

JAPANESE THEATRE: DIFFERENCE AND DIVERSITY

12. Międzynarodowy Festiwal Literatury i Teatru
between.pomiędzy

THEATRE

Nō, Gagaku, Kagura, Bunraku,
Kabuki, Kumiodori

MYTHOLOGY

Amanouzume, Kappa

FOUR EXERCISES

Finding answers, writing a
ghost story, making a short
video

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AND



Introduction



Japan is a country more culturally diverse than might seem at first glance. Japanese theatre forms are unique and, at the same time, interesting and beautiful. This chapter will present and discuss examples of several classical theatre forms that have developed in Japan, such as Kagura, Gagaku, Nō, Kabuki, Bunraku, and Kumiodori. The chapter is divided into distinct areas of Japanese culture, where the diverse forms of theatre have been made by different social groups over the course of Japanese history. Together they form a cultural mosaic of Japanese theatre.

Japan

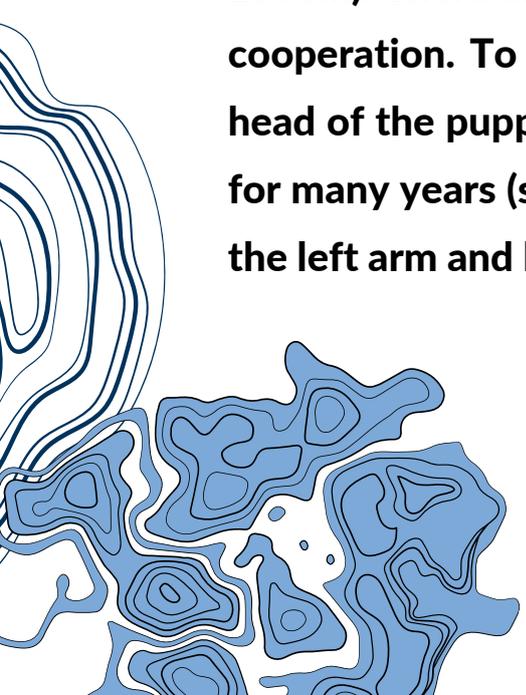


https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Japan-CIA_WFB_Map.png

- Gagaku and Nō theatre developed in the old capital of Japan - Heian or **Kyoto**.
- Kagura is a form of rural theatre that occurs in almost every region in Japan. Therefore, the performances are regionally diverse.
- Kabuki originated in **Kyoto** but was popular in Edo (today's Tokyo) as well.
- Bunraku is from the Kansai region, which is centred on the city of **Osaka**.
- Kumiodori is a theatre from the tropical island of **Okinawa**.

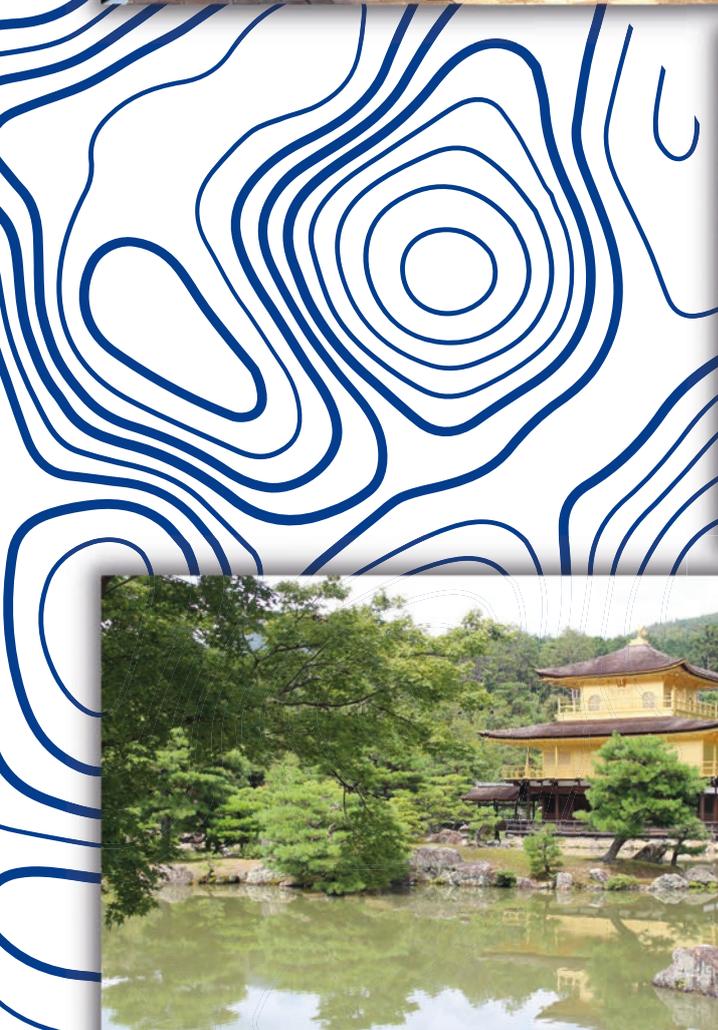
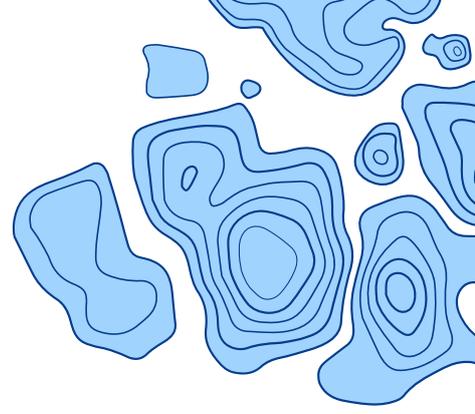


Do you know that...?

- The warlords in Japan and their warriors (samurai) usually **practiced writing poetry** and performed in Nō theatre.
 - Nō (能) in literal translation means **skill** or talent.
 - In Nō theatre, actors with **masks** are spirits, demons, or memories. Actors without masks usually play humans.
 - Usually, you should know the play **before** you go to the theatre. This is the most important in Nō and Kumiodori theatre. Nō is performed in medieval Japanese and Kumiodori in the Ryūkyūan language, so subtitles or audio guides are often provided and used. However, most of the plays refer to well-known folktales.
 - The stage in Nō theatre is considered **sacred**.
 - In Bunraku, the **puppets** are almost as big as humans (approx. 150cm). There are 3 puppeteers who operate one puppet in skilful cooperation. To become the master puppeteer, who operates the head of the puppet and the right arm, a person needs to work hard for many years (sometimes even 30 years) operating legs first, then the left arm and body.
- 

- 
- Kumiodori, a kind of theatre from Okinawa, was invented in 1719 by one person only - Tamagusuku Chōkun[1].
 - Approximately 150 years ago, Okinawa was not yet a part of Japan; it was part of a separate Ryukyu Kingdom, which does not exist anymore.
 - Although currently Kabuki is seen as a proud monument of traditional Japanese culture, historically it was closely associated with nightlife and female or male prostitution.
 - There are long vowels in Japanese, which is written using Chinese signs – kanji, not an alphabet. Hence, there is a debate how to write long vowels in English. There are many systems of writing Japanese in the Roman alphabet used in English. Some extend vowels by adding “h,” “o,” or “u”; others use a macron – a dash above the letter. That is why you can see the name Nō written as Noh and both are correct. It is important to stick to one system of transcribing kanji in Roman letters.

[1] Fun fact: In Japan, surnames/family names are written first, and the given name comes second. Hence, Tamagusuku is a surname and Chōkun is his given name.



Nō and Samurai

- **Nō** is a theatre form developed in medieval times by masters Kan'ami and Zeami, father and son. They theorised about and described the theatre style that was popular within the warrior class. Many warlords and samurai, such as Toyotomi Hideyoshi, also acted on Nō stages in breaks between battles and bloodshed. Zeami's books were kept secret and were passed from generation to generation of actors. They were published in the 19th century during the process of the westernisation of Japan, and the secrets of the acting method used in the Nō theatre was revealed to the world.

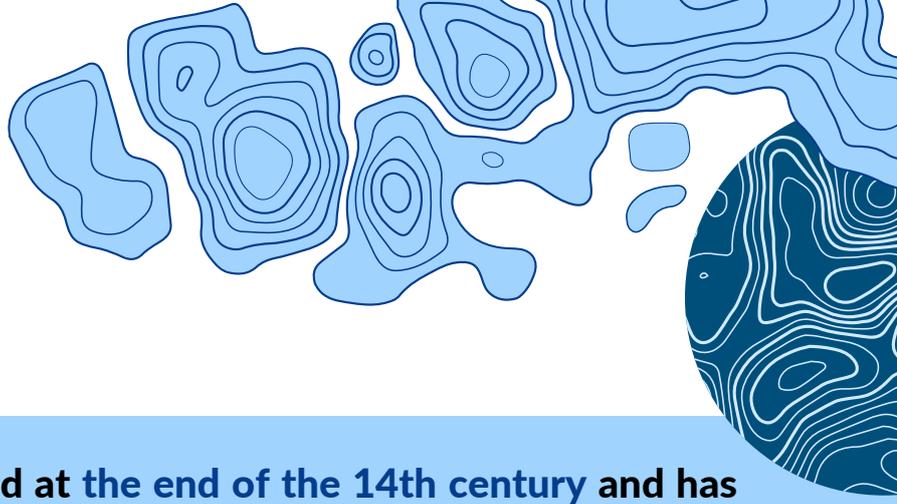


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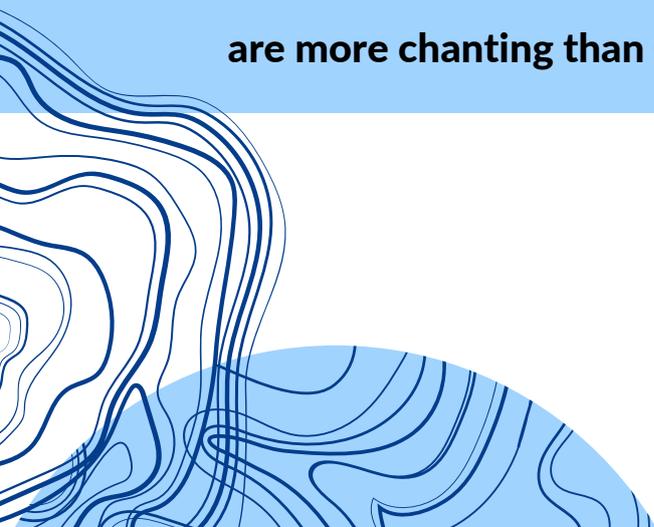
- **Samurai** were the military nobility of feudal Japan. The warrior class existed from antiquity, and in medieval times, they rose to power as the ruling class, until the feudal class system was abandoned at the end of the 19th century. Samurai had the privilege of carrying a sword (called katana), and they could arbitrarily decide on the life or death of any peasant whom they came across. They fought in wars for their warlords, and there was a time in Japanese history when wars between clans continued for about 150 years (the Sengoku period, 1467-1615). After that, they became bureaucrats and artists, in times of peace, when the culture of theatre flourished.
- **Samurai** were known for writing poetry, and their life was often compared to the flower of cherry tree (a symbol of Japan) – it disappears with the wind as soon as it blooms.

[2] Fun fact: There is the dispute about who was the last samurai in Japan. The movie *The Last Samurai*, directed by Edward Zwick, tells a story about Saigō Takamori, who led the last uprising of samurai, disenchanted with the rapidly modernising Japan. But there is also another candidate for the title. Onoda Hiroo was a soldier in the Japanese Imperial Army who fought in the Second World War on a small island in the Philippines. When the war was over, he refused to surrender and hid in the forests for almost 30 years. Finally, he came back to Japan in 1974 where he was called the last samurai.





- Nō theatre was established at the end of the 14th century and has been performed without much modification ever since. What we see and hear on stage is 14th-century language and movement passed from generation to generation of actors.
- Nō actors train their sons (or adopted sons) and pass on acting knowledge to them. As an actor, you specialize all your life in one role or character type, the same ones as your father performed.
- There are 2 main characters in Nō: Shite (the main character – a ghost or demon, who wears a mask) and waki (the second character – a human who listens to the story); sometimes they are accompanied by assistants (tsure). There is no director, but all actors train individually in their roles for their entire life, so they know how to compose a performance together in the moment of performance. Their gestures are symbolic and minimal. Their voices are more chanting than speaking.



- Masks in Nō theatre are used for hundreds of years, and they are considered **national treasures**, regarded as sacred items, where souls dwell. There is a legend that masks choose actors, not the opposite. Although this is only a legend, some actors were known for using only selected masks. One of the most striking masks is the one of a demon called **hannya**. What do you think it symbolises? The answer: a woman possessed by anger, grief, and jealousy, who has suffered for so long that she has turned into a demon seeking revenge. The gold on her eyes and teeth indicates that the character has lost her humanity.



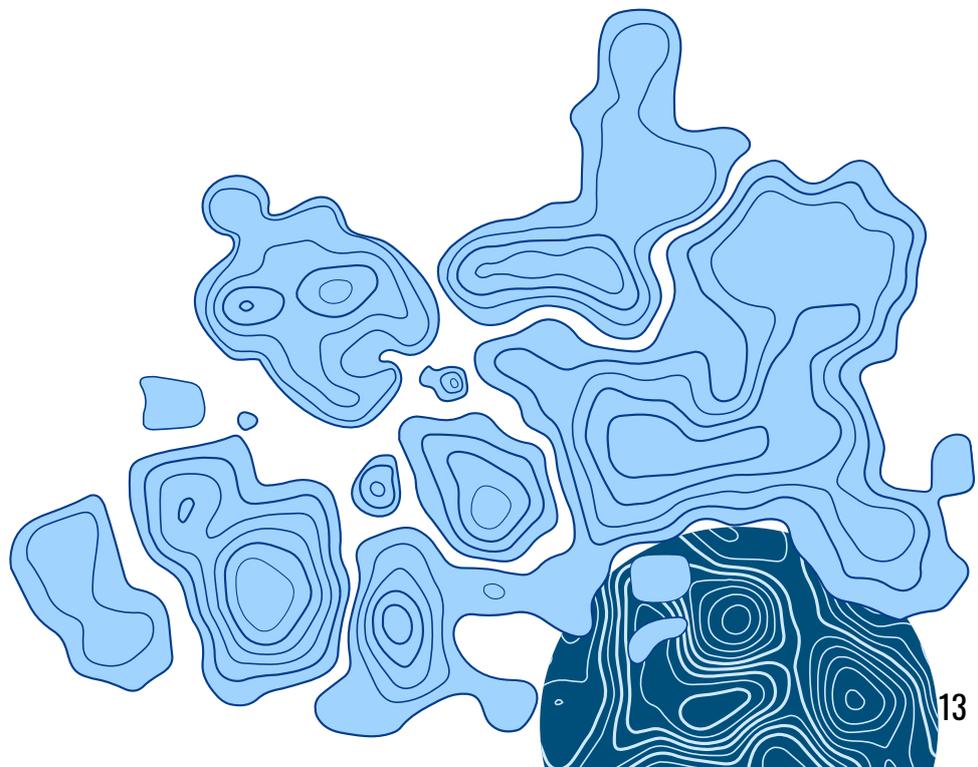
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hannya_\(Noh_mask\),_Tokyo_National_Museum_C-1555.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hannya_(Noh_mask),_Tokyo_National_Museum_C-1555.jpg)

- There are **musicians** and a **choir** at the back and on the right-hand side of the stage; they describe the situation and express the emotional layer of the performance.
- Historically, an experience involving Nō theatre could take many hours. There could be up to 5 Nō performances (serious and emotional) at a time; however, they were interspersed with light and funny **Kyōgen** performances to release tension. Kyōgen, which is comedy presented in contemporary language about everyday silly issues, was a part of the experience.

Nogaku-In-the Noh-Theatre



https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c1/Nogaku-In-the_Noh-Theatre-by-Ogata-Gekko-1891.png



Gagaku and the Emperor

- Have you ever heard the voice of a phoenix? That's a unique bird from legends; it burns itself up and rises from its own ashes. There is an instrument used only in the theatre form known as Gagaku, which is made to represent the voice of this mystical creature from legends. The instrument's name is **shō**, and [here you can listen to it.](#)



[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sho_\(wind_instrument\),_Japan,_1800s_AD,_wood,_lacquer,_bamboo,_silver_-_Peabody_Essex_Museum_-_DSC07499.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sho_(wind_instrument),_Japan,_1800s_AD,_wood,_lacquer,_bamboo,_silver_-_Peabody_Essex_Museum_-_DSC07499.jpg)

- **Gagaku** is an ancient performing art that might seem quite unusual to a European audience. The tempo, rhythm, and scale of music do not correspond to the norms of harmony set in European cultures. Hence the sound of Gagaku can seem completely alien. You can listen to an extract here:

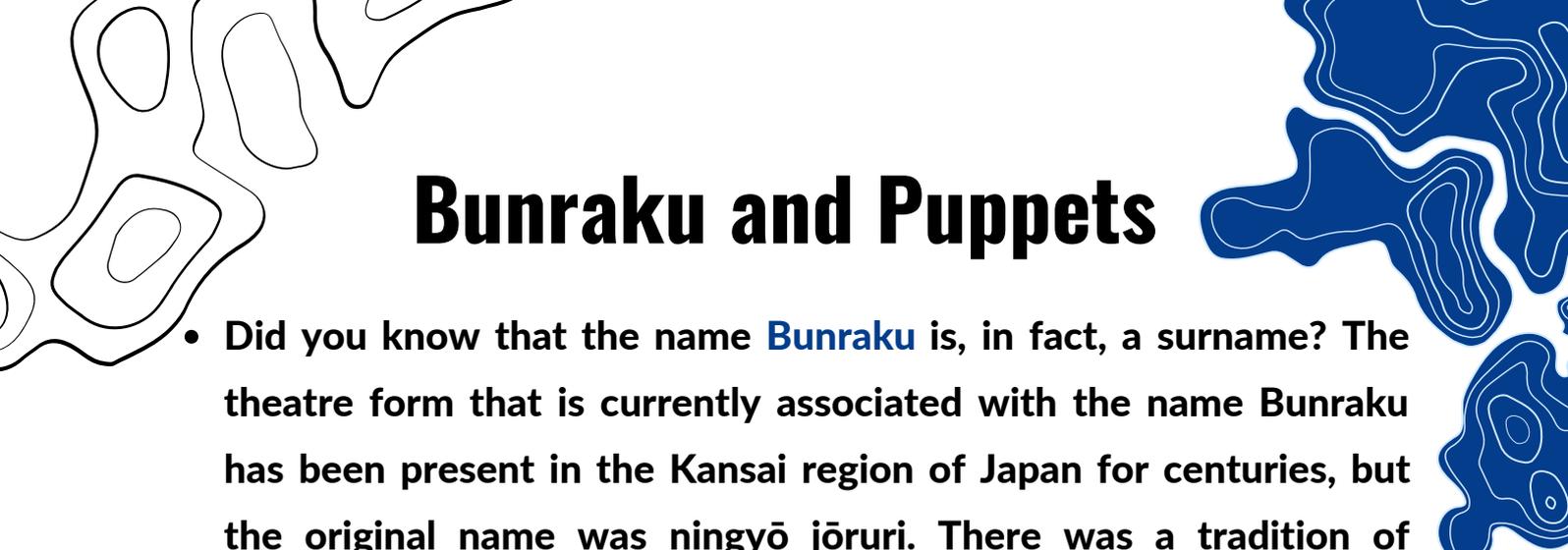


- For hundreds of years, Gagaku was performed only for the aristocracy and the emperor. The native religion in Japan - **Shintoism** - celebrated the sanctity of nature and the myriad gods living within nature. The emperor was regarded as a descendent of the sun goddess and as a god-like figure himself. Hence, Gagaku was theatre made to be performed for the gods in the Imperial Palace.

Kagura and Gods

- In Japanese native religion (Shintoism)[3], the many gods are ever-present in nature and the phenomena that surround us. They all have their stories and legends in a rich and vibrant Japanese mythology. Usually, during the summer, communities from all the regions of Japan celebrate a good harvest and give praise to their local gods. One way to celebrate and express gratitude to the deities and pay respect to tradition is to stage local myths in a theatre performance.
- **Kagura** is a form of theatre made by the people for the people (and for the gods, of course). Amateur actors practice together all year to re-enact a selected myth or story in front of their local community. Usually, such a celebration takes many hours as there can be multiple performances in one day. In a communal space or shrine where the stage is set up, people are welcome to watch the performances, relax, eat, or even sleep.
- The costumes and masks are hand-made by the actors and their families. Some of the costumes can weigh as much as 30 kg. The actors work all year together to celebrate their local traditions.
- More on Kagura can be seen [in this episode of *Begin Japanology*](#). 

[3] Buddhism was introduced to Japan in the 6th century and hugely influenced philosophy, literature, and arts. Even today, in Japan several beliefs coexist without problems, such as Shintoism and Buddhism.

The top corners of the page feature decorative map outlines. The top-left corner has a white outline of a map, and the top-right corner has a solid blue map outline. Both maps show irregular shapes representing landmasses or regions.

Bunraku and Puppets

- Did you know that the name **Bunraku** is, in fact, a surname? The theatre form that is currently associated with the name Bunraku has been present in the Kansai region of Japan for centuries, but the original name was *ningyō jōruri*. There was a tradition of travelling storytellers who entertained people with local legends, with the use of a puppet. Back then, there was a famous legend about a princess *Jōruri*. The story was so popular that it gathered crowds across the region. So, when people saw a puppeteer come to the village, they would often say in a figure of speech that a “*Jōruri* puppet” had arrived. Hence the name *ningyō jōruri* (puppet *jōruri*). Gradually, from a one-person performance with a simple portable box and one puppet, a sophisticated theatre style emerged. This is only one of the legends associated with the theatre style.
- Later, in the 19th century, a puppeteer who came from a family with such a tradition opened a theatre in the main city of the region - **Osaka**. The theatre was named after his surname - the Bunraku Theatre. Although, the theatre style was very popular in Osaka and many puppet theatres were opened, the Bunraku Theatre always stood out; so the people would link puppet theatre with the name Bunraku. To this day, the Japanese puppet theatre is internationally known as Bunraku.

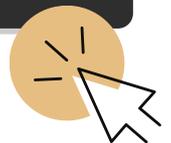
- **Osaka was always a merchant city, one that welcomed people from the seas and the land. Hence, the city and the puppet theatre developed most in times of peace and prosperity. New plays emerged, mostly with the themes of everyday city life and tragic love affairs. The stories were presented from the perspective of townspeople, and the most influential writers important for the theatre were Takemoto Gidayū and Chikamatsu Monzaemon[4].**
- **What was unique for puppet theatre was that it did not involve as many live actors, so it was much cheaper to produce a new play in Bunraku than in Kabuki. It was a test stage to introduce many new plays. Nowadays, the old Bunraku puppets are precious works of art and heritage, and creation of new ones demands skilful traditional craftsmanship.**
- **Each puppet, besides original clothing, has distinctive facial features and hairstyle. Some can be animated with moving eyes, eyebrows, mouth, or fingers. The puppets do not usually open their mouths for speaking, only for laughing or for the expression of horror. Before the performance, the puppet's head, hairstyle, kimono, and accessories are assembled, as they are each stored separately.**

[4] Fun Fact: Chikamatsu Monzaemon was so influential on Japanese popular culture that he is often compared to Shakespeare. He authored around 130 plays, used in Bunraku and Kabuki.



- How are the story and emotions presented? Near the stage with puppets there is a small stage with a shamisen player and a chanter (gidayū bushi). They work together; the musician plays without notes to improvise the melody of the chanter. The chanter improvises with the text in response to the reactions of the puppeteers, and the puppeteers respond to the story. All the elements of theatre work together to compose a performance.

- An example of Bunraku can be found here:





Kabuki and Stardom

- Kabuki is a kind of theatre that is different from anything we have discussed so far. Here, the actor is in the centre of attention, both onstage and offstage. To this day, Kabuki actors are celebrities who are hired for movies and TV productions as well. Their style is usually admired and copied by the public. Stardom was born with Kabuki performances[5].
- This style of theatre is associated with the **urban culture** of Kyoto and Edo, which developed in the peaceful early-modern period. Kabuki originated as public dance, where through dance women advertised their bodies for sale. Therefore, government restrictions banned women from performing **immoral Kabuki dances**. Their place was soon taken by young men, who used dancing in exactly the same way; so they were banned from Kabuki as well. As you can imagine, this was not the end of the story. Finally, only adult men were able to perform Kabuki dance, and, thus, advertise their intimate skills to the public. Kabuki actors often secured sponsors this way. This traditional association of theatre and red-light districts continued from the 17th century until the beginning of the 20th century.



[5]Fun Fact: Japanese woodblock prints (ukiyo-e) were developed by the same popular urban culture as Kabuki, and actors were one of the most popular themes for woodblock artists. Posters announcing the appearances of celebrities in a new theatre production were as popular as Tweet or Instagram images announcing the work of Hollywood movie stars.

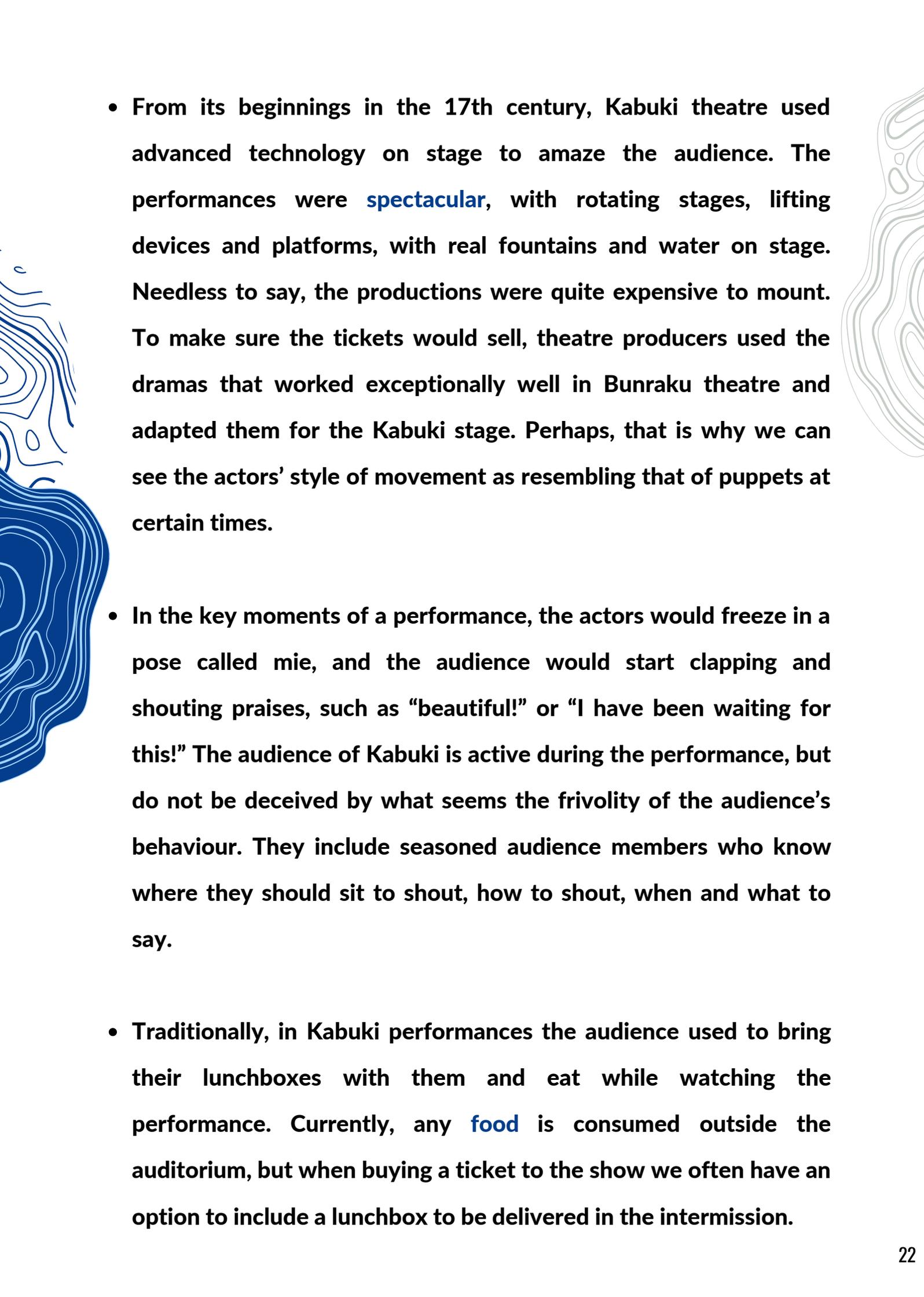
- After the Second World War, Kabuki became recognized as a cultural heritage and was supported by the government; so actors do not need to seek private sponsorship anymore. However, right up to the present, in Kabuki there are only male actors, playing both male and female characters.
- Like in any other trade in Japan, Kabuki performers come from the families of actors, where the skills and the stage name are passed from generation to generation. They usually specialise in one of the character types - male or female - but some actors can play multiple characters at the same time. The art of changing costume and makeup within seconds is a widely recognized and spectacular feature of this theatre form.
- There are no masks in Kabuki. This theatre style developed an **original makeup technique** - kumadori. Actors apply makeup on their own, as they have been taught by their fathers. Red lines are reserved for heroes, and they symbolize veins. The more red lines there are on the face, the more angry and fierce the character appears. Blue lines symbolise ghosts and spirits, and brown ones are for monsters and demons.

Picture of Kabuki ukiyoe



https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/77/Arajishi_Otokonosukein_Date_Kurabe

Okuni Kabuki.jpg

- 
- From its beginnings in the 17th century, Kabuki theatre used advanced technology on stage to amaze the audience. The performances were **spectacular**, with rotating stages, lifting devices and platforms, with real fountains and water on stage. Needless to say, the productions were quite expensive to mount. To make sure the tickets would sell, theatre producers used the dramas that worked exceptionally well in Bunraku theatre and adapted them for the Kabuki stage. Perhaps, that is why we can see the actors' style of movement as resembling that of puppets at certain times.
 - In the key moments of a performance, the actors would freeze in a pose called mie, and the audience would start clapping and shouting praises, such as “beautiful!” or “I have been waiting for this!” The audience of Kabuki is active during the performance, but do not be deceived by what seems the frivolity of the audience's behaviour. They include seasoned audience members who know where they should sit to shout, how to shout, when and what to say.
 - Traditionally, in Kabuki performances the audience used to bring their lunchboxes with them and eat while watching the performance. Currently, any **food** is consumed outside the auditorium, but when buying a ticket to the show we often have an option to include a lunchbox to be delivered in the intermission.



Kumiodori and Tropical Islands

- With the last theatre style presented here we will take you to the **tropical island of Okinawa**. Close your eyes for a moment. Imagine the crystal-clear water of the ocean, vivid and colourful tropical flowers, the evergreen jungle – those are the colours of Kumiodori.
- Kumiodori is a theatre style that was created in 1719 in the Ryukyu Kingdom by an aristocrat named Tamagusuku Chōkun. The Ryukyu Kingdom was a separate maritime merchant state that used to spread across 55 islands between Japan and China. It was annexed by Japan in the 19th century as its southernmost prefecture – Okinawa.





- How did it happen that we have an entire theatre style made by one person in one year? To make a long story short: imagine that you often host the most important foreign envoys and business partners. Your prestige and your very existence depend on their approval. It is only natural that you would like to present your culture in an attractive and understandable manner. Hence, to entertain the Chinese envoys visiting the Ryukyu Kingdom, Tamagusuku Chōkun wrote 5 plays, based on legends that existed in both countries and were easily understood by his guests. He mixed Japanese and Chinese theatre conventions with local aesthetics to present something new and original, yet close to the spectators. Ryūkyūan culture was presented as familiar and equally sophisticated as that of the two neighbouring superpowers. Hence, we can say that the theatre was a kind of cultural diplomacy.

- We can consider Kumiodori as a distinctive Ryūkyūan theatre or as one of several Japanese theatre styles, since it was influenced by Nō, Kabuki, and the Chinese Opera, as well as by the religious songs and court dances native to Okinawa. Kumiodori means the “combination dance,” as it merges traditional Ryukyuan music, dance, and poetry. The stage, costumes, and props are in a vibrant and colourful style, characteristic of tropical Okinawa.

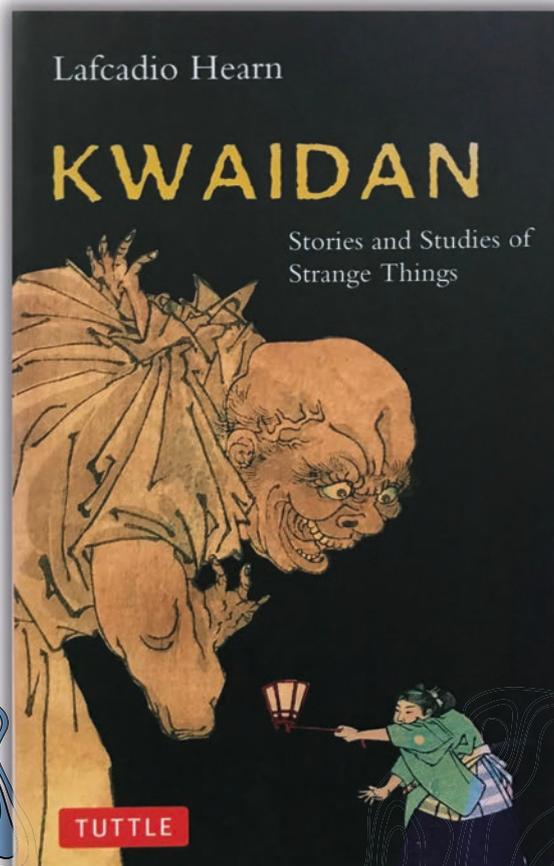


- To this day, Kumiodori is performed in one dialect of the Okinawan language. The language is not well-known by the Japanese and Okinawans anymore, so there are usually subtitles with Japanese and English translations displayed alongside the stage.



Dramas and Legends

Most of the dramas written for the theatre styles discussed here were based on previously existing legends and folktales, or on contemporary stories and items of gossip popular in the cities of Kyoto or Edo. Some of them made people laugh through the **absurd gags** found in everyday situations; other brought tears to an audience's eyes with **love stories** or **tragedies**. By far the most popular were dramas about popular righteous heroes fighting evil, or fantastic stories about various extraordinary occurrences – like stories about ghosts and monsters. Many such stories were later gathered by **Lafcadio Hearn** in his famous collection of Japanese ghost-stories, which is available in English - *Kwaidan*. In this book you can find stories that can be inspiring for your own creative practice. Many examples of Nō dramas can be found in *Japanese Nō Dramas* by Royall Tyler.



Examples of Kyōgen and Nō dramas:

- In an exemplary Kyōgen narrative – *Bōshibari* - a master (samurai) needs to leave his house for a longer period of time, but he is worried that his servants will drink all his sake when he is gone. He summons his two top servants individually and asks them what to do, each with the other, in order to protect the sake. Then the master leaves on stage his two servants with their hands tied in two different ways – to a long rod or behind the back, according to their very own ideas. However, they cleverly find a way to help each other get drunk anyway.
- An example of Nō drama: *Dōjōji*. There is a temple called Dōjōji, where a newly installed bell is waiting for its dedication ceremony. The chief priest calls on all his monks to guard the bell and not to let anyone nearby. The monks do not listen and let a dancer enter the temple grounds. It turns out that the dancer is not a human being, but a demon connected to a bell in a history that happened a long time ago:
 - In that story, a woman fell in love with a monk who did not share her affection and had to escape from her rage to Dōjōji, taking refuge in a temple bell. The woman turned into a serpent-like creature that passed over a river in flood and wrapped herself round the bell. The dragon made the bell blaze with heat and burned the monk inside the bell alive.

After many years the demon returns as a dancer and hides in the new bell. The chief priest is informed and together with the other monks they perform an exorcism. The demon wearing a hannya mask eventually leaves the bell and appears on stage, where a fierce battle takes place between the power of Buddhist prayer and the demon's fierce anger. Finally, the monks win and the demon goes away.



Photos from *Bōshibari* play



Japanese Mythology

If you like the fantastic element of Japanese dramas and legends, you might also like to learn that there are many such stories in Japanese mythology. There are myths about the beginnings of Japan and adventures of its numerous gods, monsters, and spirits, which are often represented in theatre and the visual arts. In fact, in Japanese mythology we can find some of the very first examples of performance art, as in the myth about [Amanouzume](#) – a goddess who saves the world by her comic dance performed for the other gods. You can find more about this story from mythology presented in a comic book format: *Amaterasu, A Japanese Myth* by Paul D Storrie and Ron Randall.





There are numerous fantastic creatures and original Japanese monsters in mythology and folklore. Sometimes it is difficult to say if they are good or evil.

One interesting example is:

Kappa - an aquatic creature that lives in lakes and rivers. It has a human-shaped figure with a turtle's back and a beak instead of a mouth. Its skin is greenish and slippery, and it stinks like a fish. It has a bald head surrounded with green hair and bowl on the top of its head in which there is always some water.

Kappa is enormously strong and very dangerous. It can pull children's legs to drown and eat them; so parents used to warn children against playing around rivers and lakes. Although kappas can be mischievous, they are also cultured, polite, and speak Japanese very well. So, if you meet a kappa, the trick to stay alive is to say politely "konnichiwa" (good afternoon) and bow. The monster will do the same and so the water from his bowl-shaped head will spill out. Without contact with water the monster loses its strength and there is a chance to escape.



Dr Szymon Gredżuk on the society, its religions and theatre

From mythology to Kagura and early-modern theatre we can see that performance played a very important role in the life of people of all classes and social standings in Japan, and in fact not only people. Gods enjoyed performances too; so besides offerings of rice and sake, by far the best way win their kindness was to entertain them with some kind of show.

Whether it was the sophisticated culture of the imperial court, where ritual and symbolic Gagaku dances were performed, accompanied by elaborate music, or just simple re-enactment of a local well-known myth by farmers in a provincial village, theatre always bound people and gods together. In the times as distant as mythology itself, people did not yet know how to write or read, but they passed on their traditions, history, and beliefs orally. Myths shared through storytelling were often enhanced with costumes and masks or acrobatic tricks, and so Kagura was born. Centuries later, people still gather to stage these myths together and create a sense of belonging and community with their gods and ancestors.

Picture
of Night Parade



[https://commons.wikimedia.org/
wiki/File:Night_Parade_of_a_Hun](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Night_Parade_of_a_Hun)

dred Demons -
_Google_Art_Project.jpg



Consequently, this theatre ritual and the stage where it happened were often considered sacred. For the aristocrats and samurai of medieval Japan, the whole idea behind their favourite Nō theatre was to feel the pathos and mystery accompanying the experience of a transcendental world and transcendental beings. This is because for hundreds of years the culture of the educated classes was shaped by a Buddhist world view and by the everlasting quest to understand the elusive nature of being. Hence, in the Nō drama you will often encounter gods, ghosts, or spirits in front of your very eyes. Mysterious ancient masks with solemn expressions share their tragic stories and profound feelings in a monotonous and dreamlike atmosphere.

Although Kabuki theatre often presents the world spirits and ghosts, its vibe tends to be quite opposite. Kabuki plays are designed for entertainment rather than contemplation; they thrill and amaze with fast-paced action and wonders happening on stage. Other sentimental plays remind us of the tragic stories of unfulfilled romantic love often ending in double suicides. Like today's cinema, Kabuki and Bunraku can serve as mirror to Japanese society. They show a rigid, class-divided society, presented from the perspective of subjugated commoners from the bustling urban areas of Kyoto and Edo, who nevertheless enjoyed popular culture, indulged in nightlife, and followed fashions dictated by their favourite celebrity actors.



Kumiodori serves as an interesting example of a theatre style born at the crossroads of cultures. From ancient times, merchants of the southern Ryukyu Islands travelled the seas of East and Southeast Asia, bringing different precious goods and ideas back home to enrich their own culture. The unique geopolitical position of the Ryukyu Kingdom necessitated skilful diplomacy between Japan and China and facilitated the creation of Kumiodori – a mixture of a wide range of Japanese theatre styles and common Confucian ethics, as well as original musical taste, aesthetics and style of movement, all of which recall the southern seas. Theatre served both as entertainment for foreign guests and as an instrument of cultural diplomacy; it was a vital way of expressing allegiance and at the same time maintaining a position in between the two great neighbouring civilisations.

As distinctive as Japan may seem from the global perspective, it is equally diverse internally, both socially and geographically, as well as culturally. These classical theatre styles discussed here are very clear examples of this diversity, yet there are many more unique dances and performing arts to discover across the various social groups that created Japanese culture.



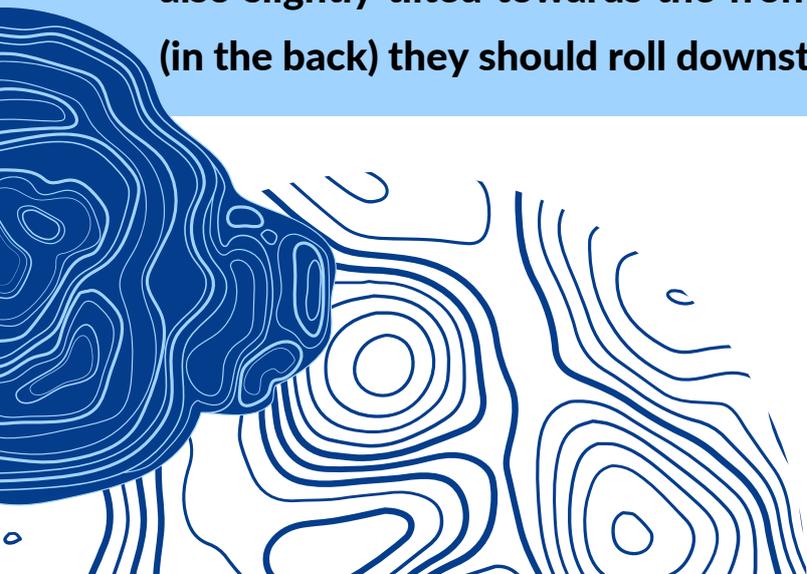
**Photo from
Kumiodori play**

Dr Sylwia Dobkowska

on stages and scenography

Did you know that every stage is built differently for every theatre form in Japan? We would never have a Nō performance on a Bunraku stage. Let us look at the stages of Nō, Kabuki and Bunraku theatre, outlining the most interesting facts about them.

Nō theatre always happens on a stage build especially for this type of theatre. The stage is considered sacred, so only actors can be there. Of course, no shoes are allowed. There are four pillars in every corner of the stage. This element is traditional but also highly functional. Imagine that you are an actor in a mask on a Nō stage. The mask was made hundreds of years ago, so it does not fit your face exactly. You cannot move freely as all gestures are precisely planned; a slight tilt of your head would indicate a different mood on the part of the character you are playing. Perhaps you cannot see well because the mask restricts your vision. Hence, the pillars at each corner of the stage are your visual guides as to where the stage ends. This is crucial information so that you do not fall off the stage during the performance. The stage is also slightly tilted towards the front, so if you put chopsticks upstage (in the back) they should roll downstage (to the front).

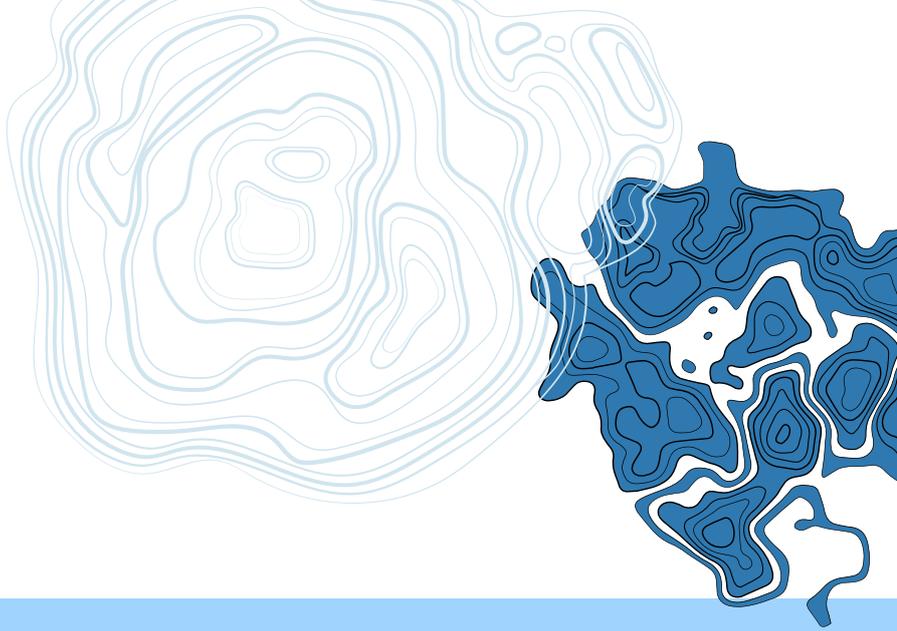


Kabuki stages are built to impress with cutting-edge technology, with revolving stages and lifting mechanisms. The common element of all Kabuki stages is a bridge that leads from the stage through the audience (called hanamachi). This road is central to introducing plot twists, new characters, and spectacular exits, close to the public. There, the actor usually strikes a pose (called mie) and that is the moment for the audience to react vividly. The whole scenography, build with astonishing precision, can change many times during the performance in surprisingly short periods of time. The set is also changed during the performance by people dressed completely in black costumes, with their faces covered. Those stagehands are on stage, but we choose by convention not to see them.



[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/12/Odori Keiy%C5%8D Edo-e no sakae by Toyokuni III.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/12/Odori_Keiy%C5%8D_Edo-e_no_sakae_by_Toyokuni_III.jpg)





The last stage I will mention is **Bunraku theatre**, built with a stage for puppets and for the musicians. On the stage for puppets, we have 3 partitions that run along the stage to present the scenery of the puppets. It is worth to remember that one puppet is quite large and heavy. It is about 150cm tall. Thus, the puppeteers walk in traditional high shoes (a type of geta) so they can hold the puppet above the partitions that divide the setting. The musicians' platform on the side is revolving, displaying them and then hiding them at the end of performance.

In conclusion, every stage is adjusted to the particular purpose of the theatre. The Nō stage is for actors who represent gods and demons, the Kabuki stage is more for the audience, and the Bunraku stage is certainly adapted for a puppet show.



Further exploration of the internet

See the entries on Japanese Theatre in:

- [Kabuki](#)
- [Nō theatre \(jparc.online\)](#)
- [Nō theatre \(the-noh.com\)](#)
- [Bunraku](#)
- [Kumiodori](#)
 - [in Polish](#)



[Przekład kulturowy: Teatr w Japonii,](#)
[Between.Edukacja 2020](#)

Four exercises



Exercise 1

- **What is theatre? Do we have only one definition?**

Would you agree that there is no one definition? Theatre is closely linked with culture and what we experience in one part of the globe is different somewhere else.

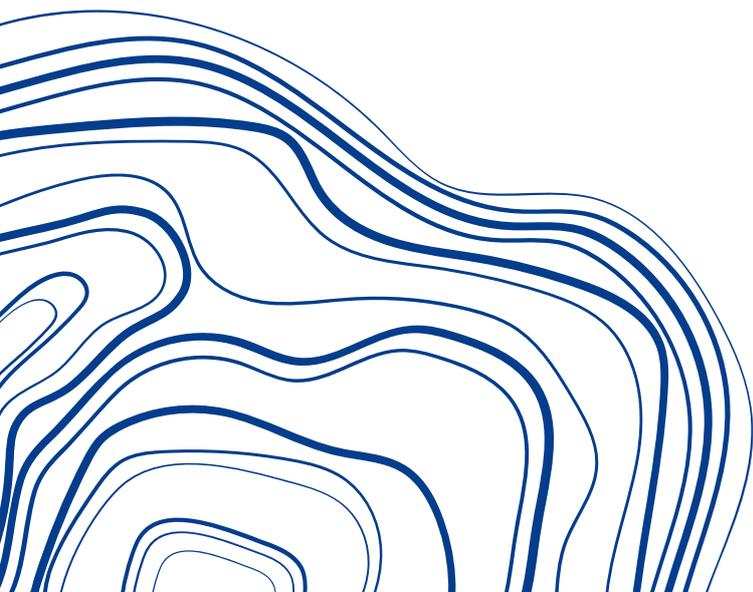
- **How should we behave in theatre?**

Perhaps, in accordance with local etiquette? In Japan, we behave differently as an audience, depending on the type of theatre we experience. To give an example:

in Kabuki, the audience is active and shouts phrases such as “wonderful” in specific moments of performance.

In Kagura, you can eat during the performance, as they last for hours.

In Nō, you need to know the play before you go to theatre, you should be elegantly dressed, and you should be silent.



Exercise 2

Choose one of the following tasks (or perhaps all of them?):

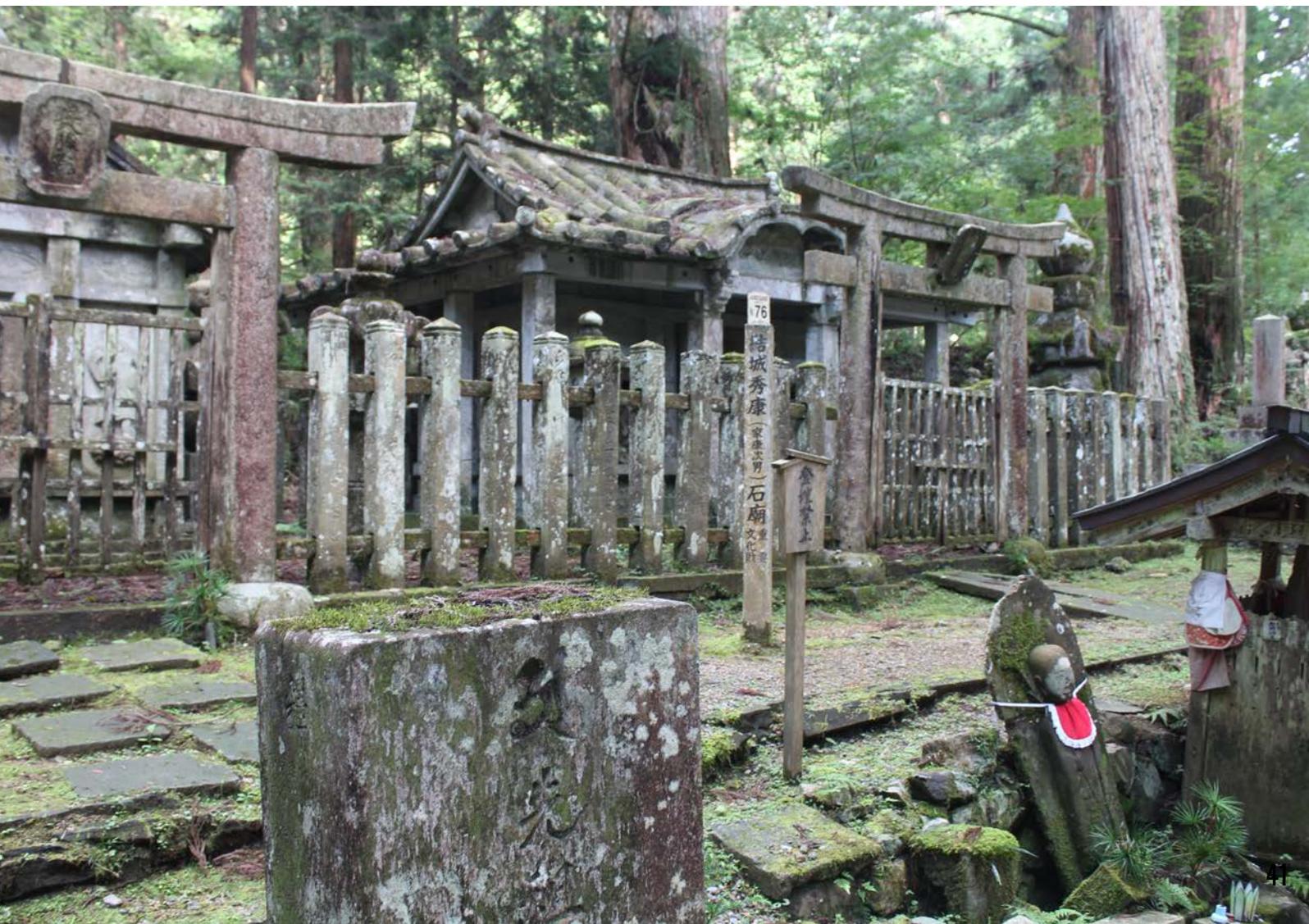
- Write 100 words on presenting ghosts and memories on stage (Nō).
- Write 100 words on making theatre as part of politics (Kumiodori).
- How different is theatre in Japan to theatre in Poland?
 - Write 100 words
 - Collect 10 images of Japanese theatre and Polish theatre to create a visual essay.



Exercise 3

Read one ghost story from Kwaidan or a story from Japanese mythology. Make a visual storyboard with collected images and drawings, and present the story to your classmates.

- Theatre in Japan uses mythology, legends, and ghost stories to make dramas. Do you think ghost stories are interesting? If so, why? Why do we need them in literature and theatre?
- Do you know any Polish drama that is about ghost stories? Example: *Dziady (Forefathers' Eve)* by Adam Mickiewicz.
- Write your own short ghost story that will really scare a 10-year-old child.



Exercise 4

Make a short video that takes its inspiration from elements of Japanese theatre. Take a story from ghost stories or mythology and present it in any style. Make sure you do not copy elements of Japanese theatre but take ideas and make your own version; you can take inspiration from multiple theatre forms. Be creative - the stage is yours!

As an example, you can see the work presented at the Between.Pomiędzy Festival 2021 by Arts Management students at the University of Gdańsk.

