

JAPANESE DRAMA – 20th Century

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Overview: Japanese Society and Culture in the Twentieth Century

Japan in the twentieth century experienced a degree of dramatic— and traumatic— change virtually unparalleled in world history. Ushering in the century as a newly-minted imperial power under the aegis of a 'divine' Emperor Meiji, Japan ending the century as an established post-imperial, post-industrial power. But the nation's modernization agenda, forged during the Meiji period (1868-1912) took a dramatic turn in mid-century, in the form of an imperial expansionism that ended in war and cataclysmic defeat. Yet this very defeat eventuated in an extraordinary postwar reconstruction and renaissance that was set in motion by the American victors, under the aegis of their Occupation regime (1945-52).

In other words, twentieth-century Japanese history is conveniently reducible to a pre-war, imperialist component; a postwar, 'de-imperialized' component; and the intervening war, which began in China and ended with the nation's unconditional surrender in August 1945, in the wake of two atomic bombings. Prior to the militarist regime of the 1930s, however, Japanese society and culture were surprisingly open and vibrant. This was especially true during the Taishō period (1912-26), which was marked by unfettered creativity in the arts and a free and open society. 'Tokyo chic' was all the rage, as evidenced by the thriving popular media (including film and radio) and consumer marketplace. Notwithstanding the official rhetoric of imperial divinity and Japanese exceptionalism, Japan was a seemingly 'normal' nation, with a secure place in the global order.

The war put an end to all of this. And so it was that nearly a century following Japan's first encounter with the United States— and Commodore Perry's ultimatum to the Shogunal regime— Japan found itself subject to the Occupation authority of General Douglas MacArthur. Its cities had been destroyed, its economic and social infrastructure was in ruins, and its fate hung in the balance. In order to ensure the end of a virulent Japanese militarism, a new Constitution was put in place in 1947, which sought to establish an egalitarian and peaceful society— women were accorded equal rights, under a modern political and social order, and the nation renounced the use of military force. No longer a Shinto divinity, Emperor Hirohito was 'repurposed' as Japan's patriarchal figurehead and the imperial system was allowed to remain.

Japan's economic resurgence, as of the 1960s, is well known, as is its dominance on the world economic stage in the 1980s— the 'Japan as Number One' era. There was a corresponding resurgence on the cultural level, with an outpouring of literature, art, and film that has earned international recognition since the 1950s. And Japanese pop culture products have long been at the center of the global marketplace.

Japan's exuberant national pride, though, has diminished in the interim, with a relatively stagnant economy as of the 1990s and looming problems that offer no easy solution— for instance, the demographic 'time-bomb' that forecasts steady population decline and raises the question of the nation's viability. Then there is Japan's role in East Asia— the fraught relationship with China, for instance, and the existential threat posed by a nuclear-armed North Korea.

What, then, of Japan in the twenty-first century? What of the perennial 'identity' question, and the schizophrenic identification of Japan as both perpetrator and victim of the Pacific War? Then there is the nuclear question— and the specter of Hiroshima and Nagasaki recently revisited in the wake of the 2001 Fukushima catastrophe. One thing is certain: We can look to Japan's writers, artists, and performers to grapple with these questions in their respective ways.

The Place of Drama in Twentieth-Century Japan

The late-Meiji scene

The Meiji period witnessed the transition from long-established theatrical practices and repertoires to a modern, Western-inspired drama. (See article on nineteenth-century drama.) In particular, the widespread popularity of kabuki drama and puppet theater (*bunraku*) during the Tokugawa period continued to exert its influence well into the modern era. Indeed, the iconic status of kabuki endures in the twenty-first century.

The late-Meiji period witnessed the rise of two important transitional genres of theatrical performance—*shimpa* and *shingeki* ('new style,' 'new theater'). These hybrid genres incorporated aspects of kabuki performance and recently-imported Western modes of acting and playwriting. What emerged was an array of competing troupes that gradually led to an increasingly sophisticated modern drama. One important development, which originated with writers seeking a broader readership, was the advent of a standardized vernacular form of Japanese. Achieving currency by the late-Meiji period, this linguistic breakthrough allowed for a more compelling and realistic mode of performance that employed colloquial speech and centered on contemporary settings and situations.

The Taishō scene and Osanai Kaoru

As with other domains of Japanese arts and culture, however, the emergence of distinctively Japanese modern drama that was freed from traditional performance modes and no longer merely imitative of Western theatrical models had to await the Taishō period (1912-26). A key figure here is Osanai Kaoru (1881-1928), founder in 1909 of an important *shingeki* troupe, the Free Theater group. Having come under the influence of Western drama during an extended stay in Europe (1912-13), Osanai set about staging translated versions of modern Western plays by Ibsen, Chekhov, and Hauptmann, among others. One drawback, though, was that Osanai's troupe of actors had been trained in kabuki performance and found it difficult to adopt Western acting techniques.

Osanai achieved greater success with his next theatrical company—the Tsukiji Little Theater (*Tsukiji shōgekijō*), founded in 1924. By this time, translated Western plays had achieved widespread currency, and audiences were more receptive to 'Western style' performance.

The privileging of translated Western drama, however, inevitably stifled the emergence of modern plays by Japanese playwrights. Following Osanai's untimely death in 1928, the burden of establishing a viable Japanese modern drama fell to individuals such as Hijikata Yoshi (1898-1959) and Kishida Kunio (1890-1954). It was Kishida who can be said to have established the aesthetic and performative standards for a modern Japanese theater that could stand on its own.

Taishō popular culture and political activism

A key context for the emergence of pre-war Japanese theater was the burgeoning popular culture of the Taishō-era, with its new performance media and thriving market for consumer goods and leisure activities. Moving pictures developed in tandem with modern theater, and their synergy of acting styles and stage sets recalls the mutual reinforcement of kabuki and *bunraku* during the Tokugawa period.

What is more, the free-wheeling, hedonistic subculture of Taishō 'modern boys' and 'modern girls' (*mobo*, *moga*), who were powerfully drawn to chic style, fashion, and spectacle, gave rise to new 'performance spaces'—bars, coffee houses, dance halls, and jazz clubs. In other words, modern theater had a vibrant counterpart in the performative world of pre-war Japanese popular culture, where histrionics, sensuality, and display were all the rage.

Furthermore, the burgeoning political activism of the Taishō and early Shōwa (1915-35) fostered a wide range of literary and dramatic production that promoted the left-wing agenda that appealed to young writers and intellectuals. A key figure is Kubo Sakae (1901-57), whose plays openly proclaimed their Marxist credo.

Pre-war 'new kabuki'

Notwithstanding these new, often radical theatrical experiments, the fact remains that kabuki, which was for a time eclipsed by the juggernaut of Meiji Westernization, proved remarkably resilient. As with other traditional genres (poetic, musical, artistic) that succeeded in adapting modern elements, the so-called 'new kabuki' (*shin kabuki*) thrived in the prewar years. For instance, the playwright Okamoto Kidō (1872-1932) composed nearly two hundred kabuki plays, which managed to incorporate contemporary themes and staging.

Another noteworthy 'traditionalist' figure is the *shimpa* playwright Mayama Seika (1878-1948). His best known play, *Genroku Chūshingura* (1935), is a modern kabuki version of the great Tokugawa-period vendetta tale of the *Forty-Seven Loyal Retainers*. Mayama's play inspired the celebrated film adaptation (1941-42) by the great director Mizoguchi Kenji. Aside from its artistic merit, Mizoguchi's film, playing upon themes of nationalism, martial honor, and self-sacrifice, served to propagandize Japan's wartime efforts.

As the tide of war turned and the 'dark valley' of austerity and draconian militarism took hold, popular entertainments and self-indulgence went into steep decline— as did the Japanese empire and its earnest performance of invincibility and spiritual purity.

Postwar Drama

The incalculable material and intangible costs of Japan's defeat were in effect mitigated by the newfound freedom and individualism fostered by the American Occupation and the egalitarian postwar Constitution of 1947. Liberated from the stranglehold of the military and its oppressive dogma, writers, artists, and playwrights set about forging new, unprecedented outlets for their creative energies in a collective quest for a new identity.

Postwar Japanese drama reflects the nation's full integration into the global theatrical scene and the emergence of diverse audiences whose tastes range across the spectrum. At one end of this spectrum is avant-garde theater, which established itself in Japan in the 1960s and 70s.

Avant-garde theater

Reflecting the influence of Western trends, yet distinctively Japanese in its performance style, Japanese avant-garde theater took hold in the 1960s. Known by the name '*angura*,' a derivative of the English 'underground,' this movement generated an eclectic theatrical repertoire that mixed traditional elements (for instance, Greek drama and Noh theater), the work of Samuel Beckett, wartime references, and the fractured identities of modern life. The key figures here are Betsuyaku Minoru (1937-) and Terayama Shūji (1935-83). Betsuyaku, a prolific and award-winning playwright, is credited with having produced the first *angura* play, 'The Elephant' (1962). Terayama is known for having favored a revolutionary theater that would challenge the received notion of 'drama' and, by extension, our very perception of self and society. Terayama experimented with plays conducted in total darkness, plays using nude actors, and an overall propensity for outrageous histrionics. What is more, he fostered impromptu, 'pop-up' productions in local neighborhoods, in an attempt to break out of the conventional notion of theatrical space and staging.

A related development is the wild, primordial dance form called *butō*, founded in the late 1950s by Hijikata Tatsumi (1928-86). A hybrid performance art, *butō* is known for the iconic look of its performers— shaven heads, bodies painted white— and for its unique choreography of body contortion and intertwining. Having gained a world-wide fan base, *butō* ranks as a legitimate Japanese cultural export.

Traditional theater

At the other end of the theatrical spectrum, traditional performance has retained its privileged place in modern and contemporary Japan. Thanks to generous government support, there is a tripartite National Theater (*Kokuritsu gekijō*), based in Tokyo, that stages performances of Japan's three 'classical' dramas— Noh, kabuki, and puppet theater (*bunraku*). Live performances are augmented by regular

broadcasts of these plays on NHK, the national television network. Appealing to younger audiences is a challenge, though, which has inspired many *anime* and other pop-cultural variants of the traditional genres.

Understandably, opinion is divided as to the sustainability of 'pure' traditional performance in the face of the onslaught of new media and the increasingly competitive entertainment market. One sign of the endurance of tradition concerns the centuries-old schools of Noh theater, which can be traced to the fourteenth century. Several of the major schools— Kanze, Hôshô, and Kita— maintain theaters in both Tokyo and Kyoto and continue to stage performances, essentially unchanged since the early Tokugawa period, on a regular basis.

Authors as playwrights

Harkening back to Meiji authors who established themselves as leading playwrights— most notably, Tsubouchi Shôyô and Mori Ôgai— several post-war authors achieved considerable renown for their dramatic productions. Yukio Mishima (1925-70), among modern Japan's most celebrated novelists, produced a number of 'neo-traditional' plays in the 1950s. In addition to modern plays in the kabuki style, Mishima composed plays based on Noh drama, which incorporate classical themes and narrative with modern staging and dialogue. One such play, 'Lady Aoi,' is a contemporary re-enactment of a famous chapter from the classic *Tale of Genji*.

It bears noting that Mishima had a famously histrionic persona, and he featured himself in several dramatic roles— for instance, the 1966 film version of his short story, 'Patriotism' (1961), which concludes with the protagonist's agonizing ritual disembowelment (*seppuku*). This was in effect a rehearsal for the author's real-life *seppuku*, 'performed' in November, 1970 for a private audience of devoted followers— and a stunned nation.

The author Abe Kôbô (1924-93), known for existential novels such as *Woman in the Dunes*, enjoyed a long and distinguished career as playwright (1954-79) and head of his own theater company— the Abe Studio, which he founded in 1971. Abe adapted several of his own fictional works into plays— for instance, 'The Man Who Turned Into a Stick' (1957). Other plays— such as 'Friends' (1967)— deal with the question of 'home' and our debatable claim to a fixed abode and a secure identity given the deracinated, alienating quality of the modern condition.

Takarazuka

Among the most distinctive and recognizable forms of twentieth-century Japanese drama is the Takarazuka theater. Founded in 1913, and named for the town— near Osaka— where it originated, Takarazuka has, since its inception, been an all-female theater. As such, it can be regarded as a 'reverse-gendered' variant of kabuki. And its popularity has extended well beyond Japan.

Takarazuka productions are known for their lavish staging and distinctive acting styles and roles— again, echoing the kabuki model. The repertoire is impressively varied— musical reviews, adaptations of Western drama, Japanese classics (*Tale of Genji*, *Tales of Heike*), and folk tales, in addition to original drama and stage spectacles.

Entry into the Takarazuka troupe is highly competitive and involves a long and disciplined training regimen. Gender questions and concerns invariably arise with respect to Takarazuka— in particular, regarding the lesbian appeal of the all-female troupe. There is no question, though, as to the profound influence of Takarazuka on Japanese popular culture— *anime* and *manga*, in particular.

Conclusion

The diversity of Japanese drama in the twentieth century— and well into the twenty-first— is remarkable, ranging from the classical and traditional to the innovative and experimental, and its place in the larger constellation of world drama is secure. Moreover, Japanese performing arts have increasingly

intersected and interacted with those of China, Korea, and Taiwan. One could easily make a case for an integrated East-Asian performative community.

Yet there are troubling signs. An aging— and increasingly isolated— population faces problems with access to live performance. A marginalized rural population is not well served, although efforts have been made to establish local acting troupes and amateur theatricals that take advantage of community centers, school auditoriums, and other facilities. Younger people may prefer social networking and gaming to more conventional performance venues. Indeed, the very notion of ‘drama’ and ‘performance’ has undergone profound shifts in recent years.

As noted above, the government has invested in performing arts at the national level, and the public media and major funding organizations— notably, NHK and the Japan Foundation— continue to broadcast dramatic productions, both traditional and contemporary, and to sponsor performances both in Japan and abroad.

One can only hope that the arts in Japan— performative and otherwise— which have played such a key role in the nation’s cultural history, will continue to thrive and to delight audiences world-wide.

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Discussion Questions and Topics

How best to compare pre-war and post-war drama in Japan? What themes and issues are shared? How to gauge the differences?

Considering the traditional/ avant-garde spectrum, what most appeals to you? How would you express your preferences vis a vis performing arts— Japanese or otherwise?

What significance do you attribute to the resilience of traditional Japanese drama— nô, kabuki, bunraku— in the modern day? Do you feel that without the ‘artificial life support’ of governmental and foundation funding, these ‘outmoded’ genres would disappear? Would that trouble you?

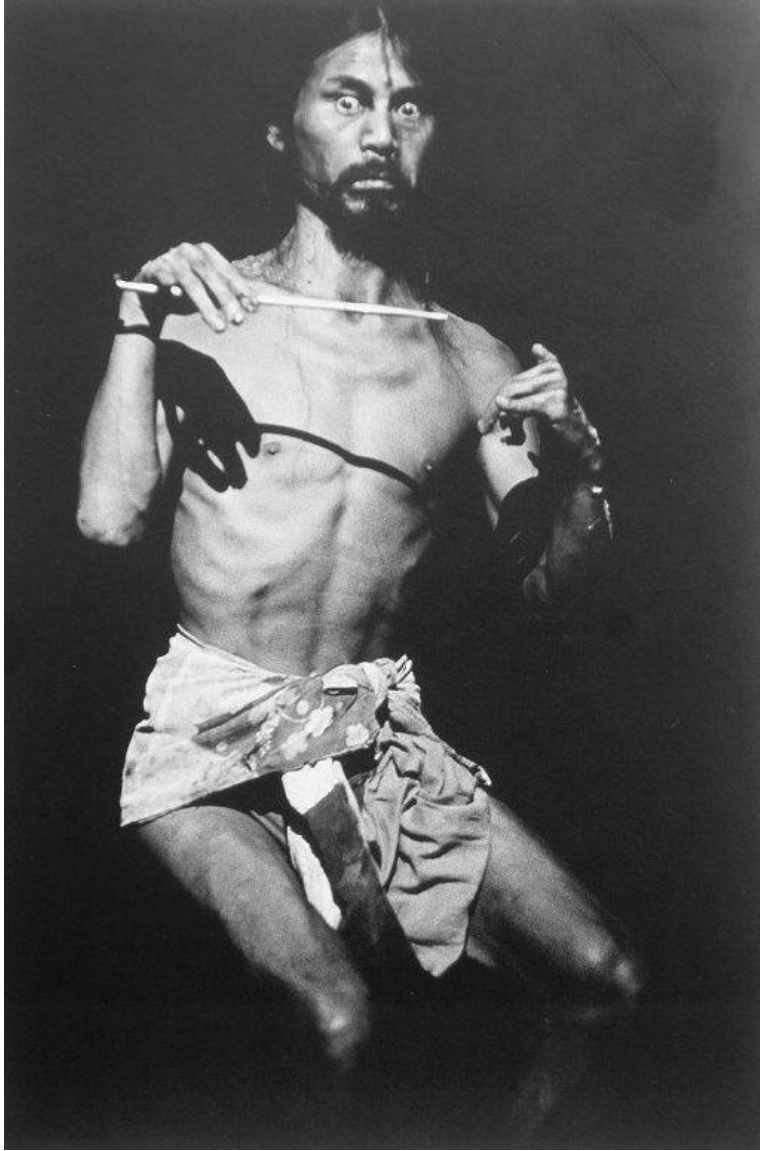
What is your attitude toward live performance? Are you a theater-goer yourself? Must we experience live performance in order to truly appreciate it?

Images



Osanai Kaoru at the Tsukiji Little Theater

(Source: Wikimedia Commons)



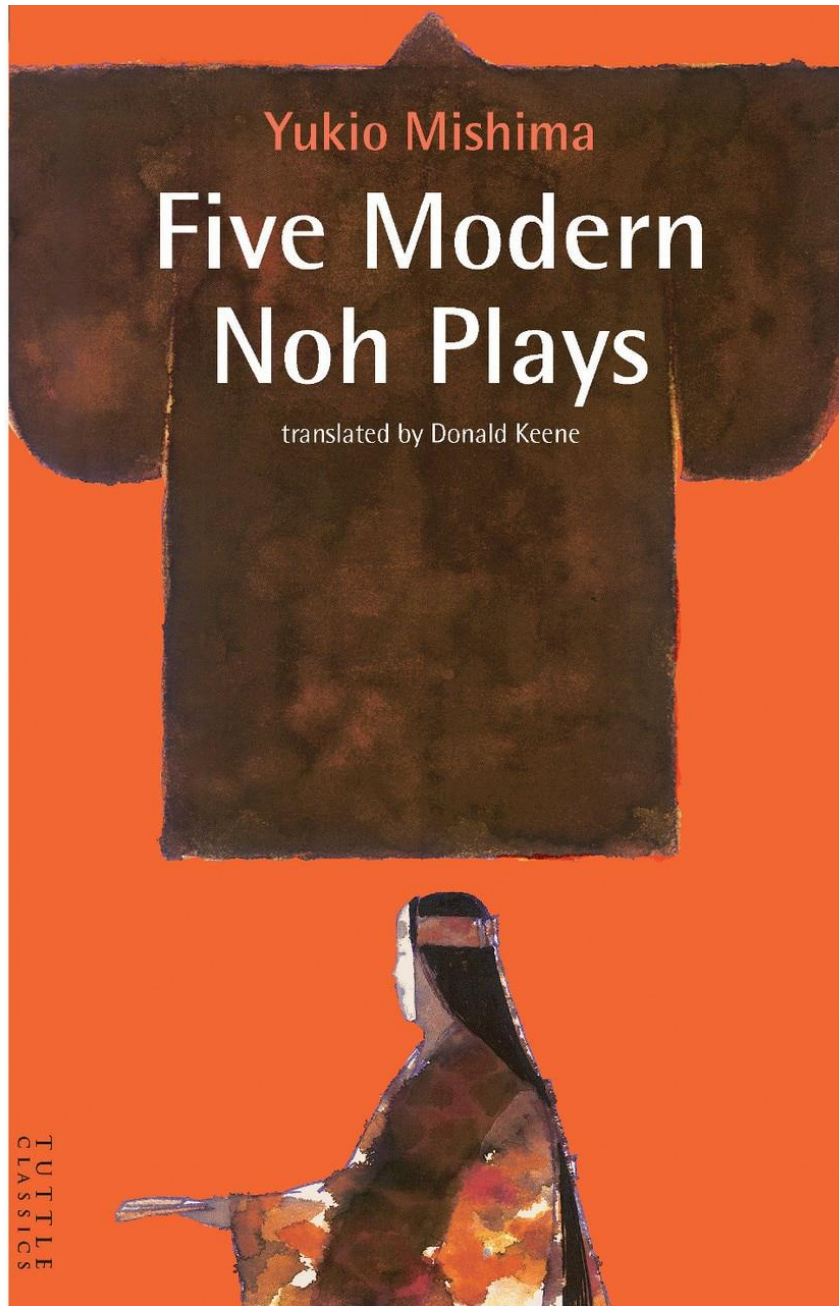
Hijikata Tatsumi, in Butoh performance

(Source: Pinterest)



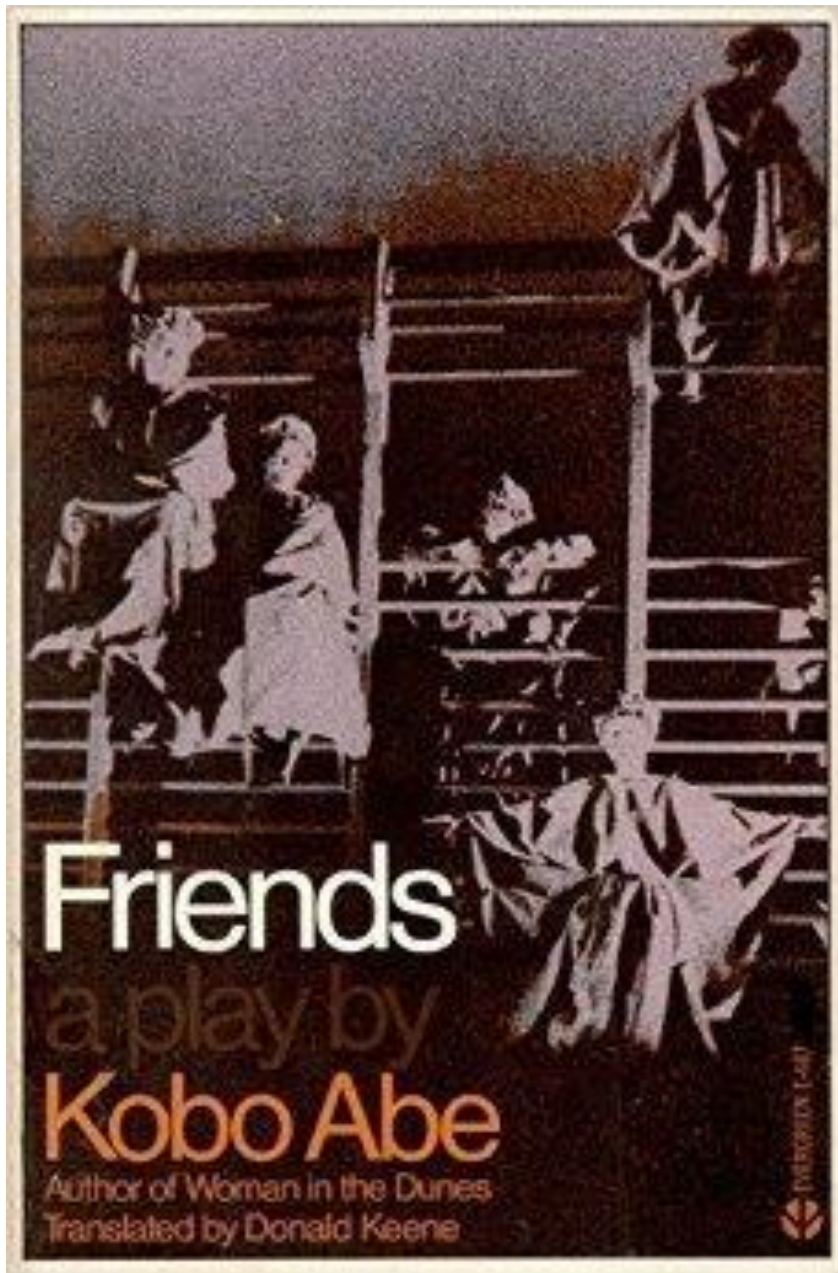
Outdoor performance of Butoh

(Source: Pinterest)



Translation of Mishima Yukio's modern Noh plays

(Source: Tuttle Publishing)



Abe Kôbô's 1967 play, *Friends* (Source: Goodreads)



Takarazuka 'traditional' performance (Source: Japan Times)



Takarazuka 'Western-style' extravaganza (Source: Japan Times)