animal imitations and runs off with the sword and their clothes.

- The recurring theme of the humiliation of the daimyo by the lower orders may seem unlikely material for humour in a feudal society. In fact the aristocracy was so strongly entrenched, and so secure in its prestige, that it could permit itself to be mocked on the stage. Such violations of the social system were discounted as fantasy, impossible and therefore tolerable. Modern social satirists have encountered similar reactions. London's satirical theatre, The Establishment, created to attack the norm of the upper classes, found with dismay that those classes provided its best audience. They came to see their prerogatives mocked on the stage in the happy confidence that such things could never happen in real life. Kyogen enjoyed the same licence. It is the closest that the Japanese theatre, or indeed the whole of Japanese literature, comes to social satire. Many of the plays were taken into the later kabuki repertoire, which, like kyogen, claimed the right, within reasonable limits, of mocking the upper classes.

Both noh and kyogen derive from popular entertainment, but kyogen is clearly much closer to its sources. Its movements are less stately, its manner less refined. Nevertheless kyogen, as now performed, has become more dignified through centuries of association with its prestigious neighbour. It lacks the explosive vitality of the traditional Chinese farces - a vitality which it too must have had at its origin. Utsuobara, for instance, is slowed down immeasurably by the protocol that governs conversation between a high-born daimyo and a lowly monkey-trainer. Everything has to be said twice, and relayed through the retainer who acts as intermediary. Today's kyogen is baggy-trousered farce which has put on a Sunday suit and a stiff collar. Its rare acrobatic moments now seem as incongruous, in context, as a belch at a vicarage tea-party. Many aspects of the physical performance have been borrowed from noh. The comic characters make the
same slow, dignified entrance up the hashigakari, and the action often stops dead while we wait for the next character to reach the stage. Their movements, however, though stereotyped, are less restricted than in noh. The stage picture is still pivoted about the traditional positions — the shite and waki pillars — but the immediate needs of the scene dictate who shall occupy them. For example, Futari Daimyo begins with a grumbling conversation between the two lords. The chief speaker takes the shite pillar, and his companion the inferior position. When the passer-by seizes their swords and bullies them, he takes the shite pillar and both lords move to the waki side. Exits are faster than in noh, often taken at a run along the hashigakari, and the sliding Chorusedoor is used more frequently. Masks are used only for special characters, like the Crying Nun, and the actors are less restricted in their facial expressions, though these are still limited in comparison with Western acting, and the actor communicates chiefly through physical gesture. There are no musicians or Chorus. Dialogue, though still chanted, is closer to the vernacular in language and delivery. The stage assistants, whose work is less demanding than in noh, are often young boys at the beginning of their training.

The full cycle of five serious and four comic plays was developed for an age and a class whose audiences could afford to spend the better part of a day at the theatres. Programmes of this length are still occasionally given, and are physically and emotionally demanding, though less so than one would at first suppose; it must be said, in all fairness, that the timelessness of the noh stage communicates itself to the auditorium, and one ceases to be aware of the passing of the hours. Modern practice, however, usually adapts itself to new habits and working conditions. The usual cycle now consists of three noh plays and one kyogen, and may be curtailed still further by presenting only two complete noh and the shinmat of the third. There are an increasing number of programmes devoted to kyogen, which has become a cult in its own right and is enjoying something of a revival in present-day Tokyo.

It is likely, also, that the earlier cycles took considerably less time than they do now. The average length of a single noh play now is about an hour and a half (though the shortest is thirty minutes, and the longest two hours and a half). As originally conceived, they may have lasted about half this time. By dividing the length of known historical festivals by the number of plays performed, scholars have calculated that the average noh may have lasted no more than forty minutes. Complete accuracy is impossible — even now the same play may vary by as much as fifteen minutes, depending on the school performing it — but it seems certain that the gradual formulation of movements and music was accompanied by a lengthening of the time of performance. As noh became fixed, it grew slower. Part of this is unquestionably due to the increasing veneration in which the art was held. A play that becomes a 'classic' automatically loses some of its vitality. Subsequent generations feel that they should treat it with the respect due to its age, and that brisk handling would slight it. We still suffer from this in our productions of Shakespeare. His 'two hours' traffic of our stage' may be an understatement, but a four-and-a-half-hour Hamlet goes brutally to the other extreme. The slow tempo of present noh, like the refinement of kyogen, may simply represent the dignity of advanced old age.

Any consideration of noh as living theatre art must admit, at the outset, the enormous barriers that time and changing custom have erected between the play and the audience. If the business of a play is to communicate, noh seems determined to make such communication as difficult as possible. It is profoundly oblique, working most typically by indirection; it prefers the allusion to the statement, the gesture to the act, the hint to the developed idea. It avoids the actual and the direct. The report or memory of an action is preferred to its presentation. This obliquity is reflected, as we have seen, in the furnishings of the stage. The setting exists only in language. Properties give the mere skeleton of the object to be represented. Costumes and masks are notably unrealistic; they form a stage shorthand, a code which conveys to the initiated audience the wearer's character and social position. The shite in mask and full costume — particularly when the hands are concealed within the sleeves — gives the uncanny effect of an
patience to acquire the taste. Many Japanese now find the language of the plays completely incomprehensible; the traditional intonations augment the difficulties of an archaic language, and many of the audience sit through the performance with librettos in their laps. The atmosphere is scholarly, and strongly reminiscent of the triennial performance of the Greek play at Cambridge, where most of the spectators come fortified with texts. Televised noh, by the same token, uses subtitles, an admission that the scripts are in what is virtually a foreign language.

It is noticeable, too, that most of the audience are middle-aged or over. Many Japanese now claim that the art is dying, and that the younger, Americanized generation has no patience with its slow tempo. This impression is reinforced by the younger people themselves, most of whom cheerfully admit that they have never seen noh – or, for that matter, kabuki – and never intend to. For all that the theatres, at least in Tokyo, are full, and there is always a hard core of students who buy tickets at reduced rates. They cannot all be there on class assignments. But the future remains uncertain. It may well be that, having at last had to face the challenge to which the classic dramas of other cultures were exposed from their inception, and to compete for the attention of the general public, noh may build a new audience – though it will always be a small one – and continue to justify its existence on its own merits.

IV

The Theatre Suspected

Though Westerners go charily to noh plays, most of them pay at least a token visit to the theatre advertising itself widely, and in English, as ‘the Mecca of Kabuki’ – the Kabuki-za. It is impossible to avoid; together with the Meiji Shrine and Tokyo Tower it has become one of the sights, and travel agencies include it with the Queen Bee cabaret on their night tours. This association is unfortunate. It prompts the casual visitor to dismiss kabuki as simply another spectacular entertainment, and to ignore its significance in Japanese cultural tradition. The present Kabuki-za is one of the last remaining homes of a historic art.

It stands, appropriately, on the edge of the Ginza, Tokyo’s central pleasure district, a bulging edifice in Japanese rococo, festooned with columns, canopies and curlies; amid the lamps and streamers, a huge sign, again in English, welcomes visitors to ‘the home of kabuki’. There is an English-speaking information desk and a lavishly illustrated English programme. What happens on the stage is entirely Japanese, but the performers feel, with some accuracy, that their art transcends the language barrier.

To reach the auditorium one must first pass through a shopping centre. A succession of lobbies reveals souvenir stalls, displays of artwork, trade exhibits, tea-rooms, a television lounge and three restaurants. Packed meals in gay boxes are in brisk demand; the usual kabuki performance lasts five and a half hours. There are two programmes a day, seven days a week, making demands of time and stamina on the actor that would bring tears to the eyes of
Equity. The average Western actor, by comparison, lives a life of pampered ease.

At first sight the tourist feels at home. The theatre is built in Western style, though shallower and wider; even the back rows are not too far from the stage. The house-lights, shrouded in paper lanterns, remain lit for most of the performance. There is a proscenium arch, unusually wide—it stretches almost the whole width of the auditorium—with a curtain striped in black, rust and green, the traditional kabuki colours. This will be drawn by hand, to reveal a succession of more splendid curtains as the programme proceeds. The popular Japanese theatre loves curtains, as it does all forms of gaudy decoration; the Jido Kaikan in Shibuza has one covered with hundreds of plastic balls in all colours and sizes. At the Kabuki-za, however, the curtains must be enjoyed with caution. What first appears as an intricate formal design will reveal itself, by a trademark or a minute slogan, as a giant advertisement for Pan-Am Airways or Mitsuya Soap. One thing is clear; kabuki is not, like noh, a hothouse flower, but very much in touch with the world outside.

The most obviously unwestern feature is a long raised walkway, beginning at the back of the theatre and cutting through the audience to the stage. This is the hanamichi, used primarily for extended entrances and exits. A larger version of the hashigakari of noh, from which it probably derived, it takes up most of the left-hand aisle. The audience itself seems to be in a state of constant movement. People come and go as they please. They sit through the pieces they are interested in, go out for a meal or gossip and return. A typical kabuki programme may contain two substantial dramas (themselves only Acts of much longer plays, now only rarely performed in full), shorter comic pieces often derived from kyogen and several dances. There is something for all tastes.

The rattle of wooden clappers cuts across the chatter of the audience, though without imposing complete silence; the play may run for fifteen minutes before the house is still. Music sounds, the usherettes stand guard around the hanamichi, and the curtain opens on Sukeroku.

This is a bravura piece, a fitting introduction to kabuki. An aregato play, born in eighteenth-century Edo, it displays the dash and flair that the townsman of that city thought of as their distinctive qualities; the qualities, too, of kabuki showmanship. The scene is the forecourt of a geisha house. Its lattice walls are bright vermilion, curtained off with straw matting. At stage left is an archway, hung with strips of brown curtain; at stage right an enormous water-cask, bigger than a man. Red-draped couches for the geisha dot the forestage.

The play begins magnificently with a series of processions. Geisha file through the archway and down the hanamichi simultaneously, tottering on high black lacquered clogs, shaded by parasols, and supported by the shoulders of their footmen. Their costumes are of rich brocade, their elaborate coffres stuck through with pins and combs; they re-create the 'courtesans' parade', a familiar spectacle in the gay quarters of the feudal cities. 'Invisible' property men are busy among them, taking off their clogs, adjusting the folds of their robes, and ensuring the perfection of the stage picture. At their feet sit child attendants, wearing crystal head-dresses that shimmer in the light. The whole stage is vibrated with colour.

Another procession follows Ikyu down the hanamichi. He is the villain of the piece, a former samurai, who has unsuccessfully courted the favours of one of the geisha, Agekami. His beard is long and white, his face made up in exaggerated, sweeping lines, his gown of gold brocade. Six servants, eight maids and two footmen escort him, carrying his sword, pipe and stool. Forestage and the hanamichi are both crowded; there are now fifty-two characters on view, most of them extras, but each one of them sumptuously dressed. Ikyu makes new advances, which Agekami contemptuously rejects. She already has a lover, the townsman Sukeroku. There is another ground of dispute between the two men; Ikyu has stolen a famous sword, which Sukeroku is trying to locate and reclaim.

Agekami and her retinue withdraw, leaving Ikyu sulking on the stage. A flute plays and Sukeroku enters, without attendants, but an impressive sight in black and scarlet. Plaunting his parasol like
a peacock's tail, he struts and swaggers down the hanamichi; the action is suspended while he postures to demonstrate his many charms. This is the type of popular hero that Edo audiences adored — a self-made man owing nothing to birth or privilege and so continually contrasted with the samurai, who are represented (in this play and in others) as villainous, cowardly and decadent. The townman hero is handsome and elegant, a virile lover and a redoubtable swordsman. A lone wolf in a caste-ridden society, his arrogance is self-defence and his pugnacity a continual reassurance. He embodies the qualities of the theatre that idolized him: resourceful and independent, he is Cyrano sans nose, a Byronic James Bond. Kabuki is largely an escapist art. Through roles like these the bourgeoisie asserted an independence it could never claim in real life, and worked off its resentment against the omnipotent samurai.

When he has stopped preening himself and reached the geisha house, Sukeroku is surrounded by the admiring girls, who offer him pipes. They give no thought to Ikyu, who is eventually forced to demand one for himself. Sukeroku, in a superb gesture, places a pipe between his toes, and extends a contemptuous foot towards his discomfited rival. He hopes to provoke Ikyu into drawing his sword, and find out for certain whether he has his stolen treasure. The trick almost works. Ikyu slaps his hand to the hilt, but checks himself in time.

Ikyu's henchman, Kamura Mombai, comes in to provide comic relief. He has his master's sour disposition and a habit of speaking out of the corner of his mouth. His quarrel with a passing noodle-seller is a self-contained scene, like the sub-plots of Elizabethan drama, and the other characters sit motionless while it is played. Sukeroku finally intervenes and ends the quarrel by slapping a dish of noodles on the servant's head. Going further, he balances a wooden clog on Ikyu's head and challenges him to fight. Once again Ikyu restrains himself from drawing just in time. Sukeroku goads him. Casually drawing up a stool, he strikes it with his sword. It falls apart, cut clean in two. Ikyu replies by summing up a pack of club-wielding servants, who set about Sukeroku. This is no problem to our superman

hero. They come at him in double file. Parting their ranks with unruffled aplomb, he strikes to left and right; the blows never connect, but the men fall like ninepins. It is an animated-cartoon battle, Popeye demolishing the enemy. Ikyu leaves in disgust.

Shinbei, Sukeroku's brother, appears to lecture him on the folly of his ways. Sukeroku explains the reason for his provocative behaviour, accuses Shinbei of being too timid, and gives him lessons in bravado. This makes another self-contained comic interlude. The brothers pick quarrels with several passers-by and force them to abase themselves by crawling between their legs. Shinbei is just beginning to enjoy the game when the last comer reveals herself as Manko, their mother. She too has come to complain about Sukeroku's behaviour, but is satisfied when she hears his plan about the sword.

Ikyu and Agekami come out in conversation. He is still pressing his suit and making himself offensive. Sukeroku, hiding behind Agekami's voluminous robes, hears himself abused. Reaching underneath the bench, he pinches Ikyu hard on the leg. After several repetitions Ikyu realizes what is happening, despite Agekami's efforts to conceal it. Sukeroku leaps out of hiding, and in the violent quarrel that follows Ikyu is finally provoked beyond endurance and draws his sword. It is indeed the stolen treasure. The secret is out, and the curtain closes on a tableau.

The final scene is rarely performed, for reasons that will be obvious. During the intermission the huge water-cask is dragged forward and filled to the brim. The curtain opens on Sukeroku and Ikyu in savage combat. It is a duel turned into ballet: they sway, leap, duck and thrust, and though the swords never make contact, the effect is electric. Ikyu is wounded; clapping his hand to his shoulder, he fastens a bunch of red ribbons to stand for blood. Then Sukeroku is hit. He lies prostrate and motionless. Is he dead? Ikyu stands astride him, and raises his sword for the coup de grâce; at the crucial moment Sukeroku springs to life, lunges upwards and pierces him beneath the arm. As he retrieves his prized sword from the body, a clamour is heard offstage. Ikyu's men are coming to avenge their master. Quick as a thought, Sukeroku dives into the tub of water. The enemy pour
on with swords and ladders. Running down the hanamichi, they climb into the first balcony, and search among the audience. Baffled, they return to the geisha house and hunt on the roof there. Sukeroku is nowhere to be seen, and they continue their pursuit offstage. With much wallowing and splashing, Sukeroku emerges triumphantly from the tub. He is wounded and drags himself painfully out. Kenneth Tynan once remarked that an English audience invariably applauds when it sees real water on a stage. So does a Japanese. Normally decorous and restrained (at least in the Kabuki-za) they unfold like paper flowers when exposed to water. Kabuki theorists insist that their art avoids realism for its own sake. This may be generally true, but I have never heard an audience applaud so hard as when Sukeroku made his precarious, sudden appearance.

The effort has been too much even for him, and he faints. Agekami comes out of the geisha house and discovers him just as his pursuers return. Hiding him beneath her flowing robe, she sends them off in the wrong direction and tries to bring him round. Running to the tub, she carries water — real water — in the folds of her sumptuous brocade. Again the audience applauds, even as it shudders at the delicious extravagance. If it is sacrilege to spoil so beautiful a costume, Cyrano's immortal rejoinder comes to mind: 'Mais quel geste!' It is an atmosphere in which the Gascon would have felt himself at home. Sukeroku stirs and revives. Brandishing his recaptured sword, he springs up the ladder that his enemies have left against the house. The spotlight catches his triumphant pose, and Agekami gazes up at him adoringly as the curtain closes.

We are, it is clear, in a very different world from that of Zeami. 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 wilfully perverse; noh is gentle, kabuki cruel; noh is concerned with the hereafter, kabuki bound by the here-and-now. Not every play is as vigorous or spectacular as Sukeroku, but all have something of these qualities. Kabuki loves extravagant display and prizes action above thought. The intellectual content of noh is everything, but in kabuki it is virtually non-existent. The popular drama idolizes the warrior hero and creates an aura of fantasy and romance. These qualities developed in kabuki because of its social position, and may be seen in the very beginning of the art.

Kabuki history is short by the standards of the Oriental theatre, a mere three hundred and fifty years against the six hundred of noh. Many of its plots and dances derive from the senior form, and it often reproduces, on a larger scale, the setting and groupings of the noh stage. But where noh became almost from the beginning a diversion of the élite, kabuki retained its contact with the popular arts from which it sprang. It has always been the theatre of the people, or at least the middle classes — though this may soon cease to be true — and, like all popular forms, has been susceptible to changing fashion. It developed its own rules and conventions, partly out of dramatic convenience, partly out of self-protection, and its subject-matter, in its own way, is almost as limited as that of noh. Nevertheless a looser form permitted greater variation, and allowed more opportunity for experiment. Some characteristics were developed in conscious opposition to noh: the melodramatic versus the cerebral, and the love of scenic spectacle in contrast to its avoidance. As we shall see, kabuki itself became a badge of class, flaunted in the face of the aristocracy to show that the lower orders had their own tastes and a right to their special privileges and pleasures.

Peter Quennell, in his biography of Shakespeare, suggests that our appreciation of Elizabethan drama, based largely on its literary merits, differs from that of the original audience, and that the crowds who flocked to the English public playhouse had much in common with the first kabuki audiences, their historical contemporaries. They came to the theatre to see a rousing spectacle and stylish swordplay. The seventeenth-century public would have enjoyed Hamlet's duel with Laertes more than his philosophizing, and would have felt perfectly at home, given a chance to see it, with Ikyu's combat to the death with Sukeroku. The analogy between the two forms, often made by Japanese scholars, is valid within limits. Both have similar physical
features. Men play women's roles; the use of stage space, and many of the conventions, are the same; Chikamatsu Monzaemon, the leading dramatist of his time, is frequently called the Japanese Shakespeare. In subject-matter there is no comparison. The English world was opening as the Japanese was closing. Elizabethan drama was critical and adventurous, free to explore the whole realm of European thought; kabuki was restricted by its milieu to a limited range of approved subjects. Criticism of the social order, where it exists at all, is mild and hedged with precautions; there is no intellectual freedom, and no room for the expansion of ideas. Kabuki could produce no Doctor Faustus, no Hamlet or King Lear. It is as if we had from the Elizabethan theatre only the chronic plays (pushed back in time to avoid political offence) and such domestic dramas as Arden of Faversham, The Two Angry Women of Abingdon and A New Way to Pay Old Debts.

In its social reference, however, the parallel is still a striking one. The relationship of the two styles of theatre in Japan has much in common with contemporary developments in England. In the sixteenth century, English theatre existed on two levels. At court the favoured form was the masque, devised for an educated and aristocratic audience, drawing heavily on classical mythology and presupposing an appreciation of erudite allusion and subtle reference. A knowledge of the Latin classics was taken for granted, as noh assumed a knowledge of Chinese. Elegant, learned, formally decorative and extremely expensive, the masque catered for a limited public and a cultivated taste.

On another level the public playhouse attracted audiences who made up in enthusiasm what they lacked in refinement. The plays, like the spectators, were boisterous and bloodthirsty. They prized action above thought and were concerned not so much with preserving a dead past as with portraying the vitality of a living present. Though the learned thought them vulgar and diffuse and accused them of lacking artistic form (we see in Ben Jonson a writer continually torn between what the critics admired and what the public wanted), the people loved them. Nevertheless it was inevitable that the public theatre should absorb and use for its own purposes elements from its aristocratic counterpart. We are all snobs; we like to see our social superiors on the stage and identify ourselves, by association, with tastes and standards officially found admirable. The English theatre in many ways has been hardly less class-conscious than the Japanese: Frederick Lonsdale and Noel Coward found their best audiences among suburban housewives. Even the most popular Elizabethan playwrights tossed in their scraps of Latin. Marlowe, Kyd and Shakespeare delighted in the masque. The groundlings thrilled to the squabbles of the aristocracy, and kings and princes became popular heroes.

This is, in essence, the relationship between noh and kabuki, though in a more rigidly stratified society the cleavage widened. Queen Elizabeth could summon Shakespeare's company to her palace; that the Shogun could watch kabuki was unthinkable. The public could see noh only by invitation, and the samurai were eventually, by the rules of their own caste, barred from the popular theatre. This odium is reflected in scholarship; kabuki was originally ignored by Western scholars because it was held in such low academic esteem in its own country. It reciprocated by affecting to despise the upper classes, but still borrowed glory by edging as close to them as it could. Borrowing themes and plays from noh and kyogen, it embodied them in its own performances, reproducing on the stage the doings of the samurai whom its audiences watched in real life with a half-contemptuous fascination, or transferring ideal samurai qualities to its own heroes. Even the Buddhist doctrines fundamental to noh have their place in the aesthetics of kabuki presentation, though in less obvious ways. The hierarchic structure of the performing companies or families are modelled in kabuki, as in noh, on the prevailing social system.

Kabuki claimed its own founding figure, in this case a woman, Okuni, a ceremonial dancer from the Izumo Shrine. About the time the first public playhouse was being built in London, she gave a performance on the dry bed of the Kamo river in Kyoto. It consisted of a Buddhist ceremonial dance with original variations. The audience had seen Buddhist dances before, what impressed them were the variations. They were, by all accounts,
highly erotic. The eroticism perpetuated itself in the later kabuki performances, and the site in the nickname given to the actors – kawara-mono, ‘things of the river-bed’. The performances were expanded, with flute and drum accompaniment. In the tradition, Okuni was joined first by her lover (Kyoto still preserves a plaque to the first male performer of kabuki) and then by a group of pupils.

Other troupes were formed in imitation. Okuni died in about 1610, but had many successors, mostly prostitutes; their performances were known as onna (‘women’s’) kabuki. The word kabuki itself is older than the theatre it came to describe, deriving from the verb kabuku, ‘to incline’, ‘to lean out from the straight’; it has some of the connotations of sexual irregularity that were later associated with the performance, and also implies the perversity, the deliberate cultivation of the freakish and bizarre, that is kabuki’s characteristic quality. We might nowadays translate it by ‘off-beat’. It was at this period too that the samisen was first used, as it still is, for accompaniment; always a popular instrument, it has today taken on a new lease of life in jazz. The shows attracted the benevolent eye of the Shogunate, which distrusted manifestations of popular feeling for any reason whatsoever. Adopting a high moral tone it declared the women to be a source of public danger and in 1629 prohibited their appearance on the stage. The companies resorted to reversing roles: men took over the women’s parts, and the actresses the men’s; but the Shogun, unimpressed, repeated his edict a year later.

The theatre has always found it easy to circumvent specific prohibitions. Actresses bowed to the inevitable and left the stage, not to reappear in kabuki until the present century, but were replaced by handsome boys, who organized wakashu (‘young men’s’) kabuki. Once again morality was invoked. The Shogunate brought charges of homosexuality (undoubtedly justified) and suppressed this new manifestation in 1652. Throughout its history, kabuki was to suffer from petty prohibitions; in its formative years it was under constant official surveillance. In 1654 yet a third form was born, known as yaro kabuki. The name was significant: yaro, ‘man’, ‘fellow’, often ‘playboy’, stresses that the performers are now robust men of mature age, against whom the previous charges could not feasibly be brought. With no more reasonable pretext for intervening, the authorities reluctantly permitted the plays to go on, though they continued to hamper them at every turn with all the bureaucratic machinery at their command. It is clear from the examination of Japanese society as a whole that the moral arguments against kabuki were no more than pretenses. If the actresses were prostitutes, prostitution was a licensed activity; if the wakashu were homosexuals, homosexuality was at least tolerated, and has even been held to explain the popularity of young boy actors in certain special roles in noh. It was public assemblies that the Shogunate distrusted, and particularly those of this kind, which, by the attractions that they offered, might cut across existing social barriers. There was also a possibility of rioting, if the samurai competed for the boys’ or women’s favours. It was for these reasons that the Shogunate denied kabuki official recognition and tolerated its existence only on the outer fringes of respectability. The next bout with law and order was to come when the companies started to build themselves permanent houses.

With the formation of yaro kabuki the plays could no longer rely on the sexual attractions of the performers. They had to stand on their own feet, and the challenge was the making of the art. Early scenarios had been in revue form, loose amalgamations of acts, songs and dances. The performers were now forced to compensate for their lack of physical charm by improved technique and stronger scripts. Kabuki began to produce works in strict play form, divided into Acts, and to develop its own playwrights. The loss of women was irrelevant. What must have seemed at first to be a limitation of the art became one of its greatest strengths. In pure kabuki the masculine tradition has continued to the present day, though its modern derivatives have reverted to the use of actresses, for women’s parts alone or for the entire cast: the currently highly popular Girls’ Opera, based at Takarazuka, goes back, historically speaking, to first principles. At the Kabuki-za, the National Theatre and several provincial houses,
women's parts are still played by men (onnagata) as they have been for centuries. Some actors have played male and female roles interchangeably, but some, including a number of the most famous, have devoted themselves exclusively to onnagata parts. In the eighteenth century some went so far as to wear women's costume off-stage, feeling that they had to live their roles every day if they were to play them convincingly in performance. This did not mean that the actors were effeminate. On the contrary, onnagata roles are physically highly demanding. Sitting close, one is conscious of the strong masculine physique under the women's costumes. The actors might well be married, though it used to be considered gauche to refer to their wives in public. A recent Japanese film, Ichikawa Kon's Yukinojo Hengei (An Actor's Revenge), uses one of these onnagata as protagonist, and shows him involved in a revenge murder: the story gains piquancy from the contrast between his entirely masculine actions and emotions and his feminine attire. The custom has now ceased. Baiko, one of today's most famous onnagata players, looks offstage like a successful, and slightly portly, businessman. In performance he is the essence of femininity. To see Baiko's son, Kikunouke, in the role of a courtesan, and then to meet him backstage burly and gruff-voiced, brings home vividly the technical accomplishment that onnagata roles demand.

The history of kabuki proper is usually divided into three main phases. At the beginning the art grew up in several centres independently, and distinct local styles emerged. Kyoto preferred its acting realistic; Osaka developed the delicate, almost effeminate wagoito style; while Edo delighted in aragoto playing, more romantic and highly emotional (Sukeroku is a typical aragoto play). When Edo was firmly established as the capital and communication with other cities improved, these styles tended to merge, but later kabuki acting owes much to the brag and bluster of its early Edo days. It was in the second phase also that kabuki felt the impact of another art form which was to influence it at a critical point in its development no less strongly than noh had at its beginning.

This was ningyo shibai, the puppet theatre, respected as a major art in its own right. Its history and character will be discussed at greater length in Chapter 6, but some of its principal features must be mentioned here, as they were taken over by kabuki virtually unchanged. A popular art long before Okuni's striptease on the river-bed, it had not yet acquired a fixed location. Its early stages were impermanent and its figures made of clay. Permanent stages and wooden puppets did not appear till 1624-3. Forty years later an important doll theatre, the Takemoto-zu, was built in Osaka, taking its name from the joruri chanter Takemoto Gidayu. Two forms of art, the joruri, or chanted story, and the manipulation of the puppet had come together to create a new form, which was, and is, highly distinctive and peculiarly Japanese, with no similarity to puppet art as presented in the Western world. Chanter and manipulator, voice and movement, were distinct. The silent manipulators confined themselves to controlling the figures - which itself developed into an art of great delicacy and refinement - while the chanter, isolated on a tiny platform at the side, doubled as narrator and Chorus, as well as providing the dialogue in an appropriate range of voices. His art has some affinities with that of the noh Chorus: both represent a transitional step from pure narrative to drama proper. In noh the Chorus may speak both of and for the characters, in the first person as well as the third. In the puppet play the responsibility belongs wholly to the chanter, and the puppets illustrate his recitation in action.

Doll plays became the fashion, and attracted the attention of serious playwrights, notably Chikamatsu Monzaemon, one of the greatest literary figures of Japan. This combination of talents temporarily eclipsed kabuki's popularity. The live theatre, in self-definition, assimilated many of the features of its rival, and eventually regained its old position at the cost of important modifications to its character. On the actors the influence of the doll-theatre was enormous. In the repertoire, too, the puppets made their mark. Plays originally conceived for puppets were adapted for kabuki, and a large proportion of the present repertoire derives from this source. Kabuki capitalized on its rival's successes almost as fast as they were written: Ehon Tatko Ki (The Tatko Picture Book), for example, first performed by puppets in 1799,
was played by actors in the following year. The *joruri* technique accompanied the plays and continues to be used. In works adapted from the puppet theatre and their later imitations, the chanter, accompanied by *samisen*, sits in a special alcove on one side of the stage. In *kabuki* the chanter shares the recitation with the actors; they normally speak their own lines, though for long passages only the chanter's voice may be heard. Sometimes there are two chanters, one on each side of the stage, if the scene represents two separate households. If they are not needed for a particular scene, or if the personnel must be changed (*joruri* chanting is arduous work), they are whisked out of sight on a small revolve and their replacements appear on the reverse; or, if the setting is too complex to allow this, they may be temporarily screened by drapes held by stage assistants while the change is effected. In these ways the puppet theatre continued to be a vital influence on *kabuki*, even when it had lost some of its own popularity; as late as 1831 players could honor this close association by presenting 'operated *kabuki*', in which the actors moved like puppets, uttering no word of dialogue.

One other important technical innovation of this period, which owed nothing to the puppets, was the revolving stage, a device which did not appear in the European theatre until the late nineteenth century. Hand operated, but nonetheless efficient, it covered most of the performing area and existed in simple or complex form: some theatres had concentric revolvs, operating independently or in opposite directions. This new toy was seized on by the Japanese with the delight with which they have always greeted mechanical ingenuity. It gave the opportunity for even more lavish use of stage settings, which had become increasingly elaborate and were now considered as an art in their own right.

The third period (1781–1850) is regarded by some as *kabuki*'s golden age, by others as the beginning of its decadence. The fusion of symbolic puppets and realistic actors had created a unique style, ornate, magical and fantastic. Edo was now the acknowledged *kabuki* centre. Technically assured, the theatre captivated a continually growing audience. Actors, no longer 'creatures of the river-bed', lived on a hitherto unimagined scale of luxury and magnificence. They were immortalized in popular prints, had coteries of fans, became public idols and set new fashions. This success was not entirely due to the actors' merits. It came in part from the changing nature of Japanese society, in which the theatre secured a more central and more profitable place, and of which the actors were as much a symbol as a part.

Japanese feudal society, as we have seen, recognized three principled divisions. At the top, exalted and remote, were the Imperial Family and the nobles of the court, whose largely honorific duties were restricted to the distribution of rank and the ordering of ceremony. Next came the *samurai*, embracing the Shogun, the *daimyo* and their retainers. Beneath them were the workers: farmers, artisans and, at the very bottom, the lowest of the low, the merchants. Japan's economy was founded on a dangerously simple basis. The peasants farmed the land, and their overlords received part of the income in the form of taxation rice. When the ruling classes needed more support, larger taxes were exacted from the farmers. It was a system that ignored the middlemen. Buying and selling was considered a mean and filthy trade, and the merchants, officially beneath contempt, profited from the class consciousness of their superiors. Largely overlooked by the growing tax demands, they became increasingly necessary as intermediaries. The taxation rice was stored in Edo and doled out to the retainers of the Shogunate three times a year. At first the *samurai* used to draw their allowances in person. As this took time, many fell into the habit of deputing merchants and tea-house masters to do it for them, and, with the gradual impoverishment of their class, were forced to sell their allowances to the middlemen or ask for credit. In this way the merchants prospered while *samurai* and farmers alike suffered from the inflexibility of the system. Out of the transition from an agrarian to a monetary economy, in which money replaced rice as currency, rose a new and forceful class, the prosperous bourgeoisie. They had money to spend freely on their pleasures, and *kabuki*, the distinctive art form of the middle classes, grew rich with its patrons.

The Shogunate perceived the dangers. Like any authoritarian
government it was apprehensive of a large segment of the populace which had suddenly acquired too much wealth and leisure. Combined with this was the old distrust of assemblies, for any purpose; for when men congregate too freely, the seeds of insurrection may be sown. Seeking to confine and thus control the pleasure-seeking impulse, the authorities designated certain quarters as amusement centres, and suppressed the spread of theatres and other places of entertainment beyond the approved limits. As early as the beginning of the seventeenth century a segregated pleasure quarter had been established at Edo. It was known as Yoshiwara, ‘the reed land’, the poorest part of the city, a levelled hill unit for other purposes. The reed land became the Nightless City. In the interests of public order the quarter was walled off and carefully policed. Visitors were limited to one day’s stay and paid a tax on their pleasure. Samurai were forbidden to enter. If they defined the prohibition, as many did, they had to go in disguise. Copies of the huge straw hats they wore to hide their faces can still be bought in the costume shops in Asakusa, one of modern Tokyo’s several pleasure districts. The disguised samurai is a familiar figure in kabuki plays, for the audience were delighted to see their rulers come down to their level. As the years passed, this segregation was more rigidly enforced.

These ‘Gay Quarters’ or ‘Floating Cities’, as the Japanese picturesquely called them, are still depicted for us in the plays and dances. Mitsu Ningyo (Three Dollys), a particularly colourful example, sets three representative characters—a courtesan, a playboy and his no less extravagant lackey—against a background of flowering cherry-trees, painted lanterns and rows of geisha houses, open and inviting. The familiar ukiyo-e genre paintings have also immortalized this exotic and escapist sub-world. In their time they served the purpose of the modern film-fan magazine, showing popular idols—kabuki actors, famous geisha, sumo wrestlers—in characteristic attitudes and with a wealth of detail. We can see how lavish this tinsel paradise must have been, and how tempting a respite it offered from the drudgery of daily life. The Floating Cities, socially irregular, housed a population that was largely a displaced class, itself as ‘off-beat’ as the kabuki which it cherished. They became famous—and notorious—and inspired a tradition in Japanese literature which has continued to the present day. Their modern equivalents may be seen in the pleasure districts of the larger cities, which still exist within well-defined, though now intangible, boundaries, and preserve their individuality. Osaka has its Dotonbori and Shinsekine, Kyoto its Kawaramachi and Gion. Most famous of all is Tokyo’s Ginza, known to every tourist and serviceman on leave. Properly speaking, the name belongs to only one street, running due north and south near Tokyo Station and housing several of the city’s largest banks and department stores. But it has been appropriated for the whole surrounding district. The Ginza proudly announces its identity in signs erected across the streets. It has its limits and its barriers, though these are now largely invisible. Within it, innumerable shops, theatres, restaurants of every nationality, cinemas blue and otherwise, dance-halls, clubs and brothels jostle for space. By day it is comparatively quiet. At night, when the theatres are out, it jumps to life. It is a city within a city, brilliant with light, throbbing with life, and packed with merchandise.

Crowded into the Ginza’s eighteenth-century equivalent, side by side with pedlars, prostitutes and other undesirables, the kabuki players gained in money what they lost in moral reputation. Another pretext for keeping the theatres apart—and one, indeed, in which there were serious grounds for concern—was the ever-present risk of fire. The whole city was burnt in 1659. Between 1804 and 1844 there were thirteen fires in major Edo theatres. This continues to be a hazard, demanding the most rigid precautions. In the Heian Shrine at Kyoto, where noh plays are given in the open air by torchlight, one can easily imagine oneself back in the fifteenth century, except for one thing, a shiny, red and very modern fire engine, poised for action just behind the Chorus tent. The non-smoking laws in Japanese theatres are enforced more rigidly than anywhere else in the world, though the cinemas, at least, defeat their purpose by persistently overselling well past the danger point. It is no uncommon thing to see a
popular film in a Tokyo cinema and find the aisles so crowded that it is impossible to get in or out. (In Taiwan the Chinese carry this foolhardiness one stage further by locking the doors during the show; in a recent fire a whole cinema was burnt to the ground with most of the audience still trapped inside.)

Here again kabuki history runs parallel with that of the English public playhouse. Forced out of the city by continuous magisterial hostility, the London theatres moved into the red-light districts on the outskirts, which did nothing to enhance their prestige in the eyes of the law. The English authorities used plague, not fire, as their pretext for persecution, but the results were the same. In both countries the popular theatre was forced in upon itself and took defensive measures. Elizabethan players sought security in protective coloration. Their chief offence in the eyes of the law was that they had no recognized profession. Respectable trades were organized by guilds; the actors, standing outside this system, were irregular. The companies therefore borrowed respectability by organizing themselves on guild lines, with a system of masters and apprentices and agreed periods of training. By thus conforming with established practices they hoped to be tolerated, if not approved.

Kabuki players were forced to use a similar expedient. Conscious of their unorthodoxy, they attempted to redeem themselves by stabilizing their own organization on traditionally acceptable lines. From the earliest times the crafts and professions in Japan had adopted the clan system. The popular theatre, by necessity, accepted the same pattern. Within their own groups actors ape the society around them. A democratic society produces democratic actors. It is only comparatively recently, and particularly in the United States, that the actor has asserted his rights, as an individual, to determine the lines of his own performance, rather than accepting traditional modes of stage behaviour or the instructions of his actor-manager. The modern actor can say, 'I don't feel it that way', and expect to be taken seriously - something that would have been unthinkable in the time of Irving. The modern director is only rarely a tyrant; he functions more often as a combination of psychiatrist and father-confessor, working by suggestion and compromise to unify individual viewpoints and interpretations into an artistic whole. By the same token, hierarchical societies have traditionally produced hierarchical actors. To this the kabuki theatre was no exception.

Japanese tradition, reinforced by Confucianism, encouraged the concept of the family as the nucleus of social life. The actors, though considered untouchables by polite society, accepted the pattern which society approved, and thought of themselves as families, bound often by actual blood-ties, but if not, by the equally strong bonds of professional association, adoption, and the hereditary transmission of their art. Both noh and kabuki actors existed in unnatural social situations, though at opposite poles of respectability, and both formed themselves into family associations, known by the family name and admitting likely heirs by adoption if no suitable blood-descendant presented himself; the actors took no less care to preserve their line than the Imperial Family did with theirs. This system continues in kabuki today. If an actor is adopted into the family from outside his personal name is no longer relevant. He takes the family name, and in addition, a new personal name which is traditional within the company and has been borne by several actors before him. This changes as his career progresses; each marks a new grade in the accomplishment of his art and a higher level of professional recognition. Thus the actor Nakamura Utaemon, one of the most respected kabuki actors in Japan, was formerly known as Nakamura Fukusuke - Nakamura being the family name, and according to Japanese practice given first. The new Nakamura Fukusuke is a younger disciple of Utaemon, acceding to the new name because he is judged worthy by his peers. Utaemon himself is the sixth to bear that name in his family.

The organization of the kabuki company is as rigidly stratified as the feudal society in which it was created. Actors born into the illustrious stage families are automatically privileged. Pushed onto the stage almost as soon as they can walk, they learn the techniques of their art early; steeped in the family tradition, they are expected to continue it and carry it to new heights. Honoured off-stage as well as on, they have the privilege of private dressing-
rooms (the Kabuki-za backstage area is a warren of cubicles, each hung with a family crest) and constitute the kabuki aristocracy. The best roles are theirs by hereditary right. Actors who come in from outside belong to the lower social stratum. They use the common dressing-room (obeja, 'big room') and must content themselves, even after years of experience, with minor roles. Skill, for them, is not enough. Obeja actors have to work as disciples of a recognized master, whose recommendation controls their slow and painful advancement up the hierarchy. It is, moreover, an expensive business, and requires the backing of wealthy patrons. Under this system few have risen from the obeja to the top rank. One of the exceptions was Nakamura Nakazo (1736–96); another was Ichikawa Kodanji IV (1812–66). Both became the leaders of their troupes. But such cases have been as unusual in the theatre as that of Hideyoshi was in politics; there was little room at the top. One considerable advantage of the system is that the minor roles are always superbly played, often by actors who have more experience than the principals: the latter may, through family prestige, often be pushed into roles beyond their current capabilities. The disadvantages are sufficiently obvious and present a particular hindrance to the popularization of the traditional Japanese theatre arts in the West. Entrepreneurs would like to take kabuki more widely overseas, but realize that this would mean some modification of the form; lacking the traditional background, Western audiences find pure kabuki difficult. But the older actors, who would be free to travel, refuse to accept the changes demanded in their programmes; the younger ones, more agreeable to compromise, dare not absent themselves from the parent company for the length of a tour, as they would lose their place in line and all their chances of advancement.

An actor takes his new name in a public ceremony (kojo) held as part of the performance. The curtain opens to reveal the whole company in line, kneeling formally on mats along the forestage. Each master introduces his disciple, and announces the change of name; Utamony, a noted onnagata player, retains his 'female' voice, even for this extra-dramatic activity. Each member of the company then makes a short speech, varying in length according to

the speaker's eminence, and the ceremony ends with a general obeisance towards the audience and a rhythmic pep-clap in which the whole theatre joins. Leading members of other families often honour these occasions, and the accompanying performances, with their presence. This successive assumption of traditional names is, in essence, ancestor-worship in a highly professional sphere, and has had a marked effect on the history of kabuki acting. Techniques as well as names are passed down through the generations. The actors regard themselves as heirs to the legacy of the past and as duty-bound to keep it alive. Acting styles and traditional business have been preserved virtually unchanged for centuries. As so many kabuki plays were originally written to display the merits of a particular actor, later generations feel an obligation to imitate their predecessors when the work is revived, and to model their style as closely as they can on that of the original performers. This is the restrictive factor in the kabuki performance, which tends to inhibit free response to contemporary influence though it has never operated as strongly as in noh.

The kabuki theatre, as has already been noted, adapted its stage and much of its ritual from the senior form. In the theatres as they now exist the extent of this debt is not immediately perceptible; the process of Westernization that accompanied the Meiji Era has given the stage a form more similar to our own. What we see at the Kabuki-za, however, is the result of a long and continuous process of adaptation. The earliest kabuki players found what accommodation they could -- usually, on existing noh and kagura stages -- and, as they became more settled, evolved a form more suited to their needs. Earle Ernst has shown in considerable detail the successive ways in which the elements of the noh stage were rearranged. In building, the companies were continually hampered by governmental regulations. The size of theatres came under official scrutiny; access from auditorium to backstage was prohibited, to prevent morally reprehensible contacts; sumptuary laws controlled expenditure on costumes; and the authorities were, for some time, adamant in refusing the theatres a permanent roof, which might be construed as an official
admission that the new theatre had come to stay. In the end they were defeated by their own conflict of interest. Prejudice forbade a roof, but prudence insisted on it, if the ever-present danger of fire was to be minimized. (The brave Edo fireman, incidentally, is a recurring character in the kabuki plays.)

The most obvious survival from the noh theatre is now the long runway, a re-oriented hashigakari leading from the back of the auditorium to the stage. Its kabuki name, hanamichi, or ‘flower path’, has given rise to the tradition, supported by official kabuki publicists, that it derived from the sumo pathway up which fans carried presents to their favourite wrestlers. It seems more likely, however, that it is simply the familiar hashigakari in a new position, but still serving the same purpose: to allow extended entrances and exits. The hanamichi has its own conventions. Its length allows the actor to establish his individual character before entering the stage picture. It may serve as a neutral area, virtually a separate stage; or it may represent a road or riverbank leading to the main scene, as in Act vi of Kanahebon Chushingura, when it becomes a narrow path on which a pedestrian and a sedan chair jostle for right of way. Its prime value, however, is that it takes the actor into the centre of its audience, as the hashigakari does not. Reverting to the idea of the theatre as an architectural metaphor of its society, we see the hanamichi as restoring the contact with the audience that noh in its perfected form abandoned. The hashigakari is set apart from the audience, and railed off; the actor is kept within his private world. In kabuki the actors are presenting a drama which, both literally and metaphorically, evolves out of the audience. There is no rail, no barrier; the actor comes within touching distance. It is the drama of the élite that sets up barriers; in the Western world it was the aristocratic theatre, the masque, that created the proscenium arch, while its popular counterpart was still performing on an open stage.

In its early days kabuki, with a characteristically grandiose gesture, duplicated the hanamichi, taking advantage of the raised walkways that cut through the auditorium. Leading to the stage at left and right, they were linked by another walkway near the back, so that a large section of the audience was enclosed and the action, if necessary, could encompass them. Low walls divided the seating area into compartments holding about six people, who sat on tatami on the floor. Unrestricted by chairs, they could turn to follow the action in any direction. It was not until the 1870s that chairs began to appear, and then only for the convenience of foreign visitors. The Kabuki-za preserves a vestige of the old arrangement in the tier of ground-floor boxes, divided by half-walls, rather like the loges of the Comédie française. Each holds four people sitting on a raised dais or on the legless chair which is Japan’s compromise between the old ways and the new.

Some modern theatres still enclose part of the audience in this way, though in the West the device is considered somewhat old-fashioned and reserved for musicals and cabaret. The Mogador in Paris has an elliptical runway enclosing the first half-dozen rows of stalls; the Casino du Liban, in Beirut, has an enormous one which cuts the audience in two, and is used at one point for a train which puffs its way among the diners – an effect of which kabuki would entirely have approved. The Takarazuka Theatre in Tokyo, home of mixed kabuki and the Girls’ Opera, has the same device. But these are poor truncated versions of the double hanamichi; the Western theatre, in fact, has no real equivalent of the hanamichi at all.

The double hanamichi did not survive as a permanent feature. Reconstructions at the Waseda University Museum of Theatre History show how it atrophied to one runway with a platform half-way down its length, from which the actor could announce himself; eventually even this extension was lost. In theatres constructed to the Western plan a double hanamichi takes up too much aisle-space, and the modern theatres retain only one as a permanent feature, with recessed lighting down most of its length, and a trap near the stage for sudden apparitions. When a second one is needed, a temporary hanamichi is laid down the right aisle in the course of the performance.

This arrangement can still be very effective. Yoshinogawa (The Yoshiwara River) has a Romeo and Juliet plot of rival households confronting each other across a river. The river itself begins upstage centre and runs straight down towards the audience; its
upper reaches are represented by revolving drums painted in a ripple design and turning slowly to give the effect of running water. The houses stand at left and right, the two hanamichi represent the banks, and the audience is, as it were, sitting in the river. (See Fig. 9.) The father of one household and the mother of the other enter slowly up their respective hanamichi, speaking unrelated yet parallel phrases until, as they reach the stage, they perceive each other and their lines merge as dialogue. This use of the split stage continues throughout the play, in parallel action. Defying parental edict, the son of one house loves the daughter of the other. Threatened by the reigning tyant and ordered to be brought to him as hostages, they choose death before dishonour. By their suffering and double suicide the parents are at last united.

In a closing scene of macabre beauty the girl's severed head is floated across the river to her lover's side, to touch his dead lips with her own in a posthumous ceremony of marriage. The houses open alternately to reveal successive scenes, and each side has its own joruri and samisen.

Nozaki Mura (Nozaki Village) ends with the parting of living lovers, though with a happier prospect. When they have survived several misunderstandings and entanglements to announce their love, it is decided for discretion's sake to send them home by separate ways. Most of the action has taken place indoors, but for the closing scene the stage revolves to show a river bank and a boat in the water. The girl embarks, and the boat, aided by a complicated arrangement of ropes and pulleys, is rowed straight off the stage and down the stage right hanamichi, representing the river. The young man is carried in a palanquin down the other, representing the bank. Kabuki likes to wring its spectacle dry. Boat and palanquin run parallel until they are half-way through the audience. There they pause; the bearers and the ferryman are hot. The former strip off their clothes, and elaborately pantomime exhaustion. On the other side the ferryman props his feet on the prow, ties a sweat-band round his head and lights up a pipe. All this is conducted in ballet movement, to music.

Other derivations from the nob stage had a shorter life. The earlier theatres retained the canopy above the stage and hung boards from it, giving the name of the play and the actors' titles. There is an echo of this practice in the technical vocabulary: actors of the highest grade are known as 'first plate' actors, from the place in which their names appeared in the lists. One may still see something of the sort at special nob and kagura performances, in the long strips of paper posted by the stage to list the programme and the artists' names. But as the scenery grew more realistic and elaborate, the canopy and its supporting pillars were found to be a hindrance. They were first disguised with strings of paper cherry blossoms, which still survive in some kabuki plays as conventional decorations hung inside the proscenium arch, and in the end removed altogether. The kabuki stage is now most reminiscent of its ancestor in its staging of the dances drawn from
noh and its adaptations of kyogen, which provide a number of popular items in the repertoire. Bo Shibari, for instance, appears in dance form in kabuki; Sanrin Katawa (Three Cripples) adapts the well-known kyogen story of three impostors who assume different physical handicaps to deceive a noble benefactor, get drunk on sake, and, when the lord returns, imitate the wrong infirmities in their confusion. As for noh dances, we have already noted the Okina-Sambaso dance, retained in several versions in kabuki, and the ever-popular shishimai. The staging of these adaptations usually presents a glossier version, on a larger scale, of the conventional noh setting, with painted pine-tree and bamboo expanded to fill the much wider stage, and an augmented orchestra, including samisen and chanters, ranged behind the performers. Kanjincho adapted from the noh Ataka (see p. 113), shows how faithful kabuki could be to its originals when it chose. It employs a chorus of ten, an equal number of samisen, six drums and a flute; the acting style is similarly expanded, being basically noh touched with kabuki flamboyance. Benkei sneers and roars magnificently at the inquisitive officer, and demonstrates his drinking prowess in the final celebration. Scoring the tiny sake cup, he empties both gourds into the lid of a tub, gulps down the wine with relish, and performs a drunken dance. In other adaptations, like Dojo-ji, the story of the serpent and the bell, and Shumkan, the plays are completely restaged, with all the scenic spectacle that kabuki is so well equipped to provide.

The present kabuki stage has its own permanent architectural features, though these may often be disguised with scenery. Downstage right is a grille behind which the musicians sit. Any scenery set in front of it is, almost invariably, similarly pierced, so that even in the most realistic set the musicians' place is obvious. Downstage left is the small alcove with its miniature revolve, the usual place for the joruri chanter. If the setting makes this impossible, there is another, higher alcove he can use; and when the set is really complicated, he may be driven out upon the forestage. Most of the stage space is occupied by the large revolve, and studded with trapdoors, some large enough for whole buildings or bridges to rise into sight. Stage settings are unfailingly magnificent, and utilize the full width of the stage to show several buildings, or rooms in the same building, side by side. As the subject-matter is largely domestic, interior settings are the most familiar. The rooms may be shut off by screens or blinds and successively disclosed as the action demands, thus giving the effect of a series of small stages within the larger one, not unlike the 'simultaneous staging' of the medieval morality plays, where all the required locations were on view at the same time and opened and used as appropriate.

By Western standards these settings show a curious combination of styles. The buildings themselves are usually solidly constructed and realistic in every detail (the time needed to erect such sets accounts for the many intermissions in a kabuki programme and contributes not a little to its length). Surrounding details tend to be realistic also – real hedges, real trees, solid fences and gates. But these may be set within a framework of other trees painted on canvas flats, like the exteriors of the mid-nineteenth-century Western theatre, and invariably cut off short below the sight-line; these in turn are backed not by a cyclorama, but by neutrally painted flats butted together at angles, like a folding screen. Most of these peripheral units must be mobile; when the revolve turns, wings slide in and out, new groundrows appear, and branches fold out of sight. This sort of kabuki scenery, in its elegant, flimsy, painted artificiality, is reminiscent of the cardboard delicacy of the Victorian toy theatre and operates in much the same way. It is as mobile as the actors – sometimes more so.

Act vii of the famous Kanadehon Chushingura (The Forty-Seven Ronin) shows the journey of a mother and her daughter to a far estate to enforce a neglected marriage contract. On their way they pass a wedding procession, which occasions mournful reflections on the contrast between their present undignified journey and the lavish ceremony which ought to have been theirs. The scenery makes the journey for them. We first see cut-out trees against a black backdrop. These fold into the wings, and the curtain drops from sight to reveal a panorama of Mount Fuji behind a groundrow of low hills. The wedding procession is
shown as in the middle distance by small cut-out figures moving up the hillside. As the women come nearer to their goal, Mount Fuji is replaced by a view of clouds, distant houses and a castle, and, in the final transformation, by a handsome pavilion standing in a lake. This is scenery as the theatres of the English Restoration used it, in their first discovery of stage mechanics; it has its own life and its own moments of glory, independent of the contributions of the actors. Thanks to elaborate and flawlessly operated stage machinery, this mobility is not confined to flat pieces. Huge built settings rise and spread themselves, fold up and sink from sight. The set becomes another actor, and frequently receives its own well-justified applause. Much of the joy lies in watching these stage mechanics, which Japanese audiences have always loved. In the early days of the cinema many were more interested in the projector than in the screen.

Kabuki makes no attempt to baffle the audience. On the contrary, the mechanics are usually patent. We applaud the artifice, not the illusion. Add to this the full resources of modern stage lighting, and you have a stage which is a pictorial pastiche, in part anachronistic, but never inharmonious, a combination of elements from every period since the art began. The lighting, in fact, reveals the same inconsistencies as the set. Special effects are usually handled with the utmost realism, but the mainstage lighting is flat and unselective. The auditorium lighting is keyed to that of the stage. Normally, as in noh, the house-lights stay at least half up. For night scenes, however, when any spill from the auditorium would ruin the stage picture, the house is plunged in darkness. But kabuki prefers its actors brightly lit. Scenes of darkness are kept to a minimum, and at the first convenient pretext the lights are brought full up again. Thus a single tiny lantern brought upon the stage can have an amusingly disproportionate effect; as soon as it appears the stage is once more radiant. Properties are impeccably constructed, perfect in every detail, and often at great expense, though the budget has been curtailed in recent years. It is often these tiny details of a production that stick in the mind when the rest has faded. In Saigo to Butabine, one of the more modern kabuki plays, the action takes place in a geisha house, and involves the hopeless love of a fat and ugly geisha for a fugitive revolutionary. In mutual despair they decide on suicide. The geisha throws open the windows, the wind blows out the lantern and moonlight floods the room. They are interrupted by two of the revolutionary's followers, who run in with lamps; by their light the lantern is seen still swinging gently where the wind had caught it. It is a minute detail; no one would have missed it if it had not been there. But it is this perfection of realistic detail within the framework of a generally stylized performance that characterizes kabuki. Sometimes, as in the settings, there must be a compromise between the formal and the naturalistic. We have already seen the kyogen horse, which owes its shape solely to dramatic convention, and not at all to nature. The kabuki horse is half nature, half convention: a detailed head and body supported by four very human limbs. Act v of Kanadehon Chushingura presents a wild boar in the same manner, impersonated by a man on all fours inside a hollow body. Comparison of these conventions illuminates the aesthetic theories that produce them.

Amid all this scenic splendour the floor is usually left bare. There is no attempt to cover its naked boards with painted soil, grass or masonry. Trees, rocks and hills emerge from it abruptly, not blended with a groundcloth. In kabuki theory, as in noh, tension is assumed between the moving vertical line of the actor and the horizontal of the stage, and in both forms this contact is essential to the dance. The characteristic noh walk, with gliding step and knees slightly bent, suggests this tension; it is as if the actor were fighting a force stronger than gravity, so that he can raise his feet only with an effort, and the resulting stamp assumes particular significance. This is no less true in kabuki, though the movements are more realistically conceived. The bare plank floor emphasizes the essential artificiality of the setting; it is no illusionistic picture, but, frankly and admittedly, a stage contrivance.

Kabuki acting, at first acquaintance, seems as eclectic as its settings and to change its style not merely from play to play, but from moment to moment. It is, in fact, made up of patterned movement and based on a rigidly preserved traditional choreo-
graphy. The actor receives extensive training in movement and
gesture, which he then applies, guided by the interpretations of
the past, to the role he is playing. This tradition is no less strong
for being preserved largely without written records; there is no
Japanese equivalent of Laban Notation. In consequence the actor
is an imitator rather than an innovator. Improvisation is not easy,
nor does the complexity of movement lend itself to experiment
or free interpretation. Actors perpetuate their predecessors’
stytes with their names: in their way the gestures of kabuki have
become as stereotyped as noh and the actors try to follow the
form established as most suitable to each occasion. Like noh, too,
they have their basis in the movements and gestures of everyday
life, but sublimate them into dance.

Within its self-imposed limits, however, kabuki is much more
flexible. In performance the technique may produce what looks
like almost total naturalism, something in the manner of the
D’Oyly Carte operetta style, where, though we know that the
acting is rigidly traditional and every small move is prescribed,
this is not always easily apparent on the stage. At the other end of
the scale it may turn into highly formal pantomime and dance.
The musical-comedy form, in fact, may be the best analogy. In
*My Fair Lady* we do not take it amiss when Higgins, Pickering,
and Eliza suddenly break from a naturalistic scene into a dance, or
when a heterogeneous collection of bystanders, without warning,
forms into a line and sings. This gives some idea of the range per-
missible to kabuki. There is something of the ritual of noh here,
and something, too, of the freedom of the street performer.
Kabuki actors may suddenly freeze into an elaborate tableau at
moments of high tension; they may stiffen into a fantastic pose,
arms outstretched, eyes crossed (a mis); they may perform violent
acrobatics to indicate a state of mind.

The costumes, even for the smallest roles, are sumptuous.
More realistic than those of noh, they are still far from completely
so. Masks are not worn, but the make-up is often so elaborate as
to constitute a mask, and is controlled by no less rigid conven-
tions. Young women and handsome and sympathetic young men
have dead-white faces, like the ‘sympathetic female’ masks of
noh, and derived from accepted social custom. In a sunbaked
society, pale skin denotes the upper classes, privileged to sit at
home in the shade while others go to work. In the conventions
of classical Mediterranean art, women were usually shown white
and men brick-red; the well-born Roman women wore white
make-up, and leukos, ‘white’, is a familiar term in Greek tragedy
to describe the ideal of feminine beauty. Conversely, in modern
society, where the masses wear an urban pallor, the aristocracy
affects an out-door look: it signifies that they are rich enough to
spend their winters on the Riviera. The women of kabuki, like
their feudal prototypes, paint out their eyebrows and wear new
ones higher up the forehead; their wigs are faithful copies of
historical exemplars. White make-up is also worn by thieves—
perhaps because kabuki, with its customary perversity, conceives
them as an underworld aristocracy; perhaps because, like the
genuine aristocracy, they spent most of their lives hiding from the
sun; perhaps for technical reasons, the white face being favoured
because it showed up better by candlelight. Rustic or villainous
characters are made up in various shades of red. Generally speak-
ing, the more evil a character, the redder he becomes. (It may
or may not be relevant that the Japanese turn bright red when
drunk.) Kabuki make-up at its most exaggerated is seen in the
*ragyotu* style, which uses broad bands of colour to throw the
muscular structure into high relief.

*Kabuki* speech, though closer to the vernacular than noh, is still
far from colloquial. Based on old forms, it has survived as a
special stage language; it is the spoken Japanese of three centuries
ago, and may be hardly more comprehensible to the average
member of the audience than the archaic High Court style of
noh. Diction (which is, by Western standards, appalling, though
this is hardly relevant: the Japanese have always preferred the
visual image to the word) employs a rhythmic intonation, which
at one end of the scale may approach naturalistic speech-patterns
and at the other produce a highly formal sing-song chant; as with
the gestures, there is a wide range of variation possible between
these two extremes. ‘Women’ speak in a falsetto, which, though
it may not much resemble a real woman’s voice, certainly comes
far closer than the women of nō, who may often be bases. Onnagata acting, in fact, reveals most clearly the distinctive features of the kabuki style. It is certainly not naturalistic acting; though here again we must enter a proviso and remember that its models, Japanese feudal womanhood, themselves owed more to art than to nature. In the studied precision of their footwork, the handling of the robe and the sinuous movements of the head and neck, the onnagata players present a convincing and highly acceptable impression of a woman, compared to which the actresses of new kabuki seem strangely limp and colourless.

The kabuki actor, then, reveals himself to the audience by a code of gestures more or less abstracted from real life, and balely conceived. They do not exactly reproduce the gestures of real life, but are usually close enough for their meaning to be apparent (as in the kabuki battles, where swords never actually touch, and a thrust aimed in the general direction of the opponent’s body indicates a death-blow). But every move is important. There is no such thing as a meaningless gesture. Each must be given its full weight in time, and the more important gestures must be artificially prolonged. (Oswald Sickert’s remarks on the time-extension techniques of nō, quoted in Chapter 3, are no less pertinent here.) This accounts for the apparently erratic and generally slow tempo of kabuki, and for the complaint heard often from Western visitors that it is hard to tell where the climaxes are meant to be. It is a performance built around the individual actor, who in turn builds his performance around the individual movements. And this means that what we should call trivial gestures may be given as much importance, seemingly, as large ones; by the same token, small-part players from time to time may dominate the stage while the principals stand motionless to wait their turn.

Examples are essential here. The play Honcho Nijushi Ko (Twenty-four Examples of Filial Piety) is based, like so many, on family rivalry. The scene is the house of Nagao Keshin, where Katsuyori, the son of his enemy, has contrived to get himself employed as a gardener to spy out his plans. Keshin penetrates the disguise, but does not reveal his knowledge. To rid himself of the enemy within his gates, he sends the youth to deliver a letter, and immediately orders his warriors to follow and kill him. It is a scene we have seen many times in gangster films. As handled by a Western author and director it would probably go something like this: Keshin gives Katsuyori the letter, with many protestations of trust and affection; Katsuyori departs; Keshin immediately turns to his henchmen, who have been waiting sinister and impassive near by, and says, ‘Kill him’; blackout. (A close Western classical example is, in fact, the murder of Banquo in Macbeth.) The director would work for the contrast between the false amiability and the curt brutality of the last command; an elaborate discussion of how he was going to be killed, with what or by whom, would seem to be an anticlimax. The scene would end on a desirable note of tension.

This is not what happens in kabuki. Here Keshin gives Katsuyori his instructions and sends him off down the hanamichi. He then summons his warriors. First comes a swordsman, who performs a martial dance to demonstrate his prowess, and runs down the hanamichi at accelerating speed. Then comes a spearman, who does a similar dance of exactly equal length, and departs in the same fashion. The curtain closes.

By our standards this is anticlimactic. Most Western directors would, I suspect, feel that if one were going to show the warriors at all, two are either too many or not enough. But by kabuki standards the warriors have their individual statements to make, and, like politicians on television, demand equal time. Another example is found in Sanin Katawa, which has already been briefly noted as farce derived from hyogen. A wealthy lord offers employment to the handicapped, and three applicants arrive: a cripple, a mute and a blind man. Each enters up the hanamichi, with a long and elaborate pantomime of his particular affliction. Each presents himself in the same way, in the same amount of time. A Western director would feel the compulsion to vary the pattern by bringing them on in different ways, or at least to work to a climax by increasing the tempo, with the second entrance faster than the first, and the third fastest of all. Kabuki sees them as separate ‘turns’, in which three actors, of equal importance,
have their individual statements to make, which are relished by the audience each on its own merits. Each exists in its own right, not as one component of a larger whole, and responsive to the pattern of that whole. Kabuki in its traditional form has no director. This is actor-centred drama.

Kabuki is very much the drama of the individual moment. We see this first of all in the settings. The scenery is allowed its individual moments of glory. Earle Ernst insists that it is never permitted to dominate the actors. I find, on the contrary, that there are many moments when it clearly does so; the action freezes while we watch an elaborate change or a vast building rise into place, and when we have enjoyed this sufficiently, the actors' movement resumes. It would be fairer to say that the scenery interacts with the players as they interact with each other, each one being dominant in turn. The division of the stage space follows the same pattern. Although the sets are vast and lavish, they are rarely used in full for any length of time. Parts are used in isolation from the rest; rooms not required by the immediate action may be shuttered off, or, if they remain occupied, the characters in them group into a silent tableau till they are called upon to speak. This technique is seen most obviously in the 'parallel-action' plays (of which Yoshinogawa is only one of several examples), where the wide stage becomes to all intents and purposes two, used alternately. And the actors usually act against the setting, not within it; they resign no part of their individuality to their surroundings. Setting and action are, to this extent, independent; the setting is permitted to make its own statement, and then yields the stage to the actors. This represents a conception of the scenic function which has now largely vanished from the Western world. The modern directorial concept seeks for a unity, and sees actors, set and lighting as working together in a larger whole. One may, however, still find traces of the older attitude. I recall, in Athens, a production of Macbeth by the Greek National Theatre. The setting was exceedingly beautiful and striking: baronial Gothic seen through Greek eyes, refined to pure economy of line, with a perfect sense of period that was at the same time modern. The acting, by contrast, was Victorian.

Alexis Minotis, as Macbeth, and his wife, Katina Paxinou, as his lady, virtually ignored the possibilities that the setting offered; they played firmly in front of it, obliterating it from the audience's mind, and taking centre stage as if by divine right; it was like seeing John Philip Kemble on a stage designed by Loudon Sainthill. Kabuki has something of the same effect. Its movements and groupings are dictated by a company etiquette and a traditional conception of stage behaviour which does not necessarily arise from the logic of the play-structure.

We have spoken of the players as 'interacting'; this term must now be severely qualified, Kabuki admits no concept of ensemble playing. Crowd scenes, for this reason, are lackadaisical affairs that would make the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen turn in his grave. Their members are still individuals; there is no unity of purpose or group sense, and important crowd lines are lost in the shuffle. Directed kabuki (as at the National Theatre) handles its crowds balletically, spacing the members with geometrical precision and letting them move, turn, and even sometimes speak as one. A crowd scene which is effective in naturalistic terms lies outside the compass of kabuki; the conditions of the art reject it.

The relationship between two actors in dialogue is the same as that between two groups of actors on the split stage: when one is busy, the other is still. Or, to put this in Noh terminology, two actors playing a scene together alternate the roles of shite and waki. They act as 'feeds' for each other in turn, and do their best not to detract from the individuality of the other's performance. They stand together, but do not work together; as Ernst puts it 'the almost complete absence of physical contact in the kabuki... appears to be the result of the unwillingness of the actor to forfeit any part of his expressiveness to another actor'. In dialogue this may be seen by watching the actor who is not speaking (though this is difficult; the combination of sing-song recitative and stylized gesture has the same hypnotic attraction as Noh). He either does not react at all, or deliberately delays his reaction until his partner's lines have finished and his own begun. Even the word 'dialogue' must be qualified. The lines do not truly interact, but exist as a series of separate though related state-
ments, marked off and denying any sense of progression by the
convention of dropping the voice at the end of each line. In this
they closely resemble the structure of much of the stichomythis
of Greek tragedy, which is not so much 'dialogue' in our sense
of the word as two independent and alternating lines of thought.

This analogy may perhaps be taken a little further. The structure
of the kabuki dance recalls Plutarch's description of its Greek
counterpart as an enchainment of separate, isolated mimetic
gestures, steps punctuated by attitudes. This pattern is sub-
stantially followed in the structure of Greek tragedy, conceived
as a series of independent scenes, which, though they all relate
to the central story line, do not necessarily relate in detail to
each other. This produces certain inconsistencies, in character
as in plot, which are seen even more obviously in Greek comedy,
where the characterization may shift radically between the
beginning of the play and its end; Greek drama, too, is responsive
to the dictates of the individual moment. These inconsistencies
have been seized upon by the more pedantic scholars with the
same enthusiasm the Baker Street Irregulars display in proving
Dr Watson a bigamist — and with as little point. They are in-
consistencies only by our standards. Greek tragedy and comedy, like
kabuki, adhere to a different conception of theatrical perfor-
ance. Kabuki is seen as a succession of individual moments. In
this it responds, hardly less than noh, to the essential Buddhist
doctrine that the world around us is impermanent, and exists
only in a series of fleeting, unrelated and accidental phenomena.
We see this in literary form in Japanese nature-poetry: where
Wordsworth defined his art as emotion recollected in tran-
quillity, the haiku represents emotion taken on the wing, a fleet-
ing moment frozen in verse like a moth in amber. The same
attitude explains the modern passion for snapshot photography, and
the balanced perfection of each individual frame in the Japanese
film. But where noh attempts to transcend the momentary world,
kabuki reproduces it. It does not try to build in time or to bring
the action to a climax. On the contrary, kabuki philosophy insists
that the play should be seen as a succession of impressive visual
moments, and that the action could be stopped at any time to
show a perfectly balanced tableau. This explains the apparent
inevitability of the audience. Knowing what kabuki is, and the sort
of continuity they may expect, they assume that they can wander
into the theatre at any point and still see something that will im-
mediately interest them and draw them into the action. Unfor-
nately many carry over their kabuki habits to modern plays.
The stragglers may still be arriving half-way through the first
Act, as if Giraudoux constructed his plays on the same pattern as
Chikamatsu Monzaemon. Western directors working with
Japanese actors in modern plays have found that their greatest
difficulty lies in persuading the cast to accept a concept of play
structure so radically different from their own; they still insist
on playing only from scene to scene, and cannot grasp the nec-
essity of subordinating one scene to another, or sustaining a pro-
gression of interest throughout the play.

One further example, and a particularly striking one, may
serve to illustrate the difference between the traditional Japanese
concept and our own. The dead who litter the stage after a
kabuki sword-fight normally get up and walk away when the battle
is over. This happens even in 'new kabuki', which is much closer
to our naturalism. Before condemning this practice as ridiculous,
we should reflect that it is, in itself, no more ridiculous than our
custom of resurrecting the dead for a curtain call, or, indeed, of
permitting a curtain call at all. Its apparent oddity derives from
our conception of stage time. The naturalistic theatre tends to
equate stage time, at least approximately, with real time (though
it may be divided arbitrarily into acts, and punctuated with inter-
missions, to accommodate the physical needs of the spectators),
just as it tends to equate stage behaviour, at least approximately,
with off-stage behaviour. Thus, the play is considered in extenso,
and the effect of any action is considered to remain in force until
the next convenient stopping place. The Japanese theatre, which,
like the Greek, is not primarily interested in the literal repro-
duction of actuality, considers time to be expandable or com-
pressible according to the dramatic exigencies of the moment,
divides the play into a series of momentary impressions, and sees
no compulsion to prolong the effects of an action beyond their
dramatic utility. Just as the ‘invisible’ stage assistant removes properties that have no further purpose, the dead may rise again when they have made their point. To keep them lying there would be untidy, superfluous and dramatically irrelevant.

It might be argued, indeed, that the structure of the kabuki play reproduces the characteristic sentence-pattern of the Japanese language. This analogy certainly holds true for Greek, where the love of parallelism, syntactical symmetry and balanced clauses is reflected in the ‘double structure’ so beloved of Greek tragedy, where two stories are balanced against each other in the manner of debate, and the play takes its point from the opposition between them. Japanese is largely paratactic. It has no subordination and little inflection; the words and phrases are strung together in an unrelieved and undifferentiated continuum, with the sentence ending denoted by the principal verb. To use a textbook illustration: *Sono hito-ga wotze-i-masu mono-wa handobagude-su* (What she is holding is her handbag) is really a combination of two sentences: *Sono hito-ga aru mono-wa wotze-i-masu; sono mono-wa handobagude-su* (She is holding a certain thing; that thing is a handbag).

The function of the words in the sentence is indicated not by their own inflections, but by the addition of the appropriate suffixes, or postpositions; thus, *wa* normally indicates that the preceding word or phrase is the subject of the sentence, and *de* denotes the predicate complement. In the same way kabuki imposes on the continuum of the action certain arbitrary devices to indicate that a certain moment is of particular importance. The climax does not evolve obviously from the action itself; it is imposed on the action by external means.

The most obvious of these devices is the clapper-board, operated at stage left by a grave, black-robed stage assistant, which not only signals the opening of the play, but underlines significant moments within it. Several sharp beats draw attention to an important gesture, and a whole crescendo accompanies a sustained passage of critical action or an exit down the *hanamichi*. Alternatively, the unseen off-stage orchestra may mark selected passages with music, or the actors may apply their own emphasis by freezing into a mie. Earle Ernst happily compares these violent, limb-locked posturings to the taut, musclebound ferocity of ‘temple guardians’, the effigies of minor deities that flank the gateway of a Buddhist shrine. They surely owe at least as much to the puppet actors that inspired so many of the details of kabuki. Having suddenly fallen into a mie, the actors may just as rapidly walk away from it; the continuum is resumed. In noh we saw how the stage dynamics of Western practice could be ignored, for the audience already knows where to look and what the critical moments are. In kabuki, with its wider stage and more diffuse plots, the mie and its cognate devices provide the requisite additional emphasis. Each act customarily closes with a tableau, and it is interesting to see how this practice has been retained, half unconsciously, in productions of modern Japanese and Western plays. Actors will often hold position for what seems an interminable time before the curtain finally falls.

Among the actors, efficient and ubiquitous, robed and veiled in black like the ninja of the feudal war machine, move the stage assistants. Like their counterparts in noh, they are seen but yet invisible. They belong to the mechanics of the play, and like the ropes, pulleys, trapdoors and the stage revolve are apparent if one cares to look. Their chief function is to keep the stage tidy. Any discarded property is immediately removed – even the shoes which, by Japanese custom, are taken off before entering a house and treading on the cherished *tatami*. For all its spectacular nature, kabuki still retains this aspect of the dramatic economy of noh. Once its utility is over, a property becomes a useless distraction and merely clutters up the stage. The assistants may also take an open part in scene changes: one may even see them stroll on with hammers, in mid-performance, to make a minor repair to the set. A traditional function was to hold candles before a leading actor’s face to give him prominence at moments of high intensity – a visual equivalent of the clapper-board, and analogous to a cinematic close-up. Modern lighting has made this function redundant, but they are still called upon to assist the actor physically in other ways. They help in the tricky on-stage costume changes, when two or three may gather round an actor at the
same time (Japanese television has adapted this, not unwittingly, for men’s tailoring commercials). In Shunkan they have a more arduous duty. At one point a ship appears on stage, and warriors pour down the gang-plank to the shore. The warriors are heavy and the gang-plank flimsy. Underneath it sits the stage assistant, doggedly supporting it with his shoulders.

Their role may sometimes be more active. In a later scene of Honcho Nijushi Ko, Kesshin’s daughter, who loves Katsuyori, although he is her father’s sworn enemy, steals a sacred heirloom from her home on his behalf. It is a magnificent battle helmet, draped in fox fur. She intends to row secretly across the lake to meet her lover, but remembers, too late, that it is winter; the lake is covered by a sheet of ice, too thin to walk across, too solid to row through. As she stands in this Eliza-like predicament, irresolute on a bridge in her garden, she chances to glance into the pool beneath and sees the reflection of a fox beside her own. She is terrified, but after several experiments realizes that it comes from the fox-fur helmet in her hand. Remembering that the fox is an emissary of the gods, she assumes it came in answer to her prayers. According to an old legend, the fox was the first to cross the early winter ice, finding a safe path across the treacherous crust. If she follows the fox, she will be safe. At this point, as the helmet and the fox-divinity are identified in her mind, the heirloom with its swinging mane takes on a life of its own. Supported by a property man on a long pole, it moves ahead, inviting her to follow; it is operated by the korumbo, or ‘black man’, as kabuki calls the stage assistant, as though it were a puppet. As she runs after it she is encouraged by further signs of vulpine favour – ‘fox fires’, will-o’-the-wisps, floating in the darkness to reveal a supernatural agency at work. These too are held by the assistants, on long poles like fishing rods.

We have called the korumbo conventionally invisible, as in noh, but the convention is different and in certain ways an uneasy one. A stage convention works only when both sides understand the rules and abide by them. As long as the audience accepts that a man in black, as in kabuki, or in an unobtrusive uniform, as in noh, is meant to be invisible, he is; his presence is neither dis-

turbing nor embarrassing. The kabuki assistant, however, often seems reluctant to accept the convention himself. To begin with, his costume makes a greater attempt at real concealment. In addition, he appears self-conscious. His movements are furtive; he tries to be really invisible. He enters at a run, bent double, and makes himself as inconspicuous as he can behind the scenery. Sometimes he will spend a whole scene lying on the floor behind a bench, to be in position to remove when it is no longer needed. And, paradoxically, the more he tries to hide himself, the more obvious he is. To pretend that a man is invisible, as noh does, is the easiest thing in the world. But there is no way of making him really invisible, except by removing him from the stage altogether. The harder kabuki tries, the more distracting its failure becomes. In some plays the korumbo changes colour for more effective camouflage. In snow-bound scenes (one of the rare occasions when the stage is covered with a floor-cloth) he wears white, to blend into the scenery. The National Theatre production of Shunkan offers a new variation. Here the scene represents a barren island set against a background of stylized waves. At one point, several characters have discarded their sandals and left them lying by a rock. The stage assistant enters to remove them in the customary fashion. But he is not wearing black. His robe is decorated with a swirling pattern of blue and white, the sea-motif of the background against which he is seen. In isolation the effect is strangely beautiful; it is as if a stray wave had come in and washed the sandals out to sea. In context, however, it rings false. The disguise is so nearly successful that it attracts the wrong sort of attention. This may be a historical problem; there is not enough material for us to judge. The self-consciousness of the modern korumbo may stem from the insidious intrusions of more recent theatre concepts, in the light of which he is an anachronism. It is more likely, however, that the difference between the wholly successful noh convention and its only partially successful kabuki counterpart has always existed. Kabuki, as we have seen, in many ways effects a compromise between the formal and the naturalistic styles. This seems to be one compromise that did not completely succeed. In noh the stage assistant is of a piece with
his formal surroundings; against the more elaborate stage pictures of kabuki he is occasionally incongruous.

The world of kabuki is that of its audience. It mirrors the hopes and fears, pleasures and privations, hard facts and fantasies, of a class which admitted and resented its inferiority and sought romance and temporary escape in the theatre. Its attitude towards the samurai is ambivalent, a love-hate relationship, cherishing what it affects to mock. With one half of it, it fawns upon the aristocracy and builds its plays around their lives and their philosophy. This offered material of great dramatic value. The samurai imposed upon himself a code no less strict than he enforced on others, and one which has been popularized under the later name of bushido ‘the way of the warrior’. His life was dedicated to his immediate lord; the feudal system with its hierarchical structure and restriction of allegiance only made this loyalty fiercer. The samurai was pledged to preserve his lord’s honour and his own. To this all else – his life, his family, his possessions – was subordinate. Insults could be wiped out only in blood. The vendetta was not merely tolerated but recognized by law, which with characteristic bureaucratic caution demanded notice in writing of attempted revenge-murder. For the defeated samurai there was only one way out: seppuku, suicide by disembowelment. Capture was the ultimate ignominy; warriors were trained and expected to fight to the death. This attitude has been held to explain, though not to condone, the inhumane treatment meted out to prisoners in the Second World War: an army conditioned to give their lives without question had no sympathy for opponents who surrendered.

Kabuki played fruitfully with these examples. The samurai code was one of the chief themes of popular literature. Romantic-historical fiction in cheap editions depicted the exploits of the samurai in war and familiarized the lower orders with the spirit that motivated their masters. This influence was not confined to art. Some tried to emulate the samurai, if not in their lives, at least in their deaths, and appropriated the forbidden privilege of seppuku. The plays capitalized on this popular interest, jidaimono, or ‘historical pieces’, ransack the remote and recent past. The famous vendetta of the Soga brothers, who sought vengeance for their father’s death, inspired a whole series of plays and dances; one of them was traditionally included in every New Year’s programme. Tangeijya no Katakuchi traces, through five long acts, the ramifications of a family feud in Osaka, based on an actual incident of 1609, and shows the picaresque adventures of a pair of brothers on their way to seek revenge. There are elaborate turns of fortune and comic as well as serious villains.

Other plays were based upon the great clan wars and the period of anarchy recorded in the Heike Monogatari and similar works; kabuki, like noh, found much material in epic. More recent political events were also treated, though with greater caution. The government prohibited the undisguised dramatization of contemporary events and the use of the real names of persons in authority, to prevent scandal. In consequence the plays were often moved back to an earlier period (as Verdi, after the initial fiasco of La Traviata, transposed it to a century before) and the names of the characters were slightly changed: the historical Mitsuhide Akechi became Mitsunari Takechi, and Kenshin Uesugi became Kenshin Nagao.

The most famous vendetta play of all was Kanadehon Chushingura (The Alphabet Book of the Forty-seven Exemplary Loyal Subjects, but more familiar as The Forty-seven Ronin), based on a historical event of 1702. Dramatized in 1748 by three writers in collaboration (a familiar practice in kabuki, as in the Elizabethan theatre) it was one of over a hundred plays on a subject which continues to inspire a spate of films. Its principal interest here lies in the fact that it is a perfect illustration of the samurai code; its chief characters are loyal retainers who take upon themselves a vendetta bequeathed them by their master. He had died as a result of an insult and a quarrel, leaving them as ronin, masterless men. Forming an elaborate conspiracy, they took it on themselves to kill his enemy and offer his head on the grave of their lord. The law, as we have seen, demanded notice of such attempts in writing; this the ronin deliberately failed to give, as it would have warned the enemy of their intentions. Having accomplished their revenge, they notified the government of what they had done and
calmly awaited the consequences. It was a cause célèbre, and dragged on for some time. Enormous public sympathy had been aroused, and the authorities were forced to proceed with discretion. The ronin were treated more like honoured guests than prisoners, and, when the verdict was inevitably given against them, were permitted the honour of seppuku, as samurai, rather than a common beheading. They were buried beside the lord they had avenged.

Kanadehon Chushingura, though its modern fame is partly fictitious (it was banned by the American Occupation as embodying dangerous aspects of the Japanese feudal spirit, and the protests lasted for years), well illustrates both the rigours of the samurai code and the emulation it inspired in others. The audience, no less than the ronin, sought to identify themselves with their masters. This attitude manifests itself in kabuki in other ways. Even those plays, such as Sukeroku, which construct their own popular heroes and are apparently anti-samurai, transfer to the bourgeois the qualities which the aristocracy found admirable. Sukeroku’s bragadocio is motivated by family honour. He is prepared to face all odds and hazard his life to recover the treasured sword. Kabuki portrays an aristocracy of its own, drawn from the stratum of society in which it had its being, that has its own code, dignity and traditions no less important than those of the samurai. Both classical and modern novelists, exploring the sociology of the sub-world, have revealed a hierarchy within a hierarchy, and a meticulous code of social observance. Sukeroku’s female counterpart is his mistress, Agekami. Like the geisha in so many plays she is no common prostitute, but an Edo Marie Duplessis, a high courtesan with a will and character of her own. She distributes her favours not haphazardly, but to men that she respects; she is loving, devoted and loyal. The husband-wife relationships of jidaimono, the fated marriages and doomed betrothals, and the conflicts of interest that they provoke, have their parallel in the liaisons between townsman and courtesan. Kabuki transfers to its world and its characters the standards of the other.

The ultimate extension of this attitude is the creation of plays dealing with an underworld aristocracy, thieves, highwaymen and other criminals who inhabit a realm outside the law, but still embody the samurai code. They are Macheteath without the surrounding squalor — or Mac the Knife with a samurai sword; robust, swaggering figures whose derring-do wins admiration, and whose peculations are on an enormous scale. In these plays kabuki’s ambivalent social attitude is most clearly revealed. While glorifying an anarchic demi-monde in which characters win wealth and prestige by crimes against society, it still upholds that society’s supreme virtues; fantasy-escape from repression is, at the same time, a reaffirmation of faith. The values are the same, though the personnel and milieu have changed. Ishikawa Goemon, ‘the best thief in Japan’, an actual personage who flourished at the end of the sixteenth century, inspired more than ten kabuki scripts. Boiled to death in a cauldron, he left his own poetic epitaph: ‘Even if the time should come when there is no more sand left on the beach, the world will have its complement of thieves.’ One of the longest plays about him, Sannon Gosan no Hiti, was the first produced in Osaka in 1778; the gorgeous showmanship of the opening scenes reveals the admiration with which such characters were regarded. Goemon has come from China to help a plot to overthrow the government. The play opens with a balletic duel between his followers and the army, in which the latter are robbed of the huge sum of 7000 yoo. An inner curtain falls to show one of kabuki’s most breathtaking scenic effects, a view of the upper story of the great gate (sannon) of the Nanzanji Shrine in Kyoto. It towers above the blossoming cherry-trees, brilliantly lacquered in vermilion and gold. Goemon is a brilliant spectacle himself, with gold pipe and gold-embroidered Chinese coat. In spite of his perilous situation — he has taken this high refuge to avoid his enemies — his opening words are magnificently casual: ‘What a lovely view!’ As he struts and postures on the balcony, the cherry-trees are pulled away and the building rises, so that we now see the full height of the gate and the courtyard in front. The technical feat is even more impressive when one realizes that the supporting machinery was first built in the Edo period, without benefit of electricity or steel ropes. Goemon’s enemy enters and spies his reflection in a pool of water. They
challenge each other in poetic dialogue. Goemon hurls a dagger, which his opponent neatly parries on a water-dipper. The curtain closes on a defiant mie. This is the sort of entertainment that the kabuki audiences loved, thrilling to Goemon and his kind as other audiences have done to Robin Hood, Dick Turpin and Robert Macaire. They found in them a colourful individuality that refreshed the regulated drabness of their own lives and could appease their consciences and the censorious authorities by pointing out that Goemon paid his dues to society in the end.

With the death of the feudal system and the growth of a democratic spirit, the later drama, in turning back to historical sources, looked more critically upon the samurai. It tried to show the human being behind the social mask and to demonstrate that the aristocracy too had its mortal frailties. In classical kabuki, however, the critical spirit is confined within strict limits. Though the samurai may be parodied, there is no attack on the basis of their rule. The system is inflexible and impervious to assault. The effete and decadent samurai who sometimes mince and twitter across the stage are no more symptoms of a popular uprising than the commoners who abuse their lords in kyogen — or, for that matter, the slaves who abuse their masters in Roman comedy, or the precocious servants of Victorian novelists. A closed system begets a closed mind. Revolution was inconceivable — on both sides. The Shogunate was built into the Japanese way of life, and solid enough to tolerate occasional impertinences. The end came, not so much by a gradual process of disintegration from within, but by a strong blast from without; with a bang, and not a whimper.

Against this wall the individual passions beat in vain. Kanadehon Chushingura demonstrates, as well as the virtues of the samurai, the obduracy of the law that they upheld. The action of the ronin was admirable, but illegal. They were applauded as popular heroes, but all admitted the inevitability and the justice of their punishment. In all its manifestations the central issue of kabuki is essentially the same: the individual against the system, in which the system inevitably triumphs. Kabuki itself had come into being as an act of artistic revolt, distrusted by the Shogunate because it championed a world of individual passion contrary to social order. The subsequent position of the art, and the themes of its plays, show how the 'off-beat' impulse was tamed and confined.

The system, as represented in the plays, may appear in its legal or its moral aspects; there is no effective difference. Although the individual may assert himself against it, he ends by admitting its tabus and accepting its punishment. Kabuki distinguishes between jidaiemono (historical) and sawamono (domestic) plays; but in a sense most plays are sawamono, illustrating the conflict between individual desires and passions and the rules laid down by society. The sense of duty — to lord, honour, father or family — is paramount and transcends personal inclination. Kabuki moves in a world which is, in its way, as ritualistic as that of noh. The conflicts are all essentially identical and the end is pre-ordained. It is a world with which we are more familiar in the French neo-classical theatre, where individual interests are subjugated to the demands of gloire and decorum; the rare individual who struggles and wins (like le Cid) does so only by divine or royal intervention, which itself embodies and transcends the system.

Sawamono plays therefore end, more often than not, unhappily; the protagonist acquiesces in the impossibility of change. Discussing Japanese food with a companion, I once remarked how much I disliked tofu, the bean-curd cake with the appearance and consistency of foam rubber. She replied, quite seriously, 'But how can you dislike it? It's quite tasteless.' It was the prototypical answer of a people who have traditionally preferred the negative to the positive virtues. It is the submissive hero, not the revolutionary, who is cherished. The samurai accepts his suicide. Lovers kill themselves rather than attempt illicit happiness. If sawamono, in synopsis, reads like the more lugubrious outpourings of the women's magazines, the impression is not far wrong. One of the more romantic Japanese festivals, the Tanabata Matsuri (Feast of the Weaver), on 7 July, typically celebrates two thwarted lovers turned into stars and condemned to see each other only one day each year across the Milky Way. The plays, similarly, prefer blighted to consummated love and a sad ending to a happy one.
One example will suffice here: a particularly interesting one, as it involves a couple who come into conflict with the code and go voluntarily to their deaths, although the youth is blameless and the woman guilty only in intention. This is Yari no Goza Kasana Katabira (Goza the Spearman) by the great Chikamatsu Monzaemon, based on a contemporary scandal. The wife of a master of the tea-ceremony is trapped by an unsuccessful admirer in an apparently adulterous situation with one of her husband’s disciples. Although she is secretly in love with the youth, she has not revealed it; her guilt lies only in the mind. When the rival accuses them on manufactured evidence, they run away together, in the knowledge that they are doomed. The husband is bound by the social code to avenge his honour; they know their respite can be only temporary, and confront him in the end of their own volition. In the last scene of the play they go to meet their executioners. It is a summer evening in Osaka by the waterside. Music is playing, and a gay procession of dancers winds up the hanamichi. The avengers are watching the ferryboat, but miss the runaways; it would still be possible for them to escape. But they do not try. Leaving the boat, they wait for the inevitable on the shore. The avengers return; one engages the youth in a vicious duel, while the other pursues the wife, who hides herself among the dancers on the bridge. But when the youth is killed, she comes running to his side and is there struck down. The code has been fulfilled.

Kabuki’s preoccupation with the limited world of the samurai, the townsman and the courtesan arises from necessity. There was little else about which it could safely write. As long as it concerned itself with triviality and the exploration of the status quo, or clothed its satires in fantasy that made them acceptable, it escaped the worst of governmental interference. In the declining years of the Shogunate the first whispers of protest begin to be heard, and kabuki, sensitive to popular feeling, went as far as it dared. In 1851, Segawa Joko III wrote Sakura Gimin Den, which may be translated as The Life and Martyrdom of a Public Hero of Sakura. In seven Acts and twenty-eight scenes, it was adapted from a novel on the hitherto unmentionable subject of the proletarian revolt. The hero, in the play called Sogo, was in real life Kiuchi Sogoro, leader of a local peasant uprising after the failure of the rice crop in 1653. We see him first negotiating with his local overlords, the Hotta family, to lessen the crushing tax-burden on the farmers. The administrators are divided. Some are sympathetic, while others seek to conceal their own misappropriations. As presented at the National Theatre the opening scene effectively conveys the perils of the individual confronting the entrenched social order. The great gate of the Hotta mansion revolves, showing inside and outside in turn. We see, first, Sogo and a mass of farmers at the gate, presenting their petition to a single, nervous representative of the aristocracy. Inside, the balance is reversed. Once he has entered the daimyo’s world, Sogo is at his mercy. He is now the lonely figure, pleading with the robed, impassive lords who sit like idols on their carved stools, not even condescending to look at him.

A promised inquiry does not materialize, and Sogo, in desperation, determines to present his petition to the Shogun himself, though such a breach of protocol was punishable by death. Declared an outlaw, he makes a furtive farewell visit to his family. There is a moving scene on the snowbound river bank, where a ferryman insists on rowing him across in spite of the law. His boat has been padlocked for the night, but the ferryman takes an axe, severs the chain, and rows the fugitive home. His impulsive and decisive act foreshadows Sogo’s own; he too is determined to cut chains and defy the law to help his people.

There follows a long scene in which Sogo takes leave of his family. To protect his wife, he has prepared a letter of divorce; by law a criminal’s family had to share his punishment. His wife, in the self-sacrificial spirit that kabuki continually glorifies, refuses to accept it, and makes him tear it up. Breaking from his son’s arms, Sogo trudges through the snow and down the hanamichi to his inevitable death.

At the Shogun’s palace the court is arrayed in splendour on a bridge, while Sogo grovels on the ground beneath. He evades the guards for long enough to toss his petition to Matsudaira, a leading minister. Matsudaira announces that so irregular a petition
cannot be received, and apparently throws it back; but Sogo sees that he has returned only the outer wrapping, and put the petition itself inside his robe, signifying that it will have his personal attention. Sogo is satisfied. It is the last we see of him. We learn later that he and his family have been crucified.

The final scene returns to Hotta’s mansion, where the despot is increasingly terrified by apparitions. Strange fires appear, a sepulchral voice intones, and Hotta sees the accusing ghosts of Sogo’s family. Finally, shown that his corruption has extended to his own household and that his lust for power has bred a corresponding lust in others, he repents. To appease the angry spirits he repeals the taxes and swears to live a better life hereafter.

Modern research has suggested that most of the events of this play are founded on fact. Sogoro’s shrine is still revered in Sakura, where the local people commemorate him in their ballads. But such a play could not be presented while the Tokugawa Shogunate was at its height. In 1851 – ten years before Commodore Perry, seventeen before Meiji – the times were more propitious. *Sakura Gimin Den* appeared against a background of popular dissatisfaction with the Shogunate’s agrarian policy. To this extent it was a protest play. It must be noticed, however, how long the protest took in coming, and how mild it eventually was. It does not condemn the system, any more than Racine’s *Britannicus* attacks the idea of monarchical government. It points merely to individual abuses within this system, while respecting the authority under which such abuses become possible. Modern critics have complained that Hotta suffers too little for his crimes. They miss the point. In its historical context, the despot’s repentance was enough. To have inflicted further punishment on Hotta might have implied that the system itself was rotten.

The first production of *Sakura Gimin Den* was a solid success and ran for three consecutive months. Subsequent revivals were less happy, and confirmed *kabuki*’s uneasiness in dealing with more cogent and realistic subjects. The showmanship of *kabuki* finds peasant drama, in particular, unattractive. Prizing beauty, gaiety and eroticism it despises the more realistic representation of working-class life as *momen shibai*, ‘cotton plays’. *Kabuki* pre-

ferred ‘silk plays’ about the rich and high-born, which allowed more opportunity for display. For this reason, revivals of *Sakura Gimin Den* glossed over the social implications and concentrated on those moments where traditional *kabuki* felt more at home: the melodrama of the court scene and the pathos of the family leave taking.

As contemporary social unrest impinged, albeit slightly, on the *kabuki* world of the 1850s, the psychology of modern power politics has influenced some plays of the present century. *Yoritomo no Shi* (Yoritomo’s Death), written in 1932, investigates feudal history from a modern standpoint. It deals with the rule of the Minamoto family at Kamakura, and in particular with the death of its greatest member, who had subdued the Taira clan and risen to supreme power. History states that Yoritomo died by falling from his horse, but there is reason to suspect this as official whitewash; the more sordid truth seems to be that he suffered a stroke while visiting one of his many mistresses. Mayamo Selka’s play takes this as a basis for an investigation of the nature of power. It is set in 1201, during the third anniversary of Yoritomo’s death. We see the uneasiness of the retainers, pledged to preserve the official account, and the personal embarrassment this causes them. Yorico, Yoritomo’s son and successor, is obsessed with finding out the truth. His investigations, using bribery and the threat of torture, only reveal the insecurity of his own position. Masako, his mother, emerges as the Agrippina of Minamoto politics. Holding a spear at her son’s throat, she insists that the lie must be preserved at all costs, if family prestige is not to suffer. The interest of government demand that Yorico continue to play his part. As the play ends, he realizes what the part is. Ostensibly the Shogun, in supreme power, he is really only a pawn in the game. Overcome by humiliation, he falls weeping to the floor.

In its acute psychological study of a neurotic ruler confronted with the facts of power, in its concern with propaganda and the noble lie, this play is very much of its time, and yet traditional in its use of historical events to study, at a safe remove, the workings of contemporary politics. Yet, like *Sakura Gimin Den*,

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it does not fit happily into the kabuki framework. The extrovert nature of kabuki is not well equipped to deal with psychology. Deprived of colour and action, it lapses too easily into dullness. Kabuki is limited by the circumstances of its evolution. Its elaborate techniques were developed to extract the maximum theatrical value from a narrowly restricted range of material. When it turns to more profound themes, these techniques are no longer appropriate, and there is nothing to take their place. To cope adequately with the newer themes which writers have tried to implant in it, it would have to change its nature radically; and then it would no longer be kabuki. Today's performers, conscious of this inherent difficulty, and of the growing status of their art as a 'classic', have tended to avoid the more recent plays, and draw increasingly on the vast seventeenth- and eighteenth-century repertoire. The writing of kabuki has never stopped, as noh did for all practical purposes; one may now see, in the same programme, one play written in 1799, another in 1848, a third in 1916. But the older plays are still preferred, though even these can only rarely be performed in full. Kanadehon Chushingura, given in its entirety a few years ago, ran for thirteen hours. Today's productions offer only excerpts, glittering slices of enormously indigestible wholes.

Kabuki, like noh, faced some hazards after the Meiji Restoration, though as it had never been subsidized by the Shogunate its financial position was unchanged. Its content, however, was called into question. In the re-evaluation of the traditional arts that followed contact with the West, kabuki was criticized for its superficiality, extravagance and wantonness. The Tokyo Prefecture instructed the theatres not to offer anything which might demean Japan in foreign eyes; the traditional tendency towards the erotic must be curbed, and the theatres offer good, clean, family entertainment. Nor must they present a distorted picture of history. The habit of transposing periods and altering historical names - which had begun as a security measure - was now forbidden. This self-consciousness towards the West was kabuki's greatest danger, though it produced new and often valuable technical advances. Gaslight was introduced in 1872 - an innovation that must have been regretted when eight years later one theatre was blacked out for non-payment of bills. The first proscenium stage in Japan, the Shintomi-za, was built in Tokyo in 1878, and followed by the first Kabuki-za, which opened in 1889 with the full glory of electric light. The present theatre is the fifth on the site. Of its predecessors, two were destroyed by the old enemy, fire, one in the great Tokyo earthquake of 1923, and the fourth in the bombing of 1945. The present building was restored in 1951.

Other compromises with the West were not so well received. A ticking clock was substituted for the traditional clappers (the Japanese equivalent of the French trois coups) at the beginning of one performance; new instruments - bugle, music box and xylophone - were heard in the orchestra, and Western fireworks contributed to the stage spectacles. Plays were written on topical themes. A dramatization of the Satsuma Rebellion (the last reactionary opposition to the Meiji Restoration) appeared in 1877, and in 1879 a unique play, The Wanderer's Strange Story (subtitled A Foreign Kabuki), attempted to combine the theatres of Europe and Japan. In the story a Japanese fisherman was shipwrecked, and in his travels visited the United States, England and France. It included a play within a play, as seen by the fisherman in Paris, performed by Western actors. The audiences roundly condemned it.

It is easy to be facetious about these experiments. The criticisms often levelled against them reflect our own rather condescending theatrical attitudes. One of the favourite legends of the Meiji theatre is of the Japanese Hamlet who entered on a bicycle down the hanamichi. It is almost impossible, now, to find out whether this is true or not. Si non è vero, è ben trovato; someone once described the Japanese theatre to me as 'a mythology within a mythology that has created its own mythology', and the myth in this case, if myth it is, is sufficiently like other things we know did happen. We laugh at it, and talk glibly about Japanese infatuation with Western technology; but when Puck rides a bicycle on the French stage, as he did at the Comédie française in 1965, we talk about theatricalism, biomechanics and the
director's right to experiment. We may still be derisive, but for more respectable reasons. Many Japanese were alarmed by the modernization of kabuki, and formed societies to study and preserve the old traditions while encouraging a more meaningful content. To this the Meiji government was sympathetic. It saw kabuki's value as a propaganda medium for keeping the public aware of their past. Modern kabuki has abandoned its more eccentric experiments and returned to a traditional posture, leaving innovations to the 'new' and 'mixed' forms.

In consequence the former lawless, popular entertainment has now come to be regarded by many as the 'classical' theatre of Japan, while noh has receded even further into the background. This attitude is reflected in contemporary scholarship. Faubion Bowers's *Japanese Theatre* belies its title by being concerned almost exclusively with kabuki, admitting noh, together with the earlier dance-forms, only as an 'influence'. There is some danger, indeed, that kabuki will become even more remote by pricing itself out of the popular market. Bowers remarks that in 1940 the price of tickets had risen from 8 yen (the best) to 200 or 300. In 1967 the best seats are 2,000 yen and the cheapest 300. This is not entirely due to the devaluation of the currency. Theatre-goers tend to be well-to-do; it is also obvious that most of the audiences at the Kabuki-za are middle-aged or over, and women. The poorer devotees crowd the upper balconies, from which they bellow their enthusiasm. These true aficionados contribute to the liveliness of the performance by shouting approval and the pet names of their favourite actors at crucial moments of the performance. They are as disciplined as the French claque and more genuine; the shouts must be perfectly timed, and require as much knowledge and precision as that displayed by the actors themselves.

One beneficial result of Meiji intervention was a rise in the actors' social status. The Emperor, determined to divest himself of the traditional exclusiveness of his caste, went out of his way to give attention to the popular arts, attending sumo wrestling in 1872 and a kabuki performance five years later. In 1887 the actor Ichikawa Danjuro IX had the unprecedented honour of a commond performance, which did as much for the player in Japan as Queen Victoria's knighting of Henry Irving did for his English contemporary. The old segregation was abolished, and actors were admitted within the pale of respectable society. It is a mark of this new respect that a leading kabuki actor has been invited to play the present Emperor in a Japanese film about Pearl Harbour—a peculiarly sensitive role, since it marks the first portrayal of a living Emperor on the screen.

The latest innovation which kabuki has to face, seen variously as an asset and a threat, is the establishment of the National Theatre. It opened in 1966, amid controversy. Should it confine itself to native works, or admit Western classics also? At present it operates on a compromise basis. The large hall, since its opening, has been devoted to kabuki, and the smaller to occasional Western and modern Japanese plays. *Cyrano de Bergerac* was an almost inevitable choice. What causes chief concern, however, is the composition of the company and the function of the director. The latter is new to kabuki, first appearing in 1926 in imitation of Western practice. Traditionally, regulation of the performances was left to the actors themselves, supervised by the head of the 'family'; it is they who have handed down, largely by memory, the traditional gestures and blocking of scenes. The director is a new, and to some dangerous, element, who threatens to disrupt the traditional pattern. Further controversy was aroused when one revival of a play that had not been produced for over a century was entrusted to a university professor of theatre history. Some critics feel that the National Theatre is preoccupied with history at the expense of entertainment, and that the age of a play is no guarantee of its value.

The hand of the director certainly makes itself felt, by no means to the drama's disadvantage. There is a stronger sense of progression and of working towards a climax. The National Theatre productions may be seen as an example of the various attempts to work out a compromise between old techniques and modern attitudes that characterize the modern Japanese theatre at its best. Here, old plays are subtly remodelled by contemporary artistic influence; in the Nisei and other major commercial
theatres modern plays are interpreted by traditional techniques. They work from different angles to a common meeting-ground. The National Theatre's most shocking innovation in the eyes of purists is that it cuts across the old family tradition. Actors are drawn from several companies and are no longer acting with their adoptive brothers. The National Theatre has had no time to build a 'family' of its own. This, in the end, may be all to the good; it makes possible the experiments that the older groups, with their instinctive conservatism, have rejected. Some of them are undoubtedly successful. In Sakura Gimin Den, for instance, the director takes advantage of the flexibility of kabuki speech to emphasize the distinction between two social groups. The court and aristocracy deliver their lines in formal recitative, the peasantry more naturally, and this distinction reinforces the sense of two worlds which can never meet. It is by such devices, perhaps, that the ideal combination may be reached: a kabuki theatre with modern appeal, but founded firmly on the traditions of the past; a venerable art shaped by a single, unifying hand.

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Puppet, Mask, Costume, Actor

When the Australian Marionette Theatre played in Tokyo on its Far Eastern tour, the audience was to some extent predictable. The corps diplomatique was out in force, and there was a substantial contingent of children. There was also something not commonly seen at such entertainments in the West: unaccompanied adults, giving the performance their serious critical attention. In Japan puppetry is an art for mature minds, demanding no less creative ability, and no less sophisticated an audience, than its human counterpart. Bunraku, with its traditional hand-operated puppets, ranks as a major theatrical form. The marionette theatre employs its own directors and choreographers. All concerned recognize the dignity of their calling and their responsibility to live up to the expectations of their public. The typical audience of the West, which persists in regarding puppetry as children's entertainment, gets the performances that it deserves.

The puppet theatre of Japan, in the form now known as bunraku, came about from the fusion of two arts as ancient as they were popular: that of the puppet itself and that of the story-teller. Prints offer evidence of the steps by which the puppet stage reached its present highly sophisticated shape. The simplest form is a box carried by a single showman and revealing a succession of painted scenes to accompany his narrative. This evolves into something like the 'penny plain, twopence coloured' theatre of Victorian England, beloved of Robert Louis Stevenson; the figures are cut out, mounted flat, and moved from the side of the