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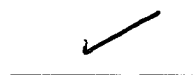
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SEX, ANDROGYNY, PROSTITUTION AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF  
ONNAGATA ROLES IN KABUKI THEATRE

by

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presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

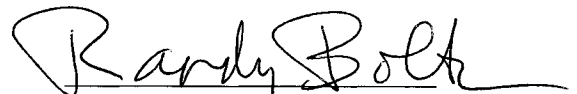
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Androgyny, eroticism and sex are powerful elements in entertainment. A performance that contains any one of these ingredients often has the ability to intrigue, arouse, and captivate. A brief review of the content of many contemporary popular films, television and theatre supports this point. It has also been true in performance styles of the past: from dirty jokes and double entendres in Shakespeare, the bawdy plays of English Restoration comedy, to the daring, body-baring plays of groups like The Living Theatre and many more in between. *Kabuki* theatre, one of the classical art forms of Japan is no exception, and has relied heavily upon elements of androgyny, eroticism, and beauty to captivate audiences for over 400 years. From its very beginning, *kabuki* has been inextricably linked to the sex industry and its development has been significantly shaped by the necessity of maintaining its core tenets of beauty and eroticism in the face of government regulations designed to neuter its sexual appeal.

While eroticism and beauty are often the provinces of female performers in Western theatrical forms, in *kabuki*, they are the sole province of male performers. All female roles, from the innocent child to the most wizened grandmother are played by *onnagata*: men who specialize in playing female roles. The very fact that the audience knows that the delicate, beautiful and often erotic feminine creature on stage in front of them is actually a man lends a particular spice to the spectator's experience. The spectator is free to assign whichever gender he or she finds most alluring to the figure of the *onnagata*. To eliminate men from the female roles would be to neutralize one of the oldest and most central characteristics of *kabuki* performance. The origins of *kabuki* in a male-dominated culture where male-male sexual relationships were socially acceptable and all entertainers were considered to be sexually available for a price have also been

central to the development of the *onnagata*'s art and to *kabuki* as a whole. An examination of the development of *kabuki* and the social climate out of which it grew indicates that the true reason for the maintenance of all-male *kabuki* stems from the fact that men portraying women is central to the fascination and art of *kabuki*.

Although the origination of *kabuki* is credited to Okuni, a female temple-dancer who led a troupe of both male and female performers, female performers were banned from the stage by government edict in 1629, and have not been an active part of *kabuki* performance since then. In general, scholars from Japan and the West give two primary reasons for this exclusion of women from the *kabuki* stage. The first is that the female body does not have the requisite strength to perform the strenuous poses and movements under the weight of burdensome costumes and wigs. The second theory is that to include women in *kabuki* performance would be too naturalistic in a theatrical world that focuses on strong stylization, spectacle and fantasy. In other words, in order to meet the stylistic requirements of *kabuki*, a woman performer would have to imitate the stylized outward actions of femininity that have been developed by generations of men performing as women, and therefore one might as well just use the *onnagata* in the first place. The flaw in the first argument seems obvious: with the proper training and physical preparation, any performer should be able to develop the needed strength to perform *kabuki* roles as they must be performed. The second argument seems to have more merit, except when viewed in light of the fact that certain male roles in *kabuki* are as strong a stylization and abstraction of masculinity as the female roles are of femininity. For all the continuity in the performance of *kabuki* and the view of it as something changeless, it has fluctuated and adapted to the social and cultural climate around it, and it is only through an

examination of its development into the classical art form that it has become today, that one can truly understand the place of the *onnagata* in *kabuki*

Along with *noh* theatre, *kabuki* is considered one of the classical art forms of Japan. Unlike *noh*, however, which arose out of a religious background and was patronized almost exclusively by the noble classes of Japan, *kabuki* developed as a theatre of the masses. Long before *kabuki* became a “classical” form, it was considered subversive and a disruptive influence on members of all levels of Japan’s stratified society. Its influence crossed social and economic boundaries that the rulers of Japan would have preferred to keep firmly in place. The subversive nature of *kabuki* performance created a friction between the *bakufu* (ruling government) of the Tokugawa shogunate and led to numerous attempts by the authorities to control *kabuki*. A number of contemporary scholars have posited that the term *kabuki* derives from *kabuku*, a word that translates as “To slant, to shift off-center, or to be outside the norm.” In the days of its development and at the apex of its popularity and power, *kabuki* disrupted the carefully ordered society from which it sprang.

When *kabuki* developed and came to prominence, Japan was making huge social and economic changes while attempting to retain the social stratification of earlier days. The Tokugawa period in Japan began in 1600 with Tokugawa Ieyasu’s rise to power as *shogun*, or supreme military ruler, and his establishment of a lasting peace throughout the entirety of the realm. Previously, Japan had been through centuries of internal strife and rebellion. Different factions and regions were constantly at war with one another or with their overlords. Adding to the strife, peasants would often rise in revolt against the *daimyo* (feudal lord) controlling their lands, especially if he was overly harsh or taxed the



populace too heavily. Sometimes a *daimyo* would join his peasants in rebellion against a lord to whom they all owed fealty and obedience.<sup>1</sup> After centuries of warring, the *samurai* warrior caste had a difficult time adapting to peace. The end of warfare impoverished many *samurai* and made their way of life and their skills somewhat obsolete. Social norms frowned upon a member of the *samurai* class dirtying his hands with commerce, so the options of the class were limited. This led to a great deal of abuse of their peasantry and a restlessness that made them an unpredictable force.

In an attempt to depressurize this situation and maintain the newly forged peace, major lords required their vassals to relocate to the castle district where each lord had his seat. This allowed each lord to closely monitor his vassals and quash any attempts at rebellion, while also ensuring that minor *daimyo* were not inciting the peasantry to rebellion by abusing them. *Samurai* with fealty to a particular lord relocated to his castle-town, as did many masterless *samurai* who were looking for new positions as retainers.

This strategy led to an explosive urbanization of Japan. Prior to this period, few cities had more than 50,000 residents. By 1700, Edo housed over one million residents, while Kyoto and Osaka had blossomed to approximately 400,000 each, and many other cities had between 50,000 and 100,000.<sup>2</sup> The *samurai* class alone did not fuel this boom in population. Many of the new urban residents were members of other classes who moved to the cities in order to service the needs of the *samurai*. Although largely despised by the *samurai*, and considered to be on the bottom rung of the Confucian social hierarchy used as a model by the *bakufu*, merchants made the most out of being the purveyors of goods and services.<sup>3</sup> Like the European landed nobility during the West's transition to an urbanized, money-based economy, the landed *samurai* classes did not fare

particularly well in this new system. The bourgeoisie, on the other hand became more educated, wealthy and sophisticated and had the cash to pursue interests, entertainments, and ventures that intrigued them. New opportunities abounded for whole classes of people whose possibilities for upward mobility had previously been significantly limited, if not altogether impossible. The *bakufu*, however, continued to attempt to apply the old hierarchies as the guidelines for governance of the society

Japanese society was in flux; in spite of the government's attempts to keep all members of the society restricted to their traditional roles and social standing, the radical changes brought about by urbanization and the developing cash-based economy could not be so easily quelled. The ground was fertile for the growth of *kabuki* a new and unique entertainment that (like the many of the elements in the blossoming culture of Tokugawa-era society) blended traditional forms and new innovations to synthesize a completely new creation.

Scholars consider the birth of the new creation of *kabuki* to have occurred when Okuni performed dances and short skits in the dry riverbed of the Kamo River in Kyoto in 1603. Okuni and other early performers drew upon some *noh* theatre and traditional temple dance conventions, with their ties to the sacred. However, the inclusion of the *shamisen*, a new musical instrument from China, added a new twist to the proceedings. Additionally, the use of stately *noh* conventions, the art form of Japan's social elite, for the presentation of bawdy, raucous, erotic performances that even the lowest social outcast could watch was no doubt considered subversive by the *bakufu*. It is critical to remember that *noh* theatre was so much the exclusive province of the *samurai* class, that most other people in Japan were not even permitted to view it.

Okuni's troupe of performers, composed of male and female entertainers, often cross-dressed to add spice to their already titillating performances. One of the most popular skits performed by Okuni and her troupe was *keiseikai* the purchase of a prostitute by a rakish young fellow. Okuni often played the role of the rake, where her clearly feminine charms contrasted with her outlandish male garb, which often included flamboyant colors, swords, rosaries, and other male accessories.<sup>4</sup> The prostitute that she was purchasing was often played by one of her male actors, increasing the sexual tension present in such scenes. The androgynous appearance of Okuni and her troupe and the often overtly sexual material performed in her skits made *kabuki* a draw for new audiences from all social strata. bored *samurai* with no real duties to occupy them, merchants with money to spend, and the poorest of the poor could all gather to see and hear these open-air performances. This lively, erotically charged new performance style was like nothing ever seen before and it became wildly popular across Japan. Troupes of *kabuki* performers sprang up all over the land, some composed of men and women, as Okuni's troupe was, but even at this early point, some troupes were composed entirely of women and some entirely of young men or boys.

Throughout Japan, shrine dancers like Okuni and other performers were often prostitutes. Prostitution was common in Japan, and many entertainment venues such as bathhouses, teahouses, and even temple shrines had women and boys available to hire for sexual purposes. In fact, it was tacitly understood that all entertainers in Japan were sexually available for a price no matter what their more openly advertised skills might be. In this regard, *kabuki* actors and actresses were no different than any of the other entertainers in Japan. *Kabuki*'s origins are inextricably linked with prostitution and early

performance material demonstrates this admirably *Kabuki* dances were designed to show off a performer's skills and charms with an eye to acquiring a customer for later. Like the dances, the *keiseikai* (prostitute buying) skits were also calculated to fire a potential customer's imagination. Eroticism and beauty has been at the very core of *kabuki* performance since its inception. In the early days of *kabuki*, troupes usually traveled, and their arrival in town would create quite a stir. Other "troupes" were sometimes the prostitutes from a nearby brothel. Brothel managers organized performances as an extended advertisement for a brothel's wares.

Women's *kabuki* at this time was often referred to as *yūjo kabuki*, or female-prostitute *kabuki*. Performances, whether by traveling troupes or local talent "inspired debauchery, drunkenness, and violent behavior."<sup>5</sup> Disagreements over performers' strengths and weaknesses might erupt into brawls. Fights also broke out over competition for the right to hire a particular performer's charms. *Samurai* were the nominal ruling class and felt that they were entitled to certain privileges. However, with the restructuring of Japan's feudal society, the merchant class was flourishing and had a great deal of available cash with which to purchase entertainments of all kinds. *Samurai* often lacked the monetary resources to indulge themselves with *kabuki* actresses. This led to a great deal of tension between the socially inferior merchants and the economically inferior *samurai*. This situation was further compounded by *samurai* borrowing ever-increasing amounts of money from well-to-do merchants in order to have access to the most exotic and popular of the *kabuki* actresses. The money-lending situation came to such a head that the merchants eventually had to petition the *shogunate* for payment of delinquent debts owed to them by *samurai*.<sup>6</sup> The *bakufu* (*shogunate*

government) disliked the public disputes and brawls, the heavy borrowing and most significantly, the way *kabuki* caused social boundaries to be blurred and crossed.

The Tokugawa *shogunate* based its ruling principals on Confucian thought, which stressed that each social class occupied a specific rung on the hierarchical ladder of society. Members of each class were not to deviate from the duties and expectations of their station. *Kabuki* appealed to a large segment of the populace, caused mixing and rivalry between members of distinct classes, and subverted the *bakufu*'s attempt to maintain a well-ordered society. Compounding the issue was the fact that *kabuki* caused inappropriate business interactions between the highest faction on the ladder (the *samurai*) and the lowest (the merchant class) and fights over performers who were officially classified as *hinin* (non-human).

The *bakufu*'s dissatisfaction with all of this rampant class-mixing due to *kabuki* performances led to the first attempts to control and regulate *kabuki*. One of the first attempts at regulation was to allow performances to take place only in designated areas of a town. These areas were usually located (naturally enough) adjacent to the prostitutes' quarter of the city. One notable example of this occurred in 1608 when a *kabuki* performance in the town of Sumpu created such an upheaval that *shogun* Tokugawa Ieyasu, who was visiting the area, immediately relegated *kabuki* performance to an area adjacent to that city's pleasure quarter.<sup>7</sup> The continuing public disruption caused by *kabuki* performance led to regional bans on performance starting as early as 1610.

Many of these controls imposed upon *kabuki* were modeled on those regulations already imposed upon prostitution. Prostitution in Japan had been regulated as early as the Muromachi period (1336-1573). Laws controlling prostitution became more stringent

at the end of the sixteenth century, when *shogun* Hideyoshi relegated all licensed brothels to a specific area on the outskirts of the city, or even outside the city limits.<sup>8</sup> The *bakufu*'s attempt to control prostitution by licensing brothels and pleasure quarters rather than outlawing them indicates that prostitution was not overtly morally repugnant to the *shogunate*. In fact, in instances where unlicensed girls were found operating outside of the licensed quarter, they were simply rounded up and deposited in the licensed quarter<sup>9</sup> The *bakufu* looked upon prostitution with something of a "bread and circuses" attitude: it kept the lower classes placated. Therefore, as long as it was under some kind of legal control, it could be used to maintain the *bakufu*'s desired social hierarchy. The pleasure quarters were not developed for the use of *samurai*, who were technically forbidden to patronize such areas. In the government's rationale, as long as prostitutes were relegated to their own quarter, it would reinforce the separation of the classes that was the foundation for a well-ordered society.

As long as it was controlled by the government and patronized only by the appropriate classes, prostitution itself was not anathema to the *bakufu*. However, the popularity of *kabuki* actress-prostitutes was definitely upsetting the applecart. Because rivalries for actresses' favors were disrupting the status quo and causing *samurai* to run up huge debts in order to secure trysts with these tantalizing, cross-dressing creatures, something had to be done to lessen the appeal of *kabuki*. In 1629, in an attempt to force a separation between prostitution and *kabuki* and to alleviate the wide-spread popularity of *kabuki*, women performers were banned from appearing on stage altogether. The fact that this ban was often reissued for the next two decades indicates that it was not immediately successful, but eventually women did cease performing publicly.

With women now gone from the stage, a new group of *kabuki* artists took hold of the public's imagination: boys and young men. Although older scholarly information indicates that all-boy troupes came into being with the demise of all-female troupes, a number of more recent scholarly writings on the subject point out that both all-woman and all-boy troupes were popular and performing at the same time. *Wakashu* or boys' *kabuki* commanded the same level of fervent enthusiasm as women's *kabuki* had. One might wonder how adolescent boys and young men could fire the ardor of a primarily male audience in the same way as sexually available women performing erotically charged skits and dances could. The answer comes in the form of a strong tradition of male sexual love in Japanese culture at this time, where androgyny was prized and having sexual relations with a boy or young man was in no way shameful. Beautiful boys performing erotic dances and skits was just as arousing to the male audience as beautiful women performing the same types of acts. Because these beautiful young male actors were also available for hire as prostitutes, the transition to an all-male *kabuki* theatre in no way lessened the sexual charge inherent in *kabuki* performance.

Male-male sexual love, called *nanshoku*, "the way of youths," has a long history in Japan, especially among religious communities and the *samurai* ruling classes, and is easily discovered in a survey of literature, art, and other cultural institutions of the Tokugawa era.<sup>10</sup> In pre-Tokugawa Japan, *nanshoku* was commonly practiced in monastic communities and amongst the *samurai* while on military campaign. These two environments were single-sex enclaves with little or no access to women. In both the monasteries and the military camp of the *samurai*, relationships between men and boys existed in a framework of duty and dedication to a pre-existing relationship (between a

monk and his *chigo* (acolyte), or between a lord and his vassal).<sup>11</sup> The relative age of the partners rather than their social standing was the factor in determining who the passive partner was and who the active partner was during intercourse. Even if there was a slight discrepancy between the social standing of the partners, they were always both from the same social caste. These relationships were often considered part of the younger partner's education in the ways of manhood.<sup>12</sup> However, with the rise of a cash economy, *nanshoku* became a commodity that could be purchased by the cash-wealthy middle class with no strings of relationship or duty attached. Following in a common pattern for rising bourgeoisie classes in many cultures, the merchants of Tokugawa Japan had no qualms about engaging in a practice indulged in by their social superiors and government leaders.<sup>13</sup>

Because there was no negative moral implication to *nanshoku*, it was simply another pleasurable way to pass the time. It is also important to recognize that principles of yin and yang in Japanese thought influenced views on sexual intercourse. It was believed that engaging in heterosexual intercourse helped a man to maintain his yin-yang balance. If he did not engage in intercourse, his yang (male essence) would become too strong, leading to illness. However, too much heterosexual intercourse could lead to a weakening of his yang through exposure to too much yin (the female essence). Homosexual intercourse would not weaken his yang because there was no yin involved, so not only was *nanshoku* enjoyable and morally and socially acceptable, it had no particular health risks.<sup>14</sup> Japan's new and burgeoning cities were also full of men, which may have made it more convenient to hire a young male bed-fellow than a female



companion. In the most extreme case, Edo in the early 1700s had almost two men for every woman living within the city<sup>15</sup>

Performers in *wakashu kabuki* were beautiful, young, androgynous and just as available as their female counterparts had been. Androgyny had been an exciting aspect of women's *kabuki*, but within the *nanshoku* traditions of the monasteries and the *samurai* enclaves, it was also prized. In monastic communities *chigo* (acolytes) were often expected to dress as women, to wear their hair in a feminine manner, and to use make-up. Many times young male prostitutes or the younger partner in a *nanshoku* pairing would wear the red under-*kimono* of women beneath their male garb to heighten their androgyny. They were not expected to *behave* like women, however. Their speech patterns, social skills and behaviors remained distinctly masculine.<sup>16</sup> Female-likeness of a younger partner was not the attraction in *nanshoku* relationships. Boys were prized for their beauty, but also for their valor, skill at arms and other traditionally masculine traits. The ideal eroticism was the result of the androgynous blending of masculine and feminine traits.

Just like their female counterparts, these young men used their stage performance as an advertisement for their sexual talents and physical charms. They showcased their wares in two main types of performances. The first was *shudo goto*, in which homosexual love relationships were acted out and which did much to showcase the boys' beauty. The other commonly-presented pieces were the *keisei goto*, the prostitute procuring scenes first popularized by Okuni and her troupe.<sup>17</sup> There were so many available boy prostitutes in the major cities of Japan at this time that prices were quite reasonable. Theatre owners saw prostitution of their boy actors as a way to garner favor

from powerful or wealthy patrons, and the boys' services were often paid for in tips or gifts.<sup>18</sup> Their androgyny was compelling, and the impact they made in their women's garb or in a collection of male and female dress made people absolutely wild for them.

Donald Shively quotes from an Edo guidebook:

When these youths, their hair beautifully done up, with light makeup, and wearing splendid padded robes, moved slowly along the runway, singing songs in delicate voices, the spectators in front bounced up and down on their buttocks, those in back reared up, while those in the boxes opened their mouths up to their ears and drooled; unable to contain themselves, they shouted: "Look, look. Their figures are like emanations of the deities, they are heavenly stallions!" And from the sides others called: "Oh that smile! It overflows with sweetness. Good! Good!" and the like, and there was shouting and commotion.<sup>19</sup>

If the *bakufu* thought that the social upheavals caused by women's *kabuki* would be extinguished with the banishment of women from the stage, they were sorely mistaken. Ironically, by removing women from the *kabuki* stage, the *bakufu* set the course for the merchant class to further imitate the upper classes by adopting the *nanshoku* behaviors and customs that had been the sole province of monastic and *samurai* communities. The same rivalries and disputes erupted over the beautiful boys of *wakashu kabuki* as over women's *kabuki*. Tales of monks selling the religious relics of their temples and of young *samurai* squandering the wealth of their households and selling their hereditary swords in order to purchase the favors of boy actor-prostitutes were rife.<sup>20</sup> *Samurai* once again racked up huge debts to merchants in order to indulge themselves with their favorites.<sup>21</sup> Banning women from the stage had certainly not managed to put a stop to the distasteful and dangerous trend of the highest caste becoming embarrassingly infatuated with social outcasts.

The *bakufu* decided that it was time to take additional measures. In 1642, a ban was enacted that forbade female impersonation on stage. *Kabuki* theatres obeyed, and presented all male plays, with strongly *nanshoku*-themed plots.<sup>22</sup> In 1648, the *bakufu* banned homosexual prostitution and forbade homosexual practices by dancers or actors. These regulations were largely ignored. Finally, after these other efforts failed to curb the mounting problems arising from the public's enthusiasm for *wakashu kabuki* and its exotic young performers, the government banned *wakashu kabuki* altogether in 1652. Eventually, cooler heads prevailed, and the licensed theatres in each of the major cities were allowed to resume performances, but with a new set of regulations and conditions imposed upon them.

These additional regulations had been enacted in yet another attempt to curb the social upheaval caused by *kabuki* performers. Actors of any age were now required to wear their hair in the style of an adult male, with the forelock shaven. The forelock, or *maegami*, was an "identifying mark of youth" and the forced shaving of this area was meant to remove *kabuki* actors from the realm of available boy actor-prostitutes.<sup>23</sup> In short, it was a blatant attempt to reduce the androgyny and beauty of male actors, marking them as grown men and rendering them unattractive as paid sexual partners. Actors over the age of fourteen were prohibited from wearing female garb<sup>24</sup> The government also required actors to register as either female-role actors or male-role actors, in a further attempt to reduce androgyny in *kabuki*. The *bakufu* began pushing for a change in the type of plays presented, preferring the plot-based *monomane kyōgen zukushi* (fully enacted performance) to the dance reviews that had been a staple of *kabuki* performance. Theatres were more and more restricted to one particular district within a

city, just as the brothels were restricted to the pleasure districts. Actors were restricted to the theatre quarter, not only for work, but as the place they were required to live.

The overarching effect of all of these regulations was to force *kabuki* to respond with greater creativity in order to maintain the support and interest of its audience. Beautiful women were not allowed on stage, and the beautiful boys that had been even more popular than the women could no longer rely on their gorgeous hair, androgynous garb and enticing dancing to draw an audience. Yet the foundations of *kabuki* performance were still rooted in erotic entertainment. Had the *kabuki* theatres discarded the erotic elements of their performances in the face of these new regulations, they never would have survived. Creative ways to circumvent the *bakufu* restrictions without losing the core of *kabuki* performance spurred the development of the *onnagata* as a central component of *kabuki*. Youth and beauty were now no longer enough to carry a plot-based performance. Actors registered as female-role actors had to overcome the handicaps of depicting femininity without beautiful hair, female garb, wigs or other outward trappings of the gender. Actors playing the female roles were not even allowed to cover their shaven foreheads (although this regulation was largely ignored). Although an actor's physical charms were still important, he had to have talent beyond just his looks in order to successfully portray female roles. Female-role actors had to begin developing ways of performing beauty and eroticism.

In spite of the government's best effort to separate *kabuki* and prostitution, the two were still inextricably linked. Teahouses and other entertainment establishments sprang up around the theatres within their restricted districts. The teahouses especially served as assignation spots for actors and patrons. Within the theatres themselves actors

would often meet with guests in private boxes to serve *sake* and entertain. Many established actors found that it was most profitable to keep a stable of “trainee actors” in their homes. These trainees were in fact boy prostitutes or *iroko* (sex youths), and often were not actually receiving training in the craft of acting, but served to provide additional income to the actor housing them. They could be hired out to teahouse customers for sexual favors or other entertainment. They sometimes even appeared on stage, usually in walk-on roles. If an *iroko* showed talent, he would actually be trained to take on real acting roles. Even *iroko* who were not being trained to perform as actors were called actors to avoid trouble with the authorities. Eventually, there were so many *iroko* in Edo that they could not all be housed in the theatre quarters, and many of them were moved to the Yoshi-cho, Edo’s pleasure district, to work in teahouses there. Although they now resided outside of the theatre quarter, they were still considered theatre employees and might be called upon for crowd scenes or other similar roles in which they were little more than set dressing. The teahouse that housed *iroko* (sex youths) would costume them and allow them to perform on stage for free because showing them off before an audience would bring patrons to the teahouse. The numbers of *iroko* in various cities around Japan eventually became such a problem that laws were enacted in 1689, 1694 and 1695 stating that only theatre managers could keep trainees.<sup>25</sup>

This continued relationship between prostitution and theatre performance is critical to the development of the performance of the *onnagata*. Estimates indicate that between 80 and 90 percent of all *onnagata* began their careers in the theatre as *iroko* (sex youths).<sup>26</sup> Their ideas of how to portray femininity arose not out of observation of a woman or even women in general, but out of the aesthetic that they were most versed in:

that of *bishōnen no bi*: the beauty of male youth. Most *kabuki* actors learned their own aesthetic regarding eroticism and the most pleasing way of presenting themselves to patrons through their training as *iroko*. Katherine Mezur states: “These adolescent boys had their own particular gender art, which evolved from a long history of boy entertainers and male love relationships.”<sup>27</sup> Ironically, by restricting the early *onnagata*’s options for presenting female gender roles, the *bakufu* forced the *onnagata* to portray a more ambiguous and androgynous style of femininity. When expected to play female characters, early *onnagata* developed stylized feminine acts based on *wakashu* (boys’ *kabuki*) performance traditions. All performers must start with what they know as a jumping-off point for developing performance. *Onnagata* knew how *iroko* behaved in order to please and arouse patrons because most of them had worked as *iroko*. They used *iroko* erotic behavior as the starting point for developing female characters instead of attempting to start from scratch. The resulting gender ambiguity of these “feminine” performances continued to fuel the public’s desire for androgynous beauty.

Considering *kabuki*’s ties to prostitution, it is not surprising that one of the first female roles developed by *onnagata* in *kabuki* is the *yūjo*, or female prostitute. Again, the portrayal of the ideal courtesan’s beauty and eroticism arose out of the *wakashu* traditions of beauty and eroticism, not out of a female perspective of beauty and eroticism. The *keiseikai* (prostitute buying) scenes were still enacted in *kabuki*, even within more plot and character-driven stories. While early *kabuki keiseikai* scenes seem to have involved just the propositioning of the prostitute by the young man-about-town, the *keiseikai* scenes were now imbedded in stories that involved the male character arriving in the pleasure district for some particular reason. It might have been that the

prostitute to be propositioned was be the true love of the male character and he was visiting the quarter specifically to see her, or he might have been on some other mission that took him there. However thin the guise that set up the *keiseikai* scene, there was now some attempt at plot leading up to the main event. Because the *keiseikai* was still central to *kabuki* performance, *yūjo* roles were needed more than any other types of women. This was compounded by the fact that in the early days of *kabuki*, the audiences were primarily male. An all-male audience did not demand a more diverse range of female characters in order to be entertained. Even in the *monomane kyōgen zukushi* (fully enacted performance) plays, which were supposed to be based in plot and acting rather than dances designed to display an actor's beauty, a segment of the plot would often involve a *yūjo* (courtesan) dancing for a patron, and the beauty of the androgynous *onnagata* and the homoerotic tension underlying the act was extremely popular. In short, despite the *bakufu*'s regulations, *kabuki* performances still relied heavily upon dance and *keiseikai* to showcase an actor's charms, just as they had from Okuni's day.

The development of the various *yakugara* (role types) for *onnagata* is a demonstration of the innovation of individual artists and the refinement of an art form over centuries of use. The *yūjo* (courtesan) role in *kabuki* remains the basis for all other female *yakugara* (role types). Just as the beautiful boy aesthetic served as the basis for feminine gender portrayal in *kabuki*, all other female *yakugara* are built upon the original *yūjo* type developed by early *onnagata*. When new types of female roles were needed to meet the expanding repertory of plays, such as princesses, young ladies of the *samurai* class, simple country girls and others, rather than reinvent the wheel, *onnagata* added or altered elements of the *yūjo* type. Because of the inherently sexual nature of *yūjo* roles,

that characteristic is always present in *onnagata* roles. Eroticism, or *iroke*, is a key component that must be present in every female character on the *kabuki* stage. Even contemporary *onnagata* say that the *yūjo yakugara* (courtesan role-type) and its attendant *iroke* are at the core of every woman they play<sup>28</sup>

In the early days of the *onnagata*'s artistic development, femininity was essentially a thin veneer of female-likeness applied over the *wakashu kabuki*'s conventions of displaying boy-beauty and sensuality. The artistry that is now associated with *onnagata* performance developed out of the innovations of key *onnagata* who made major innovations in their craft. The two *onnagata* who first arose as stars due to their portrayal of female roles were Yoshizawa Ayame I and Mizuki Tatsunosuke I. They were innovators, legends, and rivals, and both began their *kabuki* careers in 1690<sup>29</sup>. Without their separate and specific developments, the art of female-role specialists in *kabuki* might have developed very differently.

Mizuki Tatsunosuke I was initially ranked as the top *onnagata* of his day. He excelled in dance, which had long been considered the principal art form of the *onnagata*. He was famous for his energy and highly-skilled execution of difficult and dynamic dances, but his beauty and femininity were not usually remarked upon, which was unusual for an *onnagata* at the time. Equally unusual, Tatsunosuke I did not begin his *kabuki* career as an *iroko*, but as a member of an established *kabuki* acting family<sup>30</sup>.

Yoshizawa Ayame I did not have the fortuitous family connections of Tatsunosuke I to help launch his *kabuki* career. Like most other *onnagata*, Ayame I began his stage career as an *iroko*. He lived with a family of *shamisen* players and initially received his theatrical training from Arashi San'emmon I, a player of *tachiyaku*.



(male) roles. Ayame I was supported by one of his prostitution patrons who paid for his training as an actor.<sup>31</sup> He was said to be extraordinarily beautiful and wonderfully androgynous.

Many scholars and *kabuki* actors consider Yoshizawa Ayame I to be the founder of the *onnagata*'s art and a number of *onnagata*'s *yakugara* (role types). His innovations were not driven by a desire to innovate for art's sake alone, but out of the necessity of furthering his career. In order to make a name for himself outside of the shadow of his rival Tatsunosuke I, Ayame I would have to develop a distinctive and exciting style of his own. Because Tatsunosuke I dominated *onnagata* dance, Ayame I chose to focus on acting artistry instead. He did so by developing a (for *kabuki*) highly naturalistic form of *onnagata* gender performance. Ayame I purported that it was not enough to appear feminine and adopt feminine gestures. He said that in order to fully develop the *onnagata*'s art one must live a feminine lifestyle. Off stage, he adopted a feminine mode of dress, and feminine hairstyles. But unlike earlier androgynous boys who dressed as women but behaved as men, Ayame I also adopted feminine behaviors. He used the women's mode of speaking, ate foods appropriate to women, and in all ways strove to respond to the world around him as if he were a woman. Although he was a married man with children, he responded with embarrassment to mention of them, and held himself apart from *tachiyaku* (male-role) actors in order to heighten the erotic tension and illusion of femininity between them on stage. Item XXII in *The Words of Ayame* states:

The *onnagata* should continue to have the feelings of an *onnagata* even when in the dressing room. When taking refreshment, too, he should turn away so that people cannot see him. To be alongside a *tachiyaku* playing the lover's part, and chew away at one's food without charm and then go straight out on the stage and play a love scene with the

same man, will lead to failure on both sides, for the *tachiyaku*'s heart will not in reality be ready to fall in love."<sup>32</sup>

Ayame I felt that the highest form of femininity that an *onnagata* could aspire to was the *keisei*, or high-class courtesan. He believed that the “languor,” “charm,” and “erotic appeal” of the *keisei* should be at the core of any feminine role.<sup>33</sup> His performances were said to blend his boy-prostitute background and the courtesan ideal.<sup>34</sup> His adherence to a feminine lifestyle actually served to make him a highly androgynous figure, and the Japanese fascination with androgyny at this time helped to catapult him to popularity until he was the highest-ranked (and highest paid) *onnagata* in all of Japan. Ayame I's focus on the acting art of the *onnagata* paved the way for later *onnagata* to create their own innovations in the development of different *yakugara* (role types). In spite of his adherence to a feminine lifestyle, in his writings, Ayame I notes that his art is not about impersonating women. Instead he “selected and adapted gender role models and gender acts that fit and enhanced the physical skills learned from his *iroko* performance training.”<sup>35</sup> In addition to his development of gender acts depicting femininity, Ayame I also developed a set of stylized acts depicting youth. These developments consisted of physical, vocal and costuming choices that served as signals to tell the audience “This is beauty,” or “This is youth.” Those symbols for beauty and youth then acted as a supplement to the *onnagata*'s own youth and beauty. If he was not as young or beautiful as he once was, he could still display those qualities through the use of the kabuki symbol system. Ayame I's innovations in developing these signals for depicting these key elements of femininity laid the groundwork for future *onnagata* to depict these traits no matter what their level of physical beauty or their age.

Ayame I's groundbreaking development of stylized gender acts and his emphasis on the acting art of *kabuki* (as opposed to the traditional emphasis placed on *onnagata* dance) coupled with his undeniable influence as a star performer opened the way for future development of the *onnagata* performance *kata* forms. *Kabuki* stars almost all followed a particular pattern of development that resulted in further stylization and codification of the *onnagata* art. A star performer would usually become known for a signature act, and this signature act would not only be imitated by other *onnagata*, it would also become a template for other roles played by the star *onnagata* who was known for it.<sup>36</sup> In order to garner attention and fame, most young *onnagata* began by imitating the performances of established stars. If a young performer could manage to be likened to a star in one of the many actor-ranking guides published in various cities, it was his ticket to better pay and greater public acclaim. However, being likened to another performer could only garner public acclaim for so long. In order to attain lasting fame and the social and monetary standing that went with it, a rising *onnagata* had to be innovative. *Kabuki* audiences of the Tokugawa era wanted innovation, novelty and spectacle. Through this system of imitation and innovation, star *onnagata* shaped the codified *kata* of the various female roles of the *onnagata*.

Stars had the clout to bend the rules, innovate and mutate the existing *kata* to create something new and exciting. If a particular innovation did not work, their reputations were usually well established enough to weather the blow. In fact, their star status and strong fan support meant that any innovations they made would most likely meet with wild acclaim.<sup>37</sup> These star innovations could take many forms. They could consist of a costuming innovation, such as a style of *kimono* or a way of wearing the *obi*

(sash) or *boshi* (headscarf). Individual movements could also be modified by a star and then added to the canon of *onnagata* feminine display<sup>38</sup> In order for a star gender act to be a viable “candidate” for addition to the *onnagata katas*, it had to have appeal to the audience, and sufficient flexibility to be adapted and personalized by a great range of performers.<sup>39</sup>

A few examples of star *onnagata* innovations may help to illustrate how this codification of *onnagata* displays of femininity evolved. We have already mentioned Ayame I, who was central to the development of *yūjo* (courtesan), *nyōbō* (wife) and *musume* (young maiden) roles. As we have seen, Ayame I advocated for developing a vision of femininity from the inside out (through his adherence to a feminine lifestyle) in order to give depth and feeling to his female portrayals. Although he advocated for avoiding male roles, he did in his later years play some *tachiyaku* (male) parts, before returning to his mainstay *onnagata* roles.<sup>40</sup> In spite of this, his practice of living a feminine life was frequently imitated by other *onnagata* for many decades. Segawa Kikunojo I was the first true *maonnagata*, a performer who would only play women’s roles. Like Ayame I, he began his theatrical life as an *iroko*, and lived a feminine life. At the height of his fame, he was often asked to perform the roles of elegant young nobles and he repeatedly refused. Rather than giving the role to a *tachiyaku* (male role-actor), theatre owners and playwrights reworked the script so that the role was female, and Kikunojo I then consented to perform it.<sup>41</sup> Kikunojo I also strengthened the *kata* for playing youth so that *onnagata* of any age could perform any role. Previously, as an *onnagata* aged, he either moved into *tachiyaku* (male) roles or restricted himself to *baba* (old woman) roles.<sup>42</sup> Since Kikunojo I would not play *tachiyaku* roles, and the great

majority of *onnagata* roles are for characters under thirty years of age, this innovation certainly helped him maintain his top standing as a star *onnagata* far beyond the age at which earlier *onnagata* would have been forced to move into a different performance realm. Part of his secret for success as an *onnagata* came from his belief that the *onnagata*'s art was technical and could be taught. His writings on the art of *onnagata* performance dealt very specifically with actions, postures and outward signs of femininity.<sup>43</sup>

Iwai Hanshiro V developed the *akuba* role type, or evil female. Prior to this almost all *onnagata* characters had been depictions of the positive qualities of woman. Hanshiro V's development of the *akuba* (evil female) added a whole new dimension to the *onnagata* repertoire. Sodezaki Karyū developed the *onna budo* (woman warrior) role, which then influenced the entire canon of *nyōbō* (wife) roles. We have also already touched upon Mizuki Tatsunosuki I, the famous dancer. Tatsunosuki I's prime innovations were in dance, and he is credited with developing many of the most famous dance roles for *onnagata*, including two dance styles. These are *shosagoto* (gesture pieces) where the dancer's gestures do not mime the words of the accompanying chant, but instead display poetic images that reinforce the feeling of the chant. He is also credited with the development of *hengemono* (transformation pieces) in which an *onnagata* transitions through many different characters or aspects of characters in a single dance piece, often without leaving the stage. These are truly spectacular performances, and were so popular with audiences that some *tachiyaku* (male-role) performers even began co-opting *hengemono* into their performance canons. Another early innovator of *hengemono* was Nakamura Tomijuro I.<sup>44</sup> These dance innovations were critical even to

*onnagata* who were primarily known for their acting art because many of the stylized gestures used to portray the female gender were derived directly from the *onnagata* dance traditions.

It is critical to recall that throughout these continuing developments and evolutions of the *onnagata*'s art and the development of specific role types and *kata*, women were not involved. Although some *kabuki* actors came into contact with courtesans and other women of the pleasure districts, they did not use observation of women as the basis for their female role types. Instead, they began with the *wakashu* (boys or young men) traditions of beauty and sensuality and developed female role types out of that tradition. As new star *onnagata* changed and adapted the core female role type to encompass a wider range of female *yakugara* (role types), they altered the already-existing *yakugara*, which were never truly based on women at all. Ayame I was encouraged by a colleague to visit one of the pleasure districts to observe the changes in the behavior of the courtesans there. He refused, saying that it was more important to play the courtesan roles with great style and grace than with realism, saying “*keisei* should be of the old style and somewhat fantastic.”<sup>45</sup> In other words, portraying his *ideal* of the high-class courtesan was more important than portraying the *reality* of the high-class courtesan.

In order to continue to draw an audience, *kabuki* performances could not afford to grow stale. As *onnagata yakugara* (role-types) developed greater diversity, so too did the *kabuki* audience. As the middle-class continued to prosper, more and more women began to attend the *kabuki* theatres. In many households of the Tokugawa era, wives controlled the family purse strings. In order to entice them to part with their money,

theatre managers began to search for storylines and characters that would have appeal to an audience beyond the traditional male patron of *kabuki*. The *onnagata* of this developmental period embodied the Tokugawa ideal of femininity: chastity, virtue, patience and tact.<sup>46</sup> Many *kabuki* plots centered around a woman's self-sacrifice to save a lover or family member: a mother kills her own child to save her husband's honor, a princess sells herself into prostitution to raise money for her impoverished lover, a courtesan insults a powerful client in order to remain faithful to her lover and is killed when the client (or her lover) flies into a jealous rage. The irony of this is, of course, that *onnagata* portray a highly stylized and abstract vision of femininity developed by male intellectuals and artists. Sue-Ellen Case notes that in all-male theatres, women are a fictional construct favoring patriarchal values, while suppressing the true experiences of real women.<sup>47</sup> Female roles in *kabuki* teach women what they should aspire to be, without allowing them any input. However, it is interesting to note that the male-female dichotomy that is present in the *onnagata* allowed them to express feelings and sentiments that real women might wish to express but could not due to social conventions discouraging them from doing so. *Onnagata* might also express things on-stage that women might not in actuality feel, but that the audience (especially men) would be titillated to hear.<sup>48</sup> For example, in the *kabuki* theatre a scene of rape often led a female character to realize that she really enjoyed sex and she would then fall passionately in love with the man who had violated her. This is certainly not the realistic response of a woman in that situation.

To be an ideal woman in the Tokugawa era was to imitate a masculine abstraction of Woman that was developed through the *wakashu* (young boy) and *iroko* (sex youth)

traditions. As previously noted, most *onnagata* roles in *kabuki* showcased the idealized qualities of women. Self-sacrifice, beauty, chastity, duty and eroticism are qualities found in most *onnagata yakugara* (role types). Even courtesan roles were usually faithful to a particular lover, and innocent maidens were imbued with a sexuality that derived from the role-type's roots in the *yūjo* (courtesan) role types. These role types were not developed from observation of actual women, and yet women throughout the society imitated them. The influence that *onnagata* had over ideals of femininity are reflected in the way their patterns of behavior, dress and fashion were imitated by women of the community. Women often adopted the hairstyles and fashions of the most popular *onnagata*. Courtesans would model their behavior and gestures after the *onnagata*'s portrayal of the *yūjo* roles in order to seem more desirable and sophisticated to their male clientele. The irony of this was that these ideals were developed by men out of a tradition of young male prostitutes pleasing male clients.

Through their *wakashu* background, *onnagata* developed highly codified stylizations in order to present an image of femininity. This is managed through a strict regimen of vocal techniques, physical control (including posture, gesture, and movement patterns), make-up, wigs, costuming and props. Central to this illusion of female gender is costuming. The costumes of the *onnagata* completely cover the body. The *kimono* for both men and women is designed to turn the body into a column, which helps to add to the androgyny of the *onnagata*. The *obi*, too, is used to assist in creating a perfect body illusion, with the ideal being drawn from the *bishōnen no bi* (beautiful boy aesthetic) for a slim, slight build that could belong to either a delicate boy or a young girl, which helps to maintain the androgyny that is a factor in *onnagata* performance. Because the



costuming for *onnagata* roles conceals much of the body and disguises the true shape of the body underneath, it allows the spectator to imagine whatever gender they find most sexually arousing. The only areas of the body left uncovered include the face, the fingers (sometimes just the tips) the back of the neck (and sometimes the upper back) and possibly a glimpse of ankle above the *tabi* socks. The face is often made to appear smaller and more feminine by the manipulation of the wig's hairline, which is often set very low on the face in order to enhance the delicacy of the *onnagata*'s painted-on features.

Costuming, wig and make-up are all designed to highlight one key area of the body: the *eriashi*, the nape of the neck. The *eriashi* and the upper back are central to the *onnagata*'s art and to maintaining the critical sense of *iroke* (eroticism) in performance. In Japanese culture, the nape of the neck is considered one of the most erotic areas of the body. Most costuming for *onnagata* is designed to highlight the *eriashi* area. An *onnagata*'s wigmaker and costumer work to make sure that the styling of the hair at the back of the wig and the curving drape of the back of the *kimono* neck accentuate the gracefulness and beauty of the back of the neck. The neck should look long and willowy, and the line of the shoulders should be gently sloping.<sup>49</sup> The make-up application for the *eriashi* is of critical importance in the presence of *iroke* (eroticism). All *onnagata* who wear the traditional pure white make-up that is common to *onnagata yakugara* (role-types) leave a small amount of their natural skin showing through at the base of the wig's hairline in the *eriashi* region. This not only highlights the *iroke* of this body part by allowing naked skin to peek out from under the artificial beauty and perfection of the *onnagata*'s presentation, but it also draws attention to the gender ambiguity of the

*onnagata* role by allowing spectators to see the male body underneath the performance of the feminine construct. In all *onnagata yakugara*, even in a *baba* (old woman) or *akuba* (evil woman) role, the *eriashi* is always exposed through the artful use of the *kimono* drape and wig line.

The feminine role in *kabuki* must always contain an element of the erotic, and part of that eroticism is the androgyny that comes from a stylized gender presentation being performed with a male body underneath. Intellectually, the spectator knows that the performer is a man, but the display of femininity coupled with that knowledge allows for the excitement of a performer that can fulfill the fantasies of the audience. The audience is constantly aware of the male gender of the actor's body, and depending on how the *onnagata* chooses to perform certain roles; the male gender at times recedes behind the feminine role and at times is very transparently present. Depending on an individual audience member's desires, he or she can imagine whatever body they most desire when watching *onnagata* perform.

The *onnagata* also strictly controls his physical and vocal performance at all times. The voice is usually a falsetto, although in some transformation roles and some *baba* (old woman) roles, the natural male tone may be used. There is often a rhythmic meter to the spoken dialogue in *kabuki*, and while the dialogue is not truly sung, it usually has an exaggerated or stylized delivery. The *onnagata*'s body is also highly controlled. Steps are tiny and movement is often slow. Costuming helps the *onnagata* achieve this, as it is very difficult to take long strides or move very quickly in most *onnagata kimonos*. Elbows are usually held in tight to the sides of the body, the knees are usually bent, and the hips thrust back. In order to accentuate the line of the neck and to present a more

feminine silhouette, *onnagata* frequently try to add a slope to their shoulders. This is achieved by pulling the shoulder blades down and in toward the spine. *Onnagata* must often kneel onstage for extraordinary amounts of time while maintaining a body shape that is achieved through great tension. This tension and the stillness of many *onnagata* roles draw the eye and command the audience's attention.<sup>50</sup> The result of all of this rigorous reforming of the male body is a strenuous and often painful set of actions that must be beautiful above all else.

The beauty of *onnagata* performance is as essential a quality to the female roles as eroticism and androgyny. Beauty must be maintained no matter what actions are taking place on-stage. During torture, death, and scenes of tremendous grief the *onnagata* must remain beautiful. Contemporary *onnagata* who are well aware of the psychology and inner life of the characters they play say that the most critical thing for them to concentrate on in performance is *sen*, or the line that they create on stage: the outward beauty of the role. When the required physicality and outward beauty of a role is mastered, the inner life of the character shines through. *Onnagata* of today say that the constant focus on the line they cut helps them to ignore the physical agony of maintaining a line or carrying the weight of the massive costumes required for many roles.<sup>51</sup>

The stylized gender acts of the *onnagata* also serve as signals to the audience. Certain costumes, wigs, props and physical gestures are so specific to particular *yakugara* or even a specific character that when an *onnagata* arrives onstage, the audience knows exactly who they are seeing. *Onnagata* not only project an image of the female gender; they also communicate to their audiences exactly who this particular character is, her social status, her age and sometimes even her state of mind. With time and repetition,

*onnagata* gender acts have become so distilled that the *yakugara* have become archetypes of Japanese women of the Tokugawa period. *Onnagata* roles depict the original models or ideal forms for different types of women upon which all other expectations of feminine behavior in that society were based.

The innovations developed by earlier star *onnagata* such as Kikunojo I enabled *onnagata* to continue playing a broad range of women onstage regardless of their age or actual physical beauty. This development moved the *onnagata* art a little farther away from its close ties to boys' prostitution, which relied heavily on true beauty and youth. As *kabuki* continued to develop and expand its repertoire, more interesting female characters arrived on the *kabuki* stage, along with more daring *onnagata*. With the development of such *yakugara* (role types) as the *akuba* (evil female), and more developed and interesting versions of *keisei* (high-class courtesan), *musume* (young girl) and *nyōbō* (wife) roles, (and as the roles moved further away from the *iroko* and *wakashu* traditions), *tachiyaku* (male-role) performers became more interested in stepping in to *onnagata* roles. This led to a break-down between the strict gender differentiation that actors had worked under previously.<sup>52</sup> Plays became more and more fantastical, violent and sexual during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The *bakufu* which had held the reins of society for so long was beginning to crumble, and new plays reflected the instability of a society in flux.

What direction *kabuki* might have gone next would have no doubt been startling, but the Meiji restoration changed everything. In 1868, the Tokugawa *shogunate* was removed from power and the emperor of Japan regained control of the nation. Japan was opened to the West for trade purposes and a huge influx of Western ideas and morality

swept through the country. In an attempt to appear sophisticated, civilized and modern to the new European and American visitors, fashionable Japanese adopted Western aesthetics and philosophies. Things native to Japan were considered backwards. In the West at this time, realism was becoming a key aspect of literature, and theatre was moving in the direction of Ibsen, Strindberg and Chekov. Society was governed by Victorian codes of morality, in which sex and the body were hardly discussed between consenting adults much less used as the central theme for a theatrical presentation. Homosexuality was not only considered morally reprehensible, but was punishable by prison. In the face of these ideas, Japan's most popular mass entertainment was in for a change.

In an effort to showcase its own cultural accomplishments, the Meiji government co-opted *kabuki* as its crowning achievement in the performing arts. For the first time, *kabuki* was recognized as an art form by the government of Japan, and although this brought about a rise in the official social status of actors, it was not without its price. In order for *kabuki* to meet with the approval of Western visitors, things had to change, and the *onnagata*'s art was most impacted by the government's "support" of *kabuki*. *Kabuki* seemed ideal as a cultural centerpiece, except that Western Victorian morality was not going to give a warm reception to an art form that featured violence (beheadings, revenge killings and suicides), blatant sexuality (prostitutes as major characters, and seduction as a common plot point) and (until the Meiji restoration) an undeniable link to homosexuality and prostitution. *Kabuki* was co-opted by the government as a pedagogic instrument. The Meiji government expected *kabuki* theatre to demonstrate how people *should* behave, instead of showing how they really *did* behave. In 1872, theatre

managers were encouraged to showcase plays “that stress moral righteousness,” “in which good always triumphed,” and to “stop telling lies and to adhere to historical truth.”<sup>53</sup> Censorship of plays was rife, and the list of things that should be portrayed and the list of things that must be avoided kept on growing.<sup>54</sup>

As part of this attempt at sanitizing the theatre, the government pushed to replace *onnagata* with actresses. In an effort to save their careers, *onnagata* toned down much of the flamboyance and eroticism in their performances.<sup>55</sup> Fewer and fewer *akuba* (evil female), *yūjo* (courtesan) or *hengemono* (transformation) roles were featured in plays. The Western influence and the government’s acknowledgement of *kabuki* meant that *onnagata* and other actors were expected to behave as pillars of moral dignity. As a result, the *onnagata* tradition of living a feminine life off-stage almost vanished. Under the new expectations of the government, it was considered unseemly to maintain a lifestyle that seemed so closely tied to the homoerotic world of *iroko* (sex youths), *nanshoku* (male-male love) and the days when actors and prostitutes were interchangeable. To live as a woman when a man had a wife and children (and disguised that fact) seemed calculated to signal homosexual availability, which the new government was not so sanguine about as its predecessors had been. Those *onnagata* who continued to live as women off-stage were very subtle about it, so as not to give offense. They might maintain a slightly feminine styling to their *kimono*, and some traces of *onnagata* gestures and speech patterns in their off-stage lives, but they rarely appeared in public in full feminine costume, wig and make-up anymore.<sup>56</sup>

In addition to the impact made on the *onnagata*’s art by the severe reduction in the number of *onnagata* who lived by female social codes off-stage, they began to face

changes from within the theatre. During this transitional period, the *tachiyaku* (male-role) actors had control over the theatre troupes. Because *tachiyaku* were not under the same intense scrutiny from the government as the *onnagata*, they also had more liberty to push the boundaries of their art. They often took over and played *onnagata* roles.

Although to this day, *tachiyaku* (male-role actors) stringently avoid the *musume* (young girl), *himesama* (princess) and *yūjo* (courtesan) roles, they often co-opted the *hengemono* (transformation) and *akuba* (evil female) roles, which were showy, interesting, and did not require the same degree of femininity as many of the other female roles. As *tachiyaku* performers continued to perform roles that had been the province of female-role specialists, those roles were irreparably changed and the *onnagata* had their ability to express and develop their art severely curbed.

The end result of this was two-fold. *Onnagata* often “received” roles back from *tachiyaku* (male-role) actors with changes to the *kata*. Since many of those *tachiyaku* had control of the theatre troupes, *onnagata* were obligated to include any alterations made by male-role actors. Also, while the *tachiyaku* were pushing the boundaries of *kabuki* performance and bending rules and traditions that had been in place for centuries, *onnagata* were expected to anchor themselves more firmly in the traditions of the gender acts that had been long-standing *kata* for each role. Reformist *tachiyaku* actually relied on the *onnagata* to maintain *kabuki*’s ties to the past.<sup>57</sup> In part, this maintenance of tradition may derive from the fact that the *onnagata* gender acts sprang from a specific culture and time period (the Tokugawa era) and to move too far from that time and place would irrevocably damage the *onnagata*’s complex and beautiful art. Even so, after this period of transition, the division between actors who played female roles and those who

played male roles was much less strictly followed, and *onnagata* performance became more feminine than it was in its androgynous past.<sup>58</sup> Some scholars and *kabuki* performers indicate that the Meiji restoration and the attendant changes that it brought to the *onnagata*'s art signaled the end of true *onnagata* performance. The sanitization of the art form, the "meddling" of *tachiyaku* performers in an area that had been built up and developed over centuries by actors who were highly specialized performers, and the severe reduction of the androgyny and erotic undertones of the *onnagata*'s work seem to have sucked some of the excitement out of the *onnagata*'s world.

It is interesting to note that during the transitions in *kabuki* of the Meiji era, the relationship between *tachiyaku* and *onnagata* seems to shift toward a more Western relationship between male and female. All *kabuki* actors are male; therefore age and rank, not gender, should determine hierarchy in a troupe. However, as *onnagata* went through the changes to their art in this period, they were forced to move further from their androgynous performance of female roles into a more feminized presentation. At the same time, they seem to have been subjected to being treated more as *women* would have been treated in troupe hierarchy. The male-role actors took what they wanted from the *onnagata*'s sphere of expertise, expected *onnagata* to maintain a status quo while they experimented and made changes to *kabuki*, and then handed roles back to *onnagata* with "improvements" made. The past androgyny of *kabuki* performance moved in a more binary-gendered direction after this era.

It seems so evident that one need not even mention it, but the reformed *kabuki* was not a hit with *kabuki* audiences. They preferred the traditional plays done with all the dazzle and eroticism that made *kabuki* an unquenchable theatrical form in spite of the



*bakufu*'s attempts to curb it. Contemporary *kabuki* has not really regained its status as theatre for the average man. It is considered by many to be slow and difficult to understand. It is also prohibitively expensive for the average citizen to purchase tickets to a *kabuki* performance in contemporary Japan. Star *kabuki* actors still come from hereditary acting lineages, but many other actors come out of a training program at the National Theatre in Tokyo. Almost all *kabuki* actors are under contract to one entertainment firm, and like all art forms produced for a profit, economic considerations must be balanced with artistic ones. Unfortunately, this can stymie the innovation of contemporary actors. If a particular play is popular and does well, then an actor is contracted to perform the same work many times, which leaves little room for innovation that may reduce the commercial appeal of the work

*Kabuki*'s status as a national cultural icon and a classical theatre form can also stifle creative growth. *Kabuki* began as subversive, sexy entertainment that was accessible to every member of society. Its very nature as a popular entertainment meant that it was fluid; in order to survive it had to be innovative and responsive to the public moods and desires. When *kabuki* became a classical theatre, it changed its focus to the preservation and the retention of an historical ideal. Some younger actors are attempting to breathe new life into *kabuki* in an attempt to connect it with today's audiences. In spite of the fact that their energy and innovation are winning audience members back to *kabuki*, and that innovation and change were central to the true spirit of *kabuki* during the Tokugawa era, these alterations are frowned upon by those who wish to retain *kabuki* as a living museum piece.

The crucial elements of *iroke* (eroticism), androgyny and sexual tension that pervade each and every *onnagata* role would be lost without male bodies performing feminine gender acts. Fujita Hiroshi, a contemporary scholar of *kabuki* states. “When *onnagata* decay, *kabuki* will decay, and when *kabuki* becomes extinct, *onnagata* will be extinct.”<sup>59</sup> *Onnagata* portray an idealized set of female characters, but to replace them with women actors following the same stylized and abstracted acts would leave the *onnagata* roles as hollow shells, bereft of the core aesthetic that continues to fascinate scholars and audiences of *kabuki*. To fully understand the origins of the *onnagata kata* and *yakugara* (role types), one must look at the origins of *kabuki*, its inescapable ties to widespread prostitution and Japanese traditions of *nanshoku* (male-male love). The basis for *onnagata* gender acts and role types originates not with women but with an aesthetic that prized androgyny and the beautiful boy. Its very origins make the male body critical to viable *onnagata* performance. As an unsanctioned art of the people, *kabuki* developed creatively in order to circumvent the restrictions imposed on it by a class-conscious government. Its long history of innovative stars, daring performers and beautiful boys adored by men and women alike should not be lost in the contemporary view of *kabuki* as a classical art form and living museum depicting the Tokugawa era. Without *men* continuing to breathe life into the *onnagata*’s art, *kabuki* would indeed become a pale shadow of its flamboyant, beautiful and above all, arousing past.

Although *kabuki* is unquestionably a clear product of the culture and era that birthed it, a study of it reveals much that is familiar. On the surface it seems very different than Western theatre traditions of the past or contemporary popular entertainment, but it continues to fascinate us because it does resonate with us. *Kabuki*

actors of the past often stressed that it was important to work as an ensemble. Stardom was important, but not at the expense of making other actors look bad. For a contemporary performing artist, this respect for the importance of the collaborative nature of theatre moves *kabuki* out of the realm of the ancient and foreign and makes it close kin to our own performance ideals. Similarly, the *onnagata* practice of living a feminine lifestyle in order to develop a better understanding of woman's inner life seems very much like modern method acting to contemporary theatre practitioners. Although the presentation of female role-types was created through stylization and imagination, not direct observation, Ayame I and other star *onnagata* stated that the feminine lifestyle was critical *in order to display a realistic female character*. This practice helped *onnagata* relate to some of the experiences of women and to develop responses that grew organically out of their feminized life experiences. Within the stylized realm of *kabuki* performance, the focus was still on telling a human story, one that relied on emotions and conflicts that are familiar to members of any culture and era: love, duty, family and the conflicts that arise out of attempting to balance these aspects of humanity.

The universality of human experience that ties all theatre together throughout the world should not be surprising. It is somewhat more surprising to recognize in *kabuki*'s fascination with beauty, eroticism and androgyny aspects of contemporary Western performance. The concept of idealized female types developed by men should be familiar to anyone viewing a Hollywood blockbuster movie: whether a woman is a lawyer, schoolteacher, prostitute, nuclear physicist or CEO of a Fortune 500 company, she usually looks like she could moonlight as a Playboy centerfold. Beauty is considered central to female characters in entertainment. Sex continues to draw audiences, no matter

to what culture or era they belong. It is central to the human experience, human drives, and is universally intriguing. Androgyny also draws us, fascinates us and intrigues us. The popularity of such performances as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, and *The Crying Game*, (to name just a few) demonstrate that even in a culture not as comfortable with sexual flexibility as Japan's, androgyny attracts and intrigues us. The beauty espoused in contemporary Western culture is in some ways as abstract as that displayed in the *kabuki* of centuries ago. Youth is highly prized, with the ideal beauty being modeled on very young teen-aged girls. The slim, slight body favored by fashion magazines has much in common with the slim-hipped, willowy beauty of the androgynous *kabuki onnagata* of Tokugawa Japan.

Across time and culture, *kabuki* continues to fascinate us because the things that made it a raging success in its own day drew heavily upon the nature of humans as sexual beings with a love of beauty and fantasy. The androgyny of its *onnagata*, the sexual ambiguity coupled with the beautiful facades that they presented, and the sheer spectacle of their performance impact us today because human nature remains the same in North America now as it was in Japan 400 years ago. As long as men continue to perform the *onnagata*'s idealized constructs of femininity on the *kabuki* stage, they will continue to infuse *kabuki* with a juicy, tantalizing aspect found in no other classical theatre performed in the world today.

## NOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> Gary P. Leupp, *Male Colors: The Construction of Homosexuality in Tokugawa Japan* (Berkeley: U of California Press, 1995) 58-59
- <sup>2</sup> Leupp 59-60.
- <sup>3</sup> Leupp 60-61
- <sup>4</sup> James R. Brandon, William P. Malm, and Donald H. Shively, *Studies in Kabuki. Its Acting, Music, and Historical Context* (Honolulu: U of Hawaii Press, 1978) 63.
- <sup>5</sup> Laurence R. Kominz, *The Stars Who Created Kabuki* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1997) 19.
- <sup>6</sup> *Portrait of an Onnagata*, video, Films for the Humanities and Sciences, 1992.
- <sup>7</sup> Brandon, Malm, Shively 6.
- <sup>8</sup> James R. Brandon, William P. Malm, and Donald H. Shively, *Studies in Kabuki. Its Acting, Music, and Historical Context* (Honolulu: U of Hawaii Press, 1978) 7
- <sup>9</sup> Brandon, Malm, Shively, 7
- <sup>10</sup> Leupp 1.
- <sup>11</sup> Leupp 61-62.
- <sup>12</sup> Leupp 57
- <sup>13</sup> Leupp 62.
- <sup>14</sup> Leupp, 20-21.
- <sup>15</sup> Leupp 62.
- <sup>16</sup> Leupp 46.
- <sup>17</sup> Brandon, Malm, Shively 9
- <sup>18</sup> Leupp 73-74
- <sup>19</sup> Donald H. Shively, "Bakufu Versus Kabuki." *A Kabuki Reader* Ed. Samuel L. Leiter (New York: M. E. Sharpe, Inc, 2002) 33-59
- <sup>20</sup> Leupp 131.
- <sup>21</sup> *Portrait of an Onnagata*.
- <sup>22</sup> Leupp 90-91.
- <sup>23</sup> Katherine Mezur, *Beautiful Boys/Outlaw Bodies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) 66.
- <sup>24</sup> Brandon, Malm, Shively 9
- <sup>25</sup> Brandon, Malm, Shively 37-38.
- <sup>26</sup> Brandon, Malm, Shively 37
- <sup>27</sup> Mezur 67
- <sup>28</sup> Mezur 227
- <sup>29</sup> Kominz 185.
- <sup>30</sup> Kominz 184
- <sup>31</sup> Kominz 183-184
- <sup>32</sup> Yagoshirō Fukuoka, "The Words of Ayame," eds. and trans. Charles J. Dunn and Bunzō Torigoe, *The Actors' Analects*, *Studies in Oriental Culture* 3 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969) 61.
- <sup>33</sup> Kominz 196-197.
- <sup>34</sup> Mezur 89-90.
- <sup>35</sup> Mezur 92.
- <sup>36</sup> Mezur 80.
- <sup>37</sup> Mezur 81.
- <sup>38</sup> Mezur 80.
- <sup>39</sup> Mezur 80.
- <sup>40</sup> Kominz 215-217
- <sup>41</sup> Mezur 101.
- <sup>42</sup> Mezur 102.
- <sup>43</sup> Mezur 103-104.
- <sup>44</sup> Mezur 81.
- <sup>45</sup> Fukuoka 60.
- <sup>46</sup> Brandon, Malm, Shively 41.
- <sup>47</sup> Sue-Ellen Case, *Feminism and Theatre*, (New York: Routledge: 1988) 7

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- <sup>48</sup> Leupp, 177  
<sup>49</sup> Mezur 192-194.  
<sup>50</sup> Mezur 183.  
<sup>51</sup> Mezur 207.  
<sup>52</sup> Mezur 108.  
<sup>53</sup> Yuichiro Takahashi, "The Opening of the Shintomi-za," *A Kabuki Reader*, ed. Samuel L. Leiter, (New York: M. E. Sharpe, Inc: 2002) 140.  
<sup>54</sup> Takahashi 140.  
<sup>55</sup> Mezur 115.  
<sup>56</sup> Mezur 120-121.  
<sup>57</sup> Mezur 120-123  
<sup>58</sup> Mezur 134.  
<sup>59</sup> Mezur 18.

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