HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

JAPANESE DRAMA

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PART I : MEDIEVAL PERIOD

Overview: The Medieval Age of Japanese Culture (1200-1600)

The gradual decline of the Heian court in the twelfth century corresponded with the rise of the warrior (*bushi*) clans and the dawn of a centuries-long feudal history. Medieval Japan was governed by two parallel political centers— the imperial center in Kyoto and a new warrior administration, the shogunate. The period was marked by the growing power of provincial warrior chiefs (*daimyô*) and their domains (*han*), which numbered well over two hundred. The dominance of the samurai class inspired a warrior code— *bushidô*— that extolled the virtues of dedication, loyalty, and honor. Variants of this ideology would have important ramifications in Japan's subsequent history and culture.

The samurai elites emulated the cultural sophistication and artistic dedication of the Kyoto aristocracy. And their embrace of the meditative discipline inspired by Zen Buddhism would generate a distinctive artistry marked by austerity and solemnity, and a mood of evanescence and ephemerality (*mujô*). As with the Heian era, the cultural legacy of Japan's medieval period has long had a privileged place in the nation's collective memory and is well represented in its trove of literary and artistic treasures.

Noh Drama and its Antecedents

Medieval Japanese culture represents the amalgamation of many centuries of literary and performative styles and genres, together with the profound and aesthetically-rich Buddhist meditative traditions. *Noh* drama can be said to representative the confluence of these influences and inspirations.

As with so much of Japan's great cultural legacy, elite patronage played a key role. The emergence of Noh drama is closely associated with one of the early Ashikaga shoguns— Yoshimitsu (1358-1408)— who emerged as an influential patron of the arts in late 14th-century Kyoto. Yoshimitsu is noteworthy for having sought out talented and culturally-sophisticated commoners, providing the wherewithal for their entrée into the elite ranks. Such an individual was the brilliant performer and playwright Zeami (1363-1443), who would go on to establish a new dramatic genre— *Noh*— which would become a fixed landmark on the Japanese cultural map.

Adapting established musical and dramatic conventions and incorporating a range of Buddhist themes, literary allusions, and a rich lyrical vocabulary, Zeami achieved an extraordinary syncretism in his plays for the *Noh* stage. His texts, which have long been considered literary classics in their own right, are performed verbatim, with no improvisatory embroidery. It is the actors, in conjunction with a chorus and musical accompaniment, who collectively breathe life into the words and create the other-worldly atmosphere that Noh has come to represent over the centuries.

Noh Staging and Performance Styles

The *Noh* stage is conspicuously spare and unadorned. The single— and singular— image of a pine tree serves as the conventional stage backdrop. The effect is that of a sacred, meditative space, appropriate

for austere ritual and inspiring a deep engagement on the part of the audience. The language of the *Noh* text— with Zeami's work as the pinnacle— is difficult and highly allusive, requiring a high level of literary and cultural sophistication. In short, *Noh*is anything but popular theater, and it has long been considered an aristocratic entertainment. Indeed, its patronage was for centuries restricted to the elite classes, who were expected to have attained sufficient background in, and appreciation of, Japan's classical traditions and texts.

Noh performance is conspicuously non-mimetic; actors' movements are deliberate and highly stylized, conveying solemnity, deep significance, and lyrical depth. Actors share the stage with a chorus— seated individuals who intone portions of the *Noh* text in a manner reminiscent of classical Greek theater. Indeed, the affinity of these two great theatrical traditions has long been noted and appreciated.

Additionally, *Noh* performance includes an important musical component— flute and drums, which generally accompany the various dances (*mai*) that are a fixture of the performance. *Noh* music and dance complement the narrative and recitative core of the play— the story being enacted on stage. Zeami's genius lay in the manner in which he selected key episodes and figures from the classical literary tradition and 'repurposed' them for the *Noh* stage. His two chief inspirations were the twin masterworks of Japanese fiction— the mid-Heian *Tale of Genji* (Genjimonogatari) and the early 13th-century *Tale of the Heike* (Heike monogatari). Additionally, Zeami composed plays inspired by Japan's canonical poets— legendary figures such as Narihira, Komachi, and Saigyô. Indeed, it can be argued that *Noh* drama is irreducibly lyrical in its language and staging, serving as a vehicle for the preservation and advancement of Japanese poetry as the bedrock of Japan's cultural heritage.

Up until modern times, *Noh*was almost exclusively a male performance genre, subject to elaborate conventions and role types. Harking back to Greek theater, the distinction between the lead and supporting roles is crucial. The *Noh* protagonist— the so-called *shite*— is a figure who appears in the first act as an 'ordinary' individual who is encountered by the supporting 'deuteragonist' figure, the so-called *waki*— typically a traveling priest who establishes the identity of the *shite* and elicits his or her story. In the second act of the play, the *shite* appears bearing a mask that signifies one's transformed identity as a ghostly figure, apparition, demon, or wandering spirit seeking healing and salvation. Here the *waki* figure typically serves in the role of exorcist or priestly healer, through whose agency the *shite* figure— and the play itself— achieves some closure.

Other aspects of *Noh* staging deserve mention. Notwithstanding the austere, spare ambience, the *shite* character is typically adorned in a strikingly ornate garment. Moreover, the *shite* generally employs a fan, in such a way as to enhance the dramatic aura. It is liberally employed in the play's dance segments. And the *shite*'s conspicuous mask— an exquisitely crafted object entrusted to artisans of the highest caliber— can be said to assume a life of its own. The distinctive styles of Noh dance, which have roots tracing back to elegant *gagaku* court performance of the 8th century, often dominate the performance. And the manner of textual recitation— *utai*— which is shared by *shite*, *waki*, and chorus, has long been a pursuit of serious amateur practitioners, for whom the language of *Noh*, appropriately intoned, possesses unique artistic value independent of the play's actual staging.

In a typical *Noh* performance, the two acts are separated by an intermission performance, called the *ai-kyôgen*. In contrast with the solemnity of the Noh, the *ai-kyôgen* in effect provides comic relief in the form of a prosaic rendering of the drama, with actors speaking in informal vernacular and 'behaving' in a more naturalistic manner. In sum, then, the Noh stage provides in microcosm the full spectrum of Japanese performative and narrative arts.

Categories, Repertoire, and Schools of *Noh* Performance

It was during the Tokugawa period that *Noh* drama crystallized into specific role categories and performance schools. The five categories— each with its corresponding masks, dance styles, and narrative conventions— are as follows: 1) god; 2) warrior; 3) woman; 4) mad woman; 5) demon. The entire *Noh* repertoire comprises some 250 plays— although many of them are rarely if ever performed. Again, each play is based upon some classical literary text, legendary figure, or spiritual value.

Four major schools of Noh emerged during the Tokugawa— and they are still active: 1) the Tokyo-based Kanze and Hosho schools; 2) The Kyoto-based Kongo school; 3) and the Nara-based Komparu school. The casual outsider would be hard-pressed to differentiate among performances of the different schools. Rather, this is the domain of arts connoisseurship— as with opera, classical music, and so forth.

Representative Plays

The following plays by Zeami can be said to epitomize the classical quality of *Noh* drama, which hinges upon the masterful retelling of earlier works and episodes in the life of legendary cultural figures.

Atsumori Based upon a famous episode from the *Tale of the Heike*, this play concerns the sad fate of Atsumori, a young Taira clan nobleman who was killed in battle by the Minamoto warrior, Kumagai. In the play, Kumagai appears as the Buddhist priest Rensho, intent upon praying for the spiritual repose of the man he had killed. (Tyler, 37-48)

Izutsu Considered by many to be Zeami's finest play, *Izutsu* (The Well-Cradle) is a deeply moving dramatization of the canonical 10th-century *Tales of Ise* (Isemonogatari). Incorporating *waka* poetry by the great Heian poet Narihira, the play is suffused with romantic longing and a wistful evocation of Heian courtly beauty and sentiment. (Tyler, 120-32)

Nonomiya One of many Noh plays that retell episodes drawn from the *Tale of Genji*, *Nonomiya* (The Wildwood Shrine) concerns the legend of Lady Rokujo, whose unquenchable desire for Genji's affections unleashed a vengeful spirit that cost the lives of her rivals. While recalling the novel's dramatic scenes, the drama ultimately seeks the spiritual reconciliation of the tormented Rokujo. (Tyler, 205-14)

SekideraKomachi One of several plays centering on the legendary figure of Ono no Komachi, the celebrated 9th-century poet known for her beauty and her passionate nature, *SekideraKomachi* presents an homage to the Japanese lyrical tradition and the 'Way of poetry.' Appearing as an old, forlorn woman, the Komachi*shite* figure is animated in the process of recalling her youth and the poetry that epitomized it. (Tyler, 225-36)

The *Noh* Aesthetic

As a syncretic and classically-inspired Japanese cultural tradition, *Noh* drama incorporates elements of Heian courtly beauty (*miyabi*), Buddhist ritual and belief, and prized (albeit highly abstract) poetic values such as *yugen* (mystery and depth), *sabi*(imperfection and rusticity), and *mujo* (ephemerality). More to the point, the playwright Zeami produced a number of treatises on the art and craft of Noh performance. These center on the notion of *hana*— the 'flower' of sublime acting style and perfection of form.

One of the key aesthetic qualities of *Noh* concerns *jo-ha-kyu*, a term that refers to the conventionalized rhythm and pacing of the performance. Deriving from the ancient *gagaku* dance genre, *jo-ha-kyu* is said to govern the interaction of an actor's movements, the musical accompaniment, and the play's narrative flow. The language itself privileges the orthodox convention of five- and seven-syllable lines— the heartbeat, so to speak, of Japan's lyrical tradition.

***Noh* in the Modern Age**

As with other time-honored Japanese arts, *Noh* drama has managed to survive— even thrive— in the modern world. Thanks to the vibrancy of its chief schools, *Noh* continues to be staged in the traditional manner. What is more, a National Noh Theater in Tokyo further ensures the continued viability of a performance art requiring decades of training and apprenticeship. It bears noting that Japan's public media outlet, NHK, regularly broadcasts *Noh* performances. A less rigid style of performance marks the many regional and local *Noh* societies, which welcome the participation of women and young people.

Among Western artists influenced by *Noh*, one can cite the noted British composer Benjamin Britten, whose*Curlew River* (1964) is an adaptation of the play *Sumidagawa*. And modern Japanese writers such as Yukio Mishima have written plays that retell *Noh* in a contemporary idiom and staging. As might be expected, versions and variants of *Noh* have found their way into Japanese pop culture, in the form of *manga*, *anime*, and assorted '*Noh*-esque' products on the consumer marketplace. Finally, one can find hundreds and hundreds of *Noh* performances— long and short— on You Tube.

Ultimately, *Noh* drama can perhaps best be understood as an iconic signifier of 'traditional Japan,' on a par with geisha, samurai, and kabuki. It surely ranks among the most distinguished of Japan's virtuoso arts.

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Discussion Questions and Topics

As a classical performance art, *Noh* can be regarded as irrelevant— even intimidating— to those fascinated by Japan but lacking the sufficient background or cultural sensitivity. What would be a good counter-argument here? In what sense can 'esoteric' products such as *Noh* be precisely that which has the power to attract one's interest? How should one go about becoming more knowledgeable and appreciative?

What seem to be the most accessible aspects of Noh? What seems most alien— and alienating? Keeping in mind that *Noh* is ultimately a performance art, allow yourself to take in as many performances as possible. Again, You Tube offers them in abundance.

What does it mean to identify *Noh* drama as a syncretic art? How does it compare, say, with classical Greek drama? Or is there an East/ West divide that cannot be breached?
How is one to gain sufficient understanding of Japanese poetry, which is a chief inspiration for *Noh*? Or, rather, should one not be free to glean whatever is appealing about this fascinatingly complex cultural product?

Images (Source for all: Wikimedia commons)

Contemporary *Noh*theater, with its 'shrine-like' ambience. Note the *hashigakari* walkway to the left, which provides stage access to the actors.

Stylized *Noh* stage, with robed *shite* actor in foreground, chorus on the right, and musicians at the rear.

Noh performance on the stage at Itsukushima Shrine, on the Inland Sea near Hiroshima

Three images of the same Noh mask, demonstrating the range of emotional expressiveness that a masked actor can achieve

PART II : EARLY MODERN PERIOD

Overview: Japanese Culture in the Tokugawa Period (1600-1868)

Japan's medieval era was marked by complex feudal divisions and an increasingly weak central control, with neither Emperor nor Shogun capable of ruling the fractious nation. It was the sixteenth century that witnessed a gradual process of national reunification. A succession of three powerful warlords— Oda Nobunaga, ToyotomiHideyoshi, and Tokugawa Ieyasu— managed to consolidate power and pave the way for the creation of a stable, productive, and culturally-vibrant nation— albeit one that was subject to strict authoritarian control. The sixteenth century also witnessed Japan's first encounter with the West, in the form of Christian missionaries and emissaries from Western nations in pursuit of colonial and commercial interests in addition to spreading the gospel.

The Tokugawa period can be traced to the victory of its clan chief Ieyasu over his rivals in 1600. This eventuated in his establishing a new Shogunal regime in the town of Edo— modern-day Tokyo. A brilliant political strategist, Ieyasu oversaw a comprehensive program of central authority, regulation, and social order. The samurai class sat atop a fixed, Confucian-style hierarchy, and a policy of 'national seclusion' (*sakoku*) led to the expulsion of Westerners and a cordoning-off of the country that lasted for centuries. An important exception was the Dutch trading mission in far-off Nagasaki— Japan's sole window onto the West until the late-nineteenth century.

Despite the repressive samurai rule and the nation's centuries-long isolation, Tokugawa Japan witnessed a burgeoning domestic economy centered in the rapidly-growing cities— most notably, Edo and Osaka— and the rise of a new class of merchants and townsmen, the so-called *chônin*. The material and secular interests of these affluent city dwellers led to the emergence of a remarkable culture of entertainment, whose locus was the urban pleasure quarters, with its geisha houses, theaters, and assorted fleshly delights. The centerpiece was the Yoshiwara in Edo, an entertainment mecca accessible to anyone with money to burn. It became the setting for all manner of literary and pictorial representation and stood in sharp contrast to the samurai elites and their code of self-restraint and austerity.

Tokugawa Culture and the Role of Drama

Given the centrality of entertainment and spectacle in the *chônin*-centered society and culture of Tokugawa Japan, it is only natural that theater would prove attractive— and profitable. Closely associated with the pleasure quarters and its burgeoning leisure economy, Tokugawa drama centered on two related theatrical genres— puppet theater and kabuki.Nothing could rival the appeal of lavish productions featuring famous actors and dramatic scenes on the kabuki stage,and the virtuoso puppetry of *bunraku*, also known as *jôruri*. These seemingly disparate stage genres were in fact intimately interconnected. Indeed, plays initially composed for *bunraku* would be adapted for the kabuki stage, and it was standard practice for actors to emulate the style and manner of their wooden alter egos. What is more, the widespread use of woodblock prints to advertise plays and publicize the lead actors inspired the creation of one of Japan's most iconic art forms— the *ukiyo-e* 'floating world' print. Again, the contrast with the austere Confucian moralism promoted by the ruling classes could not have been more pronounced.

***Bunraku*:Puppet Theater and Dramas of Tragic Fate**

Much like *Noh* drama, its classical predecessor, *bunraku* theater is a syncretic and collaborative performing art, merging literary composition, puppetry, oral narration, and musical accompaniment. *Bunraku* can be traced to a long history of itinerant performance that included puppets and accompanying stories and music. As it developed during the 17th century, *bunraku* became text-based, and the technical artistry involved in producing and manipulating the near life-sized puppets achieved a remarkable degree of virtuosity. On the other hand, kabuki would develop as an actor's theater, hinging upon improvisation, histrionics, and lavish stage effects.

Bunraku, which developed in the Osaka area, is typically associated with ChikamatsuMonzaemon (1653-1725), far and away its greatestplaywright. It was Chikamatsu who, at the turn of the 18th century, established a standard of literary excellence in a medium where technical virtuosity mightotherwise overshadow the play's text. As with the work of *Noh* playwright Zeami, Chikamatsu'splays have been mainstays of Japanese theater as well as classics of the national literature.

Most notable are his domestic plays (*sewamono*), especially those featuring romantic encounters where the conflict between duty and passion— *giri* and *ninjô*— would have tragic consequences for the star-

crossed lovers. These so-called *shinjû*—or 'double suicide'— plays, typically based on actual events, portrayed the ill-fated affairs of lowly merchants and expensive geisha whose improprieties marked them as both outcasts in the decorous Tokugawa social order and as romantic heroes. As with the fiction of Ihara Saikaku, passion figures here as an elemental force blinding its victims to social obligation and binding them together through the so-called *michiyuki*— the poignant climax in which the lovers walk to their death. Chikamatsu's genius— which has been cast as Shakespearean but shares more with the world of opera— resides not in the comic 'low' but rather in the moving coda that sought to redeem ordinary people caught in the web of utterly human passions.

Chikamatsu's best-known *shinjû* drama is *The Love Suicides at Amijima* (ShinjûtennoAmijima, 1721), which concerns the ineffectual paper merchant Jihei and his beloved geisha, Koharu. Devoted to one another, the couple must endure the taunts of Tahei, a wealthy merchant whose advances Koharu has spurned, and earnest attempts by Jihei's family to have him come to his senses and abandon the affair. The couple pledge their love, thereby sealing their fate, and are thus obliged to enact the preordained suicidal ritual. In the climactic *michiyuki*scene, the narrative becomes an extended lyrical dialogue, dripping with pathos and bolstered by Buddhist images of rebirth and salvation. Koharu remarks to her lover:

> What have we to grieve about? Although in this world we could not stay together, in the next and through each successive world to come until the end of time we shall be husband and wife. Every summer for my devotions I have copied the 'All Compassionate and All Merciful' chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*, in the hope that we may be reborn on one lotus.

As the drama reaches a crescendo, Jihei kills Koharu, then himself, and the chanter concludes the play as follows:

> The tale is spread from mouth to mouth. People say that they who were caught in the net of Buddha's vow immediately gained salvation and deliverance, and all who hear the tale of the Love Suicides at Amijima are moved to tears.

Chikamatsu's literary achievement is undeniable. Yet for the ordinary theatergoer, who may have had little interest in elegant tropes and classical allusions, it was the stage spectacle itself that merited the price of admission— the choreographed ballet of large puppets flawlessly manipulated by the 'invisible' black-cloaked puppeteers; the chanter's moving recitation of the text; and the musical counterpoint provided by the three-stringed *shamisen*, harmonizing with the shifting moods of the play.

Arguably *the* high point of Tokugawa drama is *Chûshingura* (Treasury of the Loyal Retainers). First produced in 1748, this monumental play recounts a famous incident in 1703: The forty-seven erstwhile retainers of the Akô*daimyô*, who had been forced to commit ritual suicide several years earlier, succeed in exacting revenge on the Shogunal official responsible for their lord's demise, whereupon they sacrifice their own lives. Intricately plotted and many hours long in its complete staging, *Chûshingura*has long been a touchstone of *bushidô* virtue— selflessness, duty, loyalty, and righteous revenge— values whose 'correctness' in the postwar period has been problematic. Yet the typical theater-goer would have been more taken by the drama unfolding on the stage.

Kabuki: Stage Spectacle and Virtuoso Acting

As with *bunraku*, kabuki theater has distinctly plebeian roots, which can be traced to outdoor performances by a troupe of women led by the dancer Okuni, in early 17th-century Kyoto. Tied to prostitution, though, these performances ran afoul of the authorities, who ended up banning women from the stage. What eventuated was all-male performance, which was itself subject to codes and regulations aimed at making the young actors inaccessible for sexual dalliance. Thus, kabuki emerged as a male performance genre that in effect leveraged the imposed restrictions so as to create an actor-centered theater that exerted a profound influence on Tokugawa popular culture and its lucrative entertainment economy. Although it originated in the Kansai area (Osaka/ Kyoto), kabuki established itself in Edo and would eventually surpass *bunraku* in popularity.

Another shared aspect of kabuki and *bunraku* is that their respective repertoires belong to two categories: those based on historical and legendary sources, and those set in the contemporary period.

One of kabuki's hallmarks, an artifact of the sumptuary restrictions meant to constrain it, is the *onnagata* role, whereby male actors 'impersonate' women. Kabuki devotees have long remarked on the capacity of the well-trained *onnagata* to capture a quality of femininity inaccessible to 'actual' women. Similar claims, incidentally, have been made with respect to *bunraku* puppets— mere wooden contraptions which, in the hands of the master puppeteer, can achieve a convincing and highly moving human quality.

Kabuki staging would adapt several features of *Noh* theater—the use of a chorus and musical accompaniment. Here, as with *bunraku*, the instrument of choice is the *shamisen*. And kabuki also features a chanter who intones a narrative that recounts the action, although much of the action on stage is improvised so as to highlight the 'celebrity' actor.
But kabuki is best known for its spectacle— the revolving stage, elaborate movable props, devices that enable actors to fly, catapult themselves, and do virtually instantaneous costume change. The actors themselves are lavishly costumed and adorned with flamboyant facial makeup (*kumadori*).
As with *Noh*, *bunraku*, and other Japanese performing arts, professional kabuki actorshave historically belonged to hereditary lineages, whereby mastery of one's craft is handed down from father to son. Among the celebrated kabuki lineages are the Nakamura and Ichikawa families.
The standard kabuki repertoire features well-known plays such as *Chûshingura*, adapted from the *bunraku*stage; *YoshitsuneSenbonZakura* (Yoshitsune and the Thousand Cherry Trees), which features the heroic medieval warrior of the *Tale of the Heike*; and *Shibaraku* (Wait a Moment!), the ultimate actor vehicle, featuring over-the-top stage histrionics and flamboyance.

***Bunraku* and Kabuki in the Modern Day**

With the early Meiji period and its denigration of 'outmoded' practices and the emulation of modernWestern genres and styles, Japan's performing arts went into decline. Kabuki, though, experienced a resurgence in the late 19th century, largely thanks to the brilliant playwright KawatakeMokuami (1816-93). It was Mokuami who succeeded in modernizing the plotline of kabuki drama while preserving its chief stage conventions. It bears noting that the Meiji period also witnessed the advent of Western-inspired 'realist' theater, which has remained on the scene since then.
The immediate postwar period in Japan also witnessed adecline in 'traditional' cultural production, in part owing to restrictions imposed by Occupation authorities concerned about vestiges of militarism in performances that might extol samurai virtues. However, in line with the nation's economic recovery in the late Fifties, kabuki and *bunraku* experienced a renaissance. Both have gone on to enjoy a sustained popularity, bolstered by tie-ins with film, television, and the burgeoning pop culture marketplace.
Osaka is home to the National *Bunraku* Theater, which offers a rich performance calendar and materially sustains the demanding apprenticeship system that the art requires. As for kabuki, its 'classical' kabuki repertoire is staged in Tokyo and Kyotoat theaters devoted to kabuki performance and to the training of actors and musicians. What is more, *bunraku* and kabuki troupes perform throughout Japan, and overseas as well. And performances are regularly broadcast on the NHK network. As with many Japanese traditional arts, local and regional groups are dedicated to the performing arts, employing a range of plays and theatrical techniques.

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Discussion Questions and Topics

How might we best appreciate the syncretic quality of kabuki and *bunraku*, which hinge upon an unusual degree of collaboration and coordination? What aspects of these arts are most appealing? Why? What may be said to account for the iconic quality of these arts?

What does one gain— or lose— by concentrating on the dramatic plotline (as exemplified in Chikamatsu's*bunraku* texts) as opposed to the stage spectacle? Consider the contrast with mimetic theater, which presents 'realistic' stories, characters, and staging?
In what ways can *bunraku* and kabuki be said to epitomize the society and culture of the Tokugawa period?

Images

*Bunraku*chanter (*tayu*) and *shamisen* player

The character Osono from the *bunraku* play, *Hade SugataOnnaMaigini*

Woodblock poster for the March 1849 production of *Chûshingura*, in Edo

Woodblock print, by Sharaku, of the actor OtaniOniji (1794)

Woodblock print, by UtagawaToyokuni III, of an 1858 production of the play *Shibaraku*, in Edo

The Kabuki-zatheater in Tokyo

Note: The source for the above images is Wikimedia Commons.

PART III : 19TH CENTURY

Overview: Japanese Culture in the Nineteenth Century

Japan in the nineteenth century underwent an all-but unprecedented social, political, and cultural transformation. The centuries-old Tokugawa shogunal regime, predicated upon the privileged status of the samurai class and a policy of national seclusion, went into decline in the early nineteenth century. The shogunal leaders were unable to reform their outmoded regime, and they were equally incapable of fending off the incursion of Western powers— most notably, Commodore Perry and the American 'Black Ships' (*kurofune*). But they did succeed in promoting a strong sense of native identity and a credo of Japanese uniqueness based upon the Shinto faith and the Emperor as a living god— a *kami*.
Fifteen years following Perry's arrival on Japanese shores, the Tokugawa shogunate fell, in what was a relatively bloodless transition to Japan as a modern nation. The advent of the Meiji era (1868-1912) set in motion a process of modernization that eventuated in the establishment of Japan as a powerful empire that succeeded in rivaling the Western imperial powers. The shogunal center of Edo was 'reinvented' as the modern nation's new capital— Tokyo.

Japan's modernizers, though, were largely erstwhile samurai who sought to preserve and promote traditional values and a strong national identity at the same time that they embarked on a comprehensive program of nation-building, industrial development, urbanization, and Western-inspired political, educational, social, and cultural institutions. Their rallying-cry of 'Civilization and Enlightenment' (*bunmeikaika*), which trumpeted the virtues of science, technology, and modernity, was tempered by a state-sponsored embrace of duty and dedication to the Emperor and to the imperial state— *Nippon teikoku*. This seemingly incongruous embrace of tradition and modernity, epitomized in the motto of 'Japanese spirit, Western know-how' (*wakonyôsai*), marks the new age.
By the end of the nineteenth century, Japan had in place a sophisticated rail system, a powerful military, and a productive industrial economy. It had established a representative parliamentary system, political parties, and a modern Constitution. A modern educational system provided a standard Western-style curriculum to the nation's youth, and modern print and entertainment media were available to all Japanese. Japan gradually absorbed the material and intangible culture and institutions of the West. But the identity question— the contest between individualism and personal autonomy and the fact of an authoritarian regime intent upon maintaining order and discipline— remained unresolved. The death of the Meiji Emperor in 1912 marked the end of a truly unique chapter in world history.

The Place of Drama in Nineteenth-Century Japan

As was the case with Japanese arts and culture overall, the nineteenth century witnessed the transition from time-honored traditional drama to the introduction of modern forms and techniques that reflected the nation's radically new political and social circumstance. The austere, elegant Noh theater, with roots tracing back to the fourteenth century, thrived during the Tokugawa period, thanks to elite samurai and courtly patronage of its five performance traditions. The classical Noh repertoire— marked by unparalleled aestheticand literary sophistication and understated,meditative performance styles— appealed almost exclusively to the elite classes.

Far more popular were kabuki and puppet theater (*bunraku, jôruri*), which featured flashy stage technique, celebrity actors and famous puppet masters, and a level ofdramatic flare and flamboyance entire missing from Noh. Kabuki, in particular, became a centerpiece of Tokugawa popular culture— and a major force in the burgeoning consumer marketplace and fashion world, as well. Itsdramatic actor poses and famous scenes,as depicted in countless*ukiyo-e* woodblock prints, have long been icons of the Tokugawa period— and distinctive hallmarks of 'traditional Japan' for people around the world.

<u>Noh theater in the Meiji</u>

The modernization agenda of the Meiji leaders would eventually extend to even the most enduring traditional entertainments, but the popular tastes and styles in the performing arts— kabuki in particular— likely slowed the introduction of Western-inspired drama in late-nineteenth century Japan. As for Noh

theater— the decline of elite support during the early years of Meiji, coupled with the mass citizenry's unfamiliarity with the Noh repertoire, threatened the demise of this unique performance tradition.

One positive development took place in 1879, in the context of Ulysses Grant's visit to Japan. Invited to a performance of Noh, the ex-U.S. president remarked on his fascination with the performance and made a point of encouraging support for what he learned had become a sadly neglected performance art. Perhaps as an indication of a growing awareness and appreciation of Noh, the practice of *yôkyoku*— the oral recitation of the Noh libretto (minus the acting, dance, and musical accompaniment)— took hold among the educated public toward the end of the century.

Kabuki theater in the Meiji

In contrast with the challenges to the Noh theatrical tradition, kabuki held its own during the Meiji era. This was largely owing to the public's familiarity with, and enjoyment of, kabuki performance. Unlike Noh, which had a fixed repertoire that did not permit the introduction of new plays, kabuki was more adaptive— while maintaining a standard repertoire of 'classic' plays, it was open to new material that might appeal to a younger audience.

Most significant, though, was the survival of the kabuki 'star system' of actor lineages and celebrity figures, and the preservation of the standard theatrical styles and techniques. These factors helped sustain the popularity and economic viability of kabuki as Japan entered the modern era. Perennial favorites such as *Chûshingura*, the great 'forty-seven *rônin*' vendetta play of the mid-eighteenth century, were recast and adapted for late-Tokugawa and Meiji audiences. In fact, this play was produced in an early cinematic adaption in 1907.It was twenty years earlier, in 1887, when Emperor Meiji became the first emperor to attend a performance of kabuki. This served to enhance kabuki's stature among those who considered it to be little more than cheap entertainment for the masses.

In a sense, though, Meiji kabuki was constrained by the very need to retain its traditional theatrical styles and techniques while seeking, paradoxically perhaps, to broaden its thematic range to include current trends and issues. The key figure in this transitional moment is KawatakeMokuami (1816-93), widely regarded as the last great kabuki playwright.

Mokuami

Raised in the world of late-Tokugawa kabuki, KawatakeMokuamiwas a truly prolific playwright, with some 360 plays to his credit. He achieved such popularity in the early Meiji period that he was said to have single-handedly impeded the introduction of Western drama and performance. Yet Mokuami did understand the need to introducenew trends and innovations— for instance, plays that aimed at historical accurately as opposed to mere stage spectacle; and plays set in contemporary times, which would incorporate social realism andissues of the day. What is more, Mokuami was among the first to adapt Western literary works for the kabuki stage.

An important theme of Mokuami's plays, and one that the Meiji government promoted as part of its program of moral cultivation, is *kanzenchôaku*— the cardinal virtue of rewarding good and chastising evil. This theme underscores one of Mokuami's most famous plays, *The Thieves*(a loose translation of the elegant Japanese title, *ShimaChidoriTsuki no Shiranami*— Island plovers, white waves in the moonlight, 1881). The play, which hinges upon the exploits of two Tokyo thieves, culminates in the earnest entreaties of Shimazô, who has repented his evil ways, to have his partner in crime, Senta, do the same.

SHIMAZÔ: I once thought of you as my brother. If you will only realize that what you have done is wrong and give up being a thief, I'll help you all the rest of my life. . .

SENTA: (*Gradually looks up, and in an attitude of repentance lifts his head; he wipes away his tears and joins his hands in supplication*). Forgive me, brother. You have convinced me. I shall change my ways. . . I renounce robbery. And I

> will henceforth observe the anniversary of my poor parents' deaths— my dear parents, to whom I've brought so much suffering lo these many years!

Based on Keene, *Modern Japanese Literature*, pp48, 49

Dripping with melodrama and sentimentalism, the play ends as the character Mochizuki, a wealthy moneylender who was to have been Shimazô's next robbery victim, overhears the man's tearful repentance and offers to make good on his burden of debts— "This is Heaven's reward for your having given up crime," Mochizuki proclaims. And so the play ends, having achieved the desired mix of entertainment and edification.

Late-Meiji innovations in drama

As noted above, kabuki was caught in a bind that required adherence to certain fixed theatrical conventionsand styles, while new influences were gradually moving Japanese drama into a more modern mode.Kabuki would by no means disappear, but it would be rivaled by the modernization process, which witnessed the introduction of key Westerndramatists— from Shakespeare to Ibsen, Chekhov, and Strindberg— together with a Western-inspired realist and mimetic theater.

A noteworthy figure here is TsubouchiShôyô (1859-1935). Best known for his advocating the adoption of Western approaches to literary characterization and plot, Shôyô was schooled in both traditional and Western drama. Here he advocated an amalgam of traditional performance styles and Western theatrical innovations. Shôyô himself was an author and producer of kabuki plays and a leading translator of Shakespeare's plays. In particular, his translation of *Hamlet* inspired a new conception of character, in terms of psychological depth and interiority.

*Shimpa*theater

The mid-Meiji interest in new approaches to drama crystallized around a movement known as*Shimpa*— 'new school' theater. This transitional movement, associated with the playwright Kawakami Otojirô (1864-1911), had its heyday in the 1890s and early 1900s. Unlike the male-dominant kabuki, *shimpa* playwrights were free to use female performers. Plays could be adapted from the Western dramatic canon, and they could draw upon important events, such as the war with China. This would allow for the incorporation of appropriate patriotic sentiments, which pleased the authorities.

Shimpa attracted the work of individuals such as the above-mentioned TsubouchiShôyô and Mori Ôgai who also composed kabuki plays. It is worth noting thesynergy between 'traditional' and 'modern' theatrical forms. This precisely parallels the 'binary' development of late-Meiji poetryand its traditional (*haiku-tanka*) and modern (*shintaishi*) genres, which were often composed by the same poet.

Turn of the twentieth century

In any event, the trajectory of Japanese arts and culture at the turn of the nineteenth century was distinctly modern. And here we need to appreciate the crucial significance of literary translation across the spectrum of genres. As for drama, translations of Shakespeare, Ibsen, and others helped inspire new understandings of individualism and interiority. In fact, translated drama was considereda literary genre in its own right, and plays were read and studied in the same way as novels. The works of Ibsen— most notably *A Doll's House* (1879) and*HeddaGabler* (1890)— proved so influential that an Ibsen Society was created as a venue for the *bundan* literary community to study the great Norwegian playwright.

The innovations brought about with the *shimpa* movement would only accelerate with the new century. The genre term *shingeki* ('new theater') would come to refer to the host of experiments in modern and avant-garde drama that would emerge.

Conclusion

Historically, nineteenth-century drama in Japan spans the spectrum of tradition and modernity, and it

points the way to an even more aggressive program of modernization in the twentieth century. Yet the transition from Shogunal to Imperial rule, as of the Meiji Restoration, can be seen either as the gateway to a new, modern Japan or simply the recasting of the old authoritarian regime in modern dress. In fact, aspects of both were clearly in evidence.
As for the traditional performing arts— Noh gradually recovered from its moribund status during the early Meiji. And kabuki flourished, as both old and new plays were produced in abundance.At the same time, Western drama was studied, translated, and eventually staged, and the staging would early on entail a mixture of the old performance conventions and the realist techniques of modern dramaturgy.

Another turn-of-the-century Western import was cinema, which initially served a vehicle for the staging of kabuki and, eventually, modern productions of Japanese and Western drama and fiction. Dramatic production and cinema would continue to engage in a close and productive interaction over the course of the twentieth century.

The interplay of traditional and modern practices that marks the end of the nineteenth century in Japan would yield a rich and fascinating mélange of dramatic forms and style— as was the case with its poetry and fiction. But the full flowering of a modern Japanese drama would have to await the second and third decades of the new century.

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Discussion Questions and Topics

How best to understand the interface of 'tradition' and 'modernity' in the case of Japanese drama?How does this compare with the other genres? In particular, how do the key themes of individualism and interiority gain expression via dramatic performance?
How critical is it to experiencethe actual staging of dramatic work— be it Noh, kabuki, or a modern play? What do you feel is lost or gained insofar as we are restricted to <u>reading</u> dramatic works?
How didJapanese authorities exert control and supervision of stage performance? Can such constraints somehow yield creative benefits, or are they invariably negative?
What aspects of nineteenth-century Japanese drama interest you? How does this compare with the other genres during this time period?

Images

Woodblock print of a Noh performance during the Meiji period.(Source: ArtSofia)

Meiji woodblock print by Adachi Heishichi of a scene from an 1879 Western-stylekabuki play by Mokuami, depicting an attack by American Indians (Source: Ukiyo-e.org)

KawatakeMokuami, as depicted in a mid-Meiji photograph(Source: kabuki21.com)

Late-Meiji postcard depiction of the Asakusa theater district in Tokyo
(Source: oldtokyo.com)

Photograph of TsubouchiShôyô, taken in 1930
(Source: oldtokyo.com)

PART IV : 20TH CENTURY

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 Taishô 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

<u>The late-Meiji scene</u>

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 Taishô 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 Taishô 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 shôgekijô*), 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.

Taishô popular culture and political activism

A key context for the emergence of pre-war Japanese theater was the burgeoning popular culture of the Taishô-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 Taishô '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 Taishô and early Shôwa (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 Kidô (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 Chûshingura* (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 Shûji (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 *butô*, founded in the late 1950s by Hijikata Tatsumi (1928-86). A hybrid performance art, *butô* 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, *butô* ranks as a legitimate Japanese cultural export.

Traditional theater

At the other end of the theatrical spectrum, traditional performance has retained its privileged placed in modern and contemporary Japan. Thanks to generous government support, there is a tripartite National Theater (*Kokuritsu gekijô*), based in Tokyo, that stages performances of Japan's three 'classical' dramas— Noh, kabuki, and pupper 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.

<u>Takarazuka</u>

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?

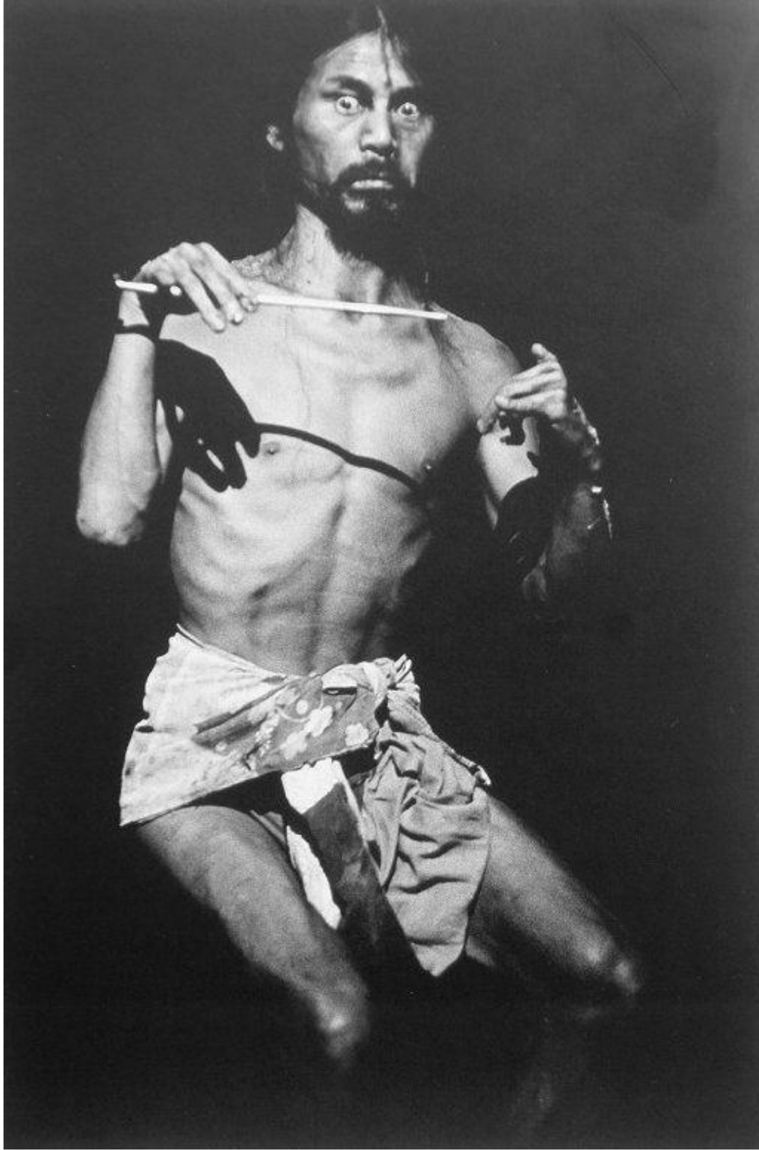
Considering the traditional/ avant-garde spectrum, what most appeals to you? How would you express your preferences vis a vis performing arts— Japanese or otherwise?

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?

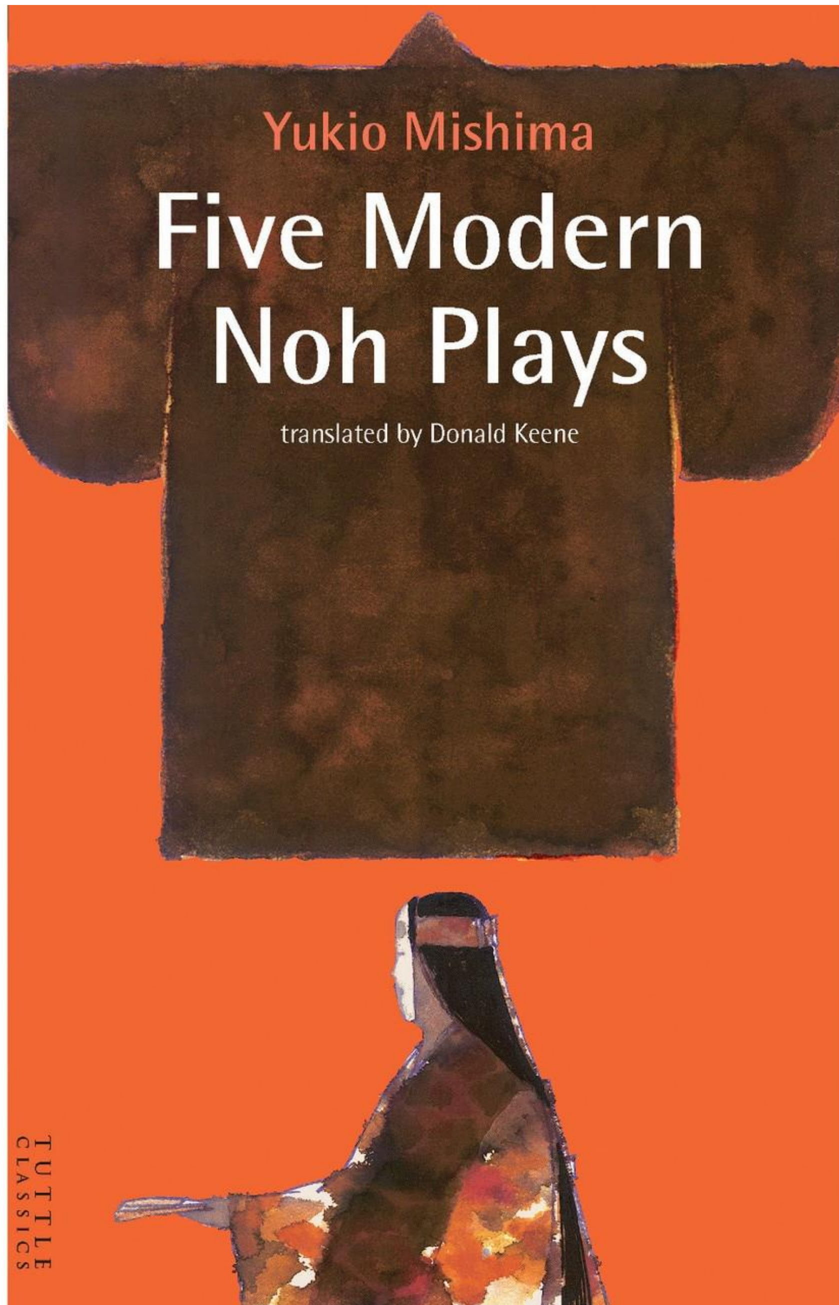
Images

Osanai Kaoru at the Tsukiji Little Theater
(Source: Wikimedia Commons)

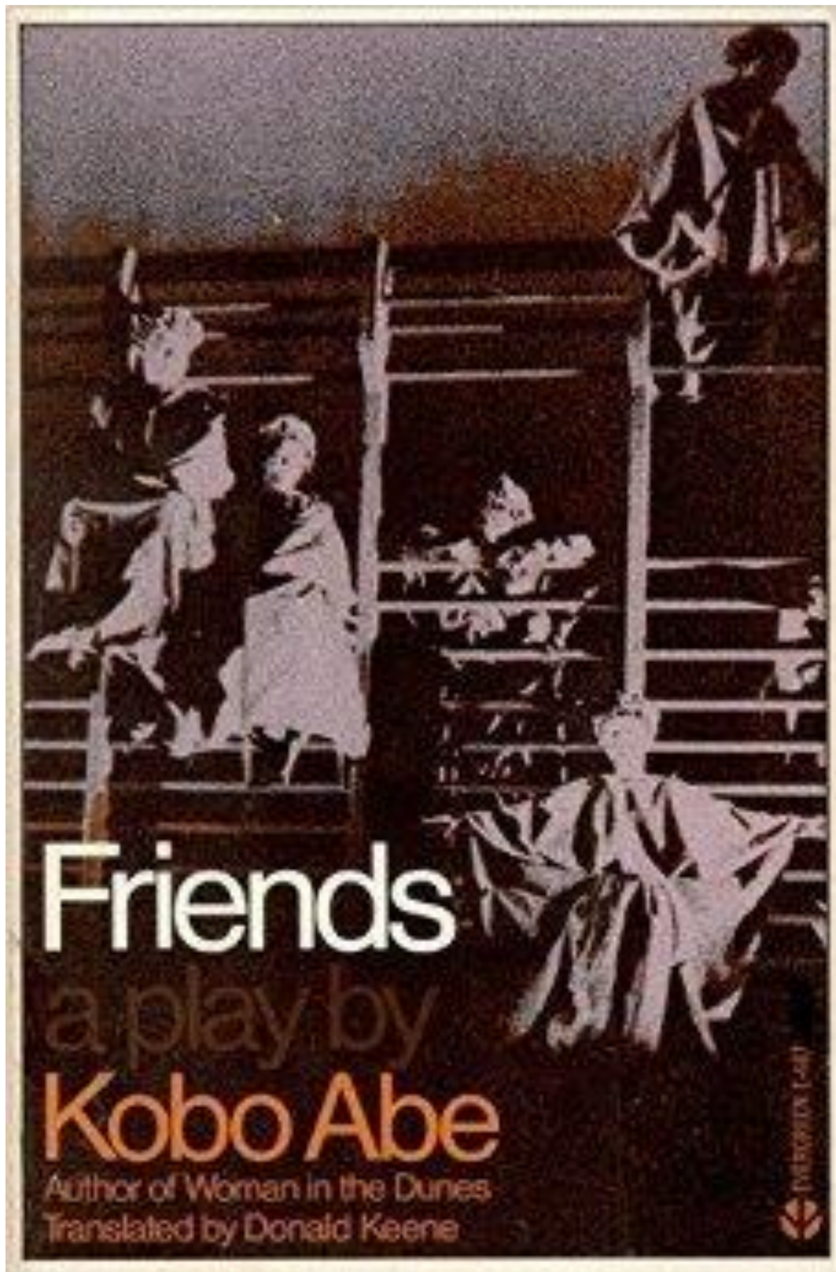


Hijikata Tatsumi, in Butoh performance
(Source: Pinterest)

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)