

“A Paradise on Earth”:  
Exploring the Actor-Spectator Relationship  
in Genroku Era Kabuki Performances

by

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## INTRODUCTION

### *Kabuki of the Genroku Era*

“The only thing that all forms of theatre have in common is the need for an audience.”

— Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*

Dawn breaks in Edo, the bustling city that will one day be Tokyo. The year is sometime between 1670 and 1730—what we now call the Genroku period of Japanese history (Raz 159). From all over the city, working men and women, wealthy lords and servants, merchants and court ladies begin to converge on the city’s theater district. Many of them spent the previous day in bathing and dressing, and woke long before sunrise to travel into the city. They stop in teahouses to rest or eat breakfast until they hear the sound of the clappers announcing that morning’s kabuki performances.

The most enthusiastic among the spectators leave the teahouses in a hurry and approach the theater. Outside the building, paid performers advertise the day’s program of plays by imitating the voices and gestures of the actors. Spectators who have not already reserved tickets purchase them before entering the theater. Theatergoers may also buy meals, tobacco, tea, and cushions for sitting. Wealthier patrons who have reserved tickets in advance make their way directly into the auditorium and seat themselves in elevated boxes, where over the course of the day they will eat, drink, relax, and probably change clothes several times (Raz 175). The rest of the audience sits in boxes on the floor. Wealthy and poor alike are dressed in their best

clothes. Women, who do not often go out in public, get the rare chance to show themselves off to one another—and more importantly, to the actors (Shively 24).

Since being seen is at least as important as seeing for many spectators, fights break out over the most prominent seats in the boxes. People push one another out of the way and crowd dangerously close to the stage. Latecomers trying to sneak into the auditorium add to the chaos, as do tobacco-sellers moving around through the crowd. Friends shout greetings at each other, and spectators who are already seated yell for others to sit and stop moving around (Raz 177). The atmosphere on the theater floor is raucous and disorderly.

Meanwhile, in the elevated boxes above, actors join the wealthy spectators for a drink before the first performance. If the spectators are frequent attendees, the performers may already know them intimately. Actors and patrons chat and admire one another's outfits. At the last minute, the performers exit through tunnels linking the boxes to their dressing rooms, and the performance begins.

Amid shouts and cheers, an actor appears at the back of the theater. His fans stand on tiptoe. For a moment, the audience is in reverent silence. Almost immediately, though, the shouting resumes. Throughout the performance, spectators call out encouragement as well as abuse. Common shouts of praise include "*Tento sama!*" ("Light of my life!"), "*Matteimashita!*" ("I've been waiting for this!"), "*Iro otoko!*" ("Sexy fellow!"), "*Otosan to sokkuri!*" ("Exactly like your father!") (Raz 185). If a spectator is displeased with an actors' performance, she may yell "*Hikkome!*" ("Get out!") or "*Daikon!*" ("Radish!") (186). Spectators do not wait until the ends of sections to applaud. Instead, they clap and cheer during the most

spectacular moments, providing a continuous stream of applause throughout the entire performance.

Since the performance continues until nightfall, spectators buy *bento* boxes and *sake* during breaks, which they eat and drink over the course of the day. Actors may rejoin the wealthy patrons to share food and comment on the performances. As the day progresses, parties get rowdier and more flirtatious (Raz 177).

When the performance ends, the audience pushes its way out of the theater, talking loudly. For hours afterward, theatergoers crowd the streets, imitating the gestures of the performers and arguing about their favorite actors. The sounds of the theater permeate the streets late into the night, until finally, all is quiet—until dawn the next morning (Raz 180).

#### *Encountering kabuki in the twenty-first century United States*

The kabuki I first encountered, the summer after my seventh birthday at a theater camp in Ohio, was of a very different sort. It was a kabuki filtered through time and place, presented by an inexpert teacher for the enjoyment of a group of American seven-year-olds. This kabuki was watered down and unrefined—but still, I was drawn to it. I was drawn to its bigness: it felt like a game I might play with my friends in the street when I got home from camp, not something I'd learn from grownups in a class paid for by my parents. As a child raised by artists in the Midwestern United States, I was familiar with a children's theater that broke the conventions of naturalistic theater—lacking a fourth wall, for example, and relying on elements of audience participation—but I had never taken part in a production that

did not attempt to mimic life. Thus, my first experience of kabuki was also my first experience of a theatrical form with a refined, nonrepresentational code of movement.

From what I knew of kabuki, it seemed to me that its nonrealistic acting style allowed for the expression of emotions and sensations that were bigger and deeper than those expressed in everyday interactions. My interest in the relationship between nonrepresentational performance and the expression of “big” emotions followed me into my studies in high school and college. It led me to take part in a “physical theater” intensive at the Stella Adler Studio in New York, where I discovered the work of the Polish theater director Jerzy Grotowski—whose writing introduced me to theories of spectatorship. In the essay “Towards A Poor Theatre,” Grotowski writes that the one thing without which theater cannot exist is “the actor-spectator relationship of perceptual, direct, ‘live’ communion” (32). I recognized that this living exchange between actor and spectator served to differentiate theater from “real” life, and created the structure that allowed for the “bigness” that appealed to me as a child. As my research continued, I discovered other directors’ experiments in highlighting or privileging this actor-spectator relationship. Most of this work had taken place in the Americas and Europe in the 1960s. As I sought further examples of performances that elevated the role of the audience, I found myself returning once again to kabuki.

During the golden age of kabuki theater in the Genroku Era of Japanese history, the structure of performances gave audiences a notably pivotal role. From the rigid codes of movement to the physical space in which these performances took place, the elements that made up kabuki performances served to highlight the role of the audience in performance. Kabuki scholar Jacob Raz goes so far as to say that in

that time period, the audience contributed seventy percent of performances, while the actors added an additional thirty percent (186). By what means did the kabuki theater of the Genroku Era achieve this focus on the role of the audience in performance? This essay explores the nature of the actor-audience relationship in kabuki, and the processes by which this relationship was created.

### *Explanation of terms and scope*

I should begin by defining what I mean when I talk about theater and performance. No single definition exists for either word, and the two can be used either synonymously or separately. However, for performance and theater to occur, at least one performer and one spectator must be present in the same time and space. Erika Fischer-Lichte, a prominent scholar of theater studies and spectatorship, defines performance as “the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators” (*The Transformative Power of Performance* 37). Spectators and actors “assemble to interact in a specific place for a certain period of time,” (32) and in that space and time exist in relation to one another as co-subjects. For Fischer-Lichte, a performance is created by the presence of the real bodies of actors and spectators in the same space, and the reciprocal relationship between the two groups. Director and theorist Richard Schechner defines theater similarly, writing that a performance is:

the whole constellation of events, most of them passing unnoticed, that takes place in both performers and audience from the time the first spectator enters the field of performance—the precinct where the

theatre takes place—to the time the last spectator leaves. (“Drama, Script, Theatre and Performance 39)

For Schechner, as for Fischer-Lichte, the exchange between actors and spectators in one time and space makes up a performance.

Performances often employ an array of elements—for example, movement, text, sound, images, a space or environment, and so on—but the fundamental unit, without which an occurrence is not performance, is the co-presence of both performer and spectator. As director Peter Brook says:

There is no theater, there is nothing that one can examine, or discuss, or feel, or think, or argue about except at the moment when the actor and the audience are related. The question of what makes this a satisfactory relationship is the deepest and perhaps the only question in the theater of our time. (*Conversations with Peter Brook* 28)

Brook recognizes that most performances are composed of a number of elements, but argues that the relationship between actor and audience is the element most worthy of thought and exploration.

Though Schechner differentiates between performance and theater, recognizing theater as the immediate event enacted by the performers (and excluding audience from that definition), this essay will use the two words interchangeably. I will refer to both performance and theater as the event experienced together by performers and audience, and will not attempt to differentiate between the actions performed by the actors from the spectators’ responses to those actions. It is difficult to make this distinction, because the two groups impact one another continuously and

instantaneously. This constant exchange throughout a performance is what Erika Fischer-Lichte calls the autopoietic feedback loop. She describes it thus:

Both the other spectators as well as the actors perceive and, in turn, respond to [a spectator's] reactions. The action on stage thus gains or loses intensity; the actors' voices get louder and unpleasant or, alternatively, more seductive; they feel animated to invent gags, to improvise, or get distracted and miss a cue; they step closer to the lights to address the audience directly or ask them to calm down, or even to leave the theatre. The other spectators might react to their fellows spectators' responses by increasing or decreasing the extent of their participation, interest, or suspense... They begin to address, argue, or insult each other. In short, whatever the actors do elicits a response from the spectators, which impacts on the entire performance. (*The Transformative Power of Performance* 38)

As Fischer-Lichte explains, the autopoietic feedback loop is self-perpetuating, requiring the combined participation of all performers and spectators. The interplay between the two groups is inevitable, but the degree to which each group participates actively in this loop depends on the structure and nature of the performance.

#### *Shaping the autopoietic feedback loop*

The definitions of theater proposed by contemporary theorists such as Fischer-Lichte, Brook, and Schechner rely heavily on the role the audience plays in a performance. However, from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century,

audience reception often was neglected by theorists and actively minimized by theater practitioners. The European middle-class viewed the autopoietic feedback loop's unpredictability as a flaw (*The Transformative Power of Performance* 38). As a result, theater managers restructured the traditional theater space to create greater separation between performers and spectators. Comfortable chairs, assigned seating, the proscenium arch, and a lighting system that placed the audience in darkness while highlighting the performers all contributed to a new style of performance, in which spectators observed but did not actively affect the action taking place onstage (Jannarone 78).

When the job of the director became more integral in the early twentieth century, some theater practitioners initiated a movement to bring the public's focus back to the audience's role in performance (*The Transformative Power of Performance* 39). Beginning in the 1960s, many directors sought to construct performance experiments that would address the elusive but undoubtedly important role of the audience. Fischer-Lichte describes three interrelated processes used by many of these experimenters in an attempt to influence and draw attention to the feedback loop: role reversal, community, and physical contact (40).

According to Fischer-Lichte, role reversal is "a process that transforms the conventional subject-object relationship...into a scintillating, ever-elusive negotiation" (*The Transformative Power of Performance* 40). The boundary between actor as subject and audience as object is blurred, and it is unclear which group is instigating and which is responding at a given moment. When these distinctions are destabilized, actors and spectators become co-subjects of a performance. Fischer-

Lichte describes this process as taking place in the performance experiments conducted by Schechner's Performance Group in the 1960s and 1970s. Schechner, she writes, "emphasizes the relationship between equal co-subjects" (41). Writing about the Performance Group's first experiment with audience participation, *Dionysus in 69*, Schechner explains:

...participation occurred at those points where the play stopped being a play and became a social event—where spectators felt that they were free to enter the performance as equals...the second point is that most of the participation in *Dionysus* was according to the democratic model: letting people into the play to do as the performers were doing, to "join the story." (*Environmental Theatre* 44)

The Performance Group created experiments that used entire spaces for performance, not differentiating between places for actors and places for onlookers. Both groups had access to the total space, as well as to one another ("6 Axioms for Environmental Theatre" 50). These spaces de-stabilized the binary between performer and spectator, allowing actors and spectators to participate in the co-creation of performances.

Role reversal, Fischer-Lichte writes, "opens up the possibility for collective action" (*The Transformative Power of Performance* 55). Performances—such as those of the Performance Group—in which the clear distinction between actor and spectator is blurred may also allow for the performance of actions by actor and spectator together. In some cases, Fischer-Lichte suggests, actors and spectators who are performing actions together may experience a temporary sense of community for the duration of the performance. "The communities brought forth by these collective

actions,” she writes, “[constitute] a temporary social reality. They [disappear] as a soon as the actions [are] performed” (55). In other words, performances that destabilize the binary between actor and spectator may serve as a space for a short-lived community made up of both actors and spectators.

Fischer-Lichte cites the experimental artist Hermann Nitsch’s action events (also of the 1960s) as an example of performances that resulted in the emergence of a temporary actor-spectator community. In these events, spectators joined actors in the performance of taboo-breaking actions, such as pouring blood on one another and disemboweling a lamb. The action events, Fischer-Lichte writes,

transformed the acting individual by providing a[n]...experience that led to “excess” and triggered catharsis...The communities engendered by [these events]...are to be understood as symbolic and social, possibly even ritual, communities. (*The Transformative Power of Performance* 54)

Fischer-Lichte suggests that Nitsch’s events created a state of community between acting individuals within a temporary reality governed by social rules unlike those of everyday life.

The potential for the emergence of a temporary community within a theatrical performance depends on the participants’ pre-knowledge of the actions being performed. In the case of Nitsch’s action events, the activities undertaken by actors and spectators were generally considered social taboos in the context where the events took place (Europe in the 1960s). Nitsch likely relied on the spectators’ understanding of these social rules when inviting them to take part in the performance

of these actions. Reception theorist Susan Bennett calls the audience's pre-knowledge of everything associated with a given performance the "horizon of expectations" (49). An audience's horizon of expectations includes their prior experience and associations with the actions being performed, their preconceptions about the structure of the performance, and their understanding of the role they should play. The term was originally coined by another scholar of reception theory, Hans Robert Jauss, who Bennett quotes as saying that "the aesthetic distance between a given horizon of expectations and a new work 'can be objectified historically along the spectrum of the audience's reactions and criticism judgment.' At its first publication/performance, a work is measured against the dominant horizon of expectations" (49). An audience's reception of a performance is dependent on the expectations they have for that particular performance—and thus, an audience's horizon of expectations upon entering a performance space may influence the degree to which it will participate actively in the performance.

Physical contact is the third and final process Erika Fischer-Lichte cites as useful to experimenters of the 1960s who explored the autopoietic feedback loop. She notes that while theater is a public medium, touch most commonly belongs to the realm of the private, so that the inclusion of touch between performers and spectators brings an unusual level of intimacy to a public event. However, from the eighteenth century into the mid-twentieth century, many theater artists discouraged touching between actors and spectators. During this roughly 200-year period, much of Western theater was illusionistic or mimetic. Fischer-Lichte writes that mimetic styles of theater typically rely on metaphorical "touching" rather than literal physical touch:

The audience's illusion is destroyed whenever the actor's body ceases to represent the dramatic character but is perceived as the real body of the particular actor. Physical contact [seems] to enhance this danger by performing the invasion of the real into fiction. By observing the happenings on stage from a distance, the audience emotionally [engages] with the dramatic characters rather than the actors. (*The Transformative Power of Performance* 60)

Mimetic theater, thus, rarely included any form of physical contact between actor and spectator. Since the 1960s, however, matters of the public and the private have blurred in both the social sphere and the theatrical sphere. Experiments of the 1960s increasingly began to include actual physical touch as a mechanism for creating public intimacy.

The ability for actors and audience to touch one another is dependent on their physical orientation in space. Since spectators and actors in a performance must exist in one space together, directors (or whoever is making these decisions for a given performance) must choose what the physical relationship in space between the two will be. Nearly endless possibilities exist, of course, from the proscenium stage that rose in popularity in nineteenth century Europe to the intermingling of Schechner's *Dionysus in 69*. Grotowski writes extensively about the spatial relationship between performers and audience, noting that the most essential concern "is finding the proper spectator/actor relationship for each type of performance" ("Towards A Poor Theatre" 33). For Grotowski, each performance must place actors and spectators in a physical relationship that fits the content of the performance. The nature of the spatial

relationship between actor and spectator affects the degree to which the audience will participate—cognitively, emotionally, and actively—in the performance.

All of the processes discussed above—role reversal, the creation of a temporary community, physical touch, physical space—are reliant on one another. These elements, along with others, interact in performances and influence the dynamics of the autopoietic feedback loop. While these processes are not fully extricable from each other, in this investigation I will attempt to divide them into the following three categories:

1. Physical relationship and physical space
2. Role reversal: audience participation and audience agency
3. Community and horizon of expectations

Kabuki theater of the Genroku Era is a prime example of a theatrical form that made use of the processes loosely grouped into these three categories. In this essay, I will explore the means by which these processes took place within kabuki performances, and the relationship between these processes and the autopoietic feedback loop. Through this investigation of kabuki performances of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, I hope to consider possibilities for future experiments in influencing the dynamics of the autopoietic feedback loop in performance.

## **A BRIEF HISTORY OF KABUKI**

Before I examine kabuki theater through the framework of contemporary Western theater theories, I will briefly investigate its history in the context in which it developed. The theater that would become kabuki began to take shape at the

beginning of the Keicho Era (1596-1614) with the Buddhist priestess-performance Okuni, from the Izumo Shrine in Kyoto (Scott 35). Okuni was one of many women of that time who served as a priestess, advertising dancer, and prostitute (Bowers 39). Okuni was an innovator, however, and in order to shock and excite her audiences she inserted bits of erotic material into the religious dances she was paid to perform (40). Okuni's sexualized re-constructions of Buddhist dances were the first performances to be associated with the word *kabuku*, meaning "to frolic, disport oneself, flirt, dress a little over-smartly" (38). Okuni destabilized her audience's expectations for temple dances, startling and then delighting them with her experiments.

As Okuni's dances rapidly gained popularity, she gathered a group of female dancers to help her adapt the theatrical and religious rituals of the day to the needs of popular entertainment (Scott 35). Okuni and her troupe designed dances to appeal to the laborers, townsmen, and merchants, who previously had no means of dramatic expression apart from the folk dances that were performed at festivals (Bowers 45). Over time, the dances gained structure as Okuni's troupe began to perform tales of historical events as well as the popular love stories of the day. The troupe performed to popular music and referenced current events, intending to please their audiences (41). At the end of performances, the troupe offered a *so-odori*: a general dance in which performers and spectators participated together. The *so-odori* was a collective action that engaged performers and spectators together, potentially resulting in the creation of a fleeting actor-spectator community.

New groups of female dancers emerged in imitation of Okuni's popular troupe, helping to spread the new form throughout the country. In addition, houses of

prostitution started to use the style of dance developed by Okuni as a kind of advertisement (Raz 148). For the spectators of these performances, the dancers were both performers and prostitutes. Their dramatic and sexual talents were equally on display, and as such, spectators were equally aware both of their metaphorical bodies as performers and their real bodies as prostitutes (149). The binary of performer and onlooker was blurry in these cases, and the spectators' dual awareness of the performers placed these performances in a sphere that was both public and intimate.

By the end of the Keicho Era, these early kabuki performances began to attract the attention of the Japanese shogunate (Scott 35). In 1629, the government placed a ban on the presence of women onstage, claiming that the performances were having an adverse effect on the order and morality of the country (Bowers 44). The popularity of the dances did not diminish, however. Instead, young men began performing the dances developed by the female troupes (Raz 150). Male and female spectators alike continued to find the performers alluring, and spectators and performers frequently engaged in sexual relationships (Scott 36). Intimate relations between actors and spectators continued to be a feature of kabuki as it evolved and grew in popularity.

With the continued rise in success of the kabuki dances, performances became rowdier. Fights often broke out between spectators competing for the affection of the performers (Bowers 48). Even members of the upper classes began sneaking into performances in disguise so they too could experience the famous kabuki dances without tarnishing their reputations—until they too joined the fighting and dispensed with their disguises (49). By 1652, the frequency of increasingly dangerous fights at

kabuki performances prompted a ban on young, attractive performers. After this, all kabuki performers had to shave off the forelock that marked them as young men (Scott 36). The Japanese government attempted to control kabuki audiences' desire for contact and relations with the performers, but ultimately was unable to eliminate the erotic, rowdy performance style entirely.

The government did succeed, however, in transforming kabuki into a more "legitimate" theater. Adult male performers who could not rely on their sex appeal for success began to develop their physical and vocal skills. New performances included dramatic scenes, and a structure emerged (Brandon 65). Playwrights began to write for the kabuki theater, where previously they had written texts only for noh, the institutional theater of the day. Unlike noh plays, which told stories about gods and historical figures, these new kabuki texts were about the lives of working people: merchants, prostitutes, husbands and wives (Scott 37). For the first time in Japanese history ordinary people could see characters like themselves onstage. Thus, even as kabuki became a more polished form, it retained its ties to the people who made up its audiences.

While kabuki theater maintained its connection with the working classes, actors in the Genroku Era experienced a rise in fame. Wealthy women began imitating the fashions and mannerisms of the actors who played female roles (Scott 39), and companies published books ranking the actors by skill and physical attractiveness (Raz 155). Spectators idolized actors. Even so, sexual relationships between actors and spectators continued to be common. In 1714 an affair between the actor Ikushima and a court lady called Ejima caused a scandal that resulted in the

closing of the Yamamuraza, one of the prominent theaters of the time (162). Even as kabuki evolved into a less controversial form, elements of the actor-spectator relationship established on the riverbanks of Kyoto lingered.

During the Meiji Era (1868-1912), however, the vibrant, popular form of kabuki began to erode. Increased contact with the West led playwrights and theater managers to reform the kabuki theater to incorporate Western elements. New theater buildings included aspects borrowed from European theaters, such as curtains, chairs, and proscenium arches (Raz 200). With the invention of electric lighting came the possibility of lowering the lights in the audience, a practice that Japanese theaters incorporated not long after its emergence in European theaters. Seated in the dark, spectators lost interest in dressing up or changing clothes during the breaks, since it was difficult to see one another (226). The change in the physical structure of theaters began to divide actors and spectators.

In 1880 spectators from other countries, unfamiliar with the style and traditions of kabuki theater, started to attend performances. (Raz 229). Gradually, the group mentality of kabuki spectators diminished (225). Fewer and fewer spectators had favorite actors or belonged to fan clubs (248). Ticket prices rose and poor or working class spectators could no longer afford the price of admission (Ernst 69). Kabuki became associated with the “grand pageant of the Japanese past” (Raz 249). Spectators might experience only one kabuki performance in their lifetimes.

This is the kabuki theater that continues to exist today. Although the atmosphere of performances remains informal compared to that of noh, the relationship between actors and audience has become polite and dry (Raz 256).

Because of its history, kabuki retains a strong presence in contemporary Japanese society, but the raucous theater party of the Genroku Era has vanished (270).

## **THE PRIORITIZATION OF AUDIENCE: THREE PROCESSES**

### *1. Physical relationship and physical space*

One of the primary means by which European theaters of the nineteenth century achieved the taming of the audience was through the restructuring of the physical theater space. When theater managers began assigning spectators to individual chairs, they limited spectators' contact with each other and with performers, as well as their ability to turn around, move, or leave the theater. The proscenium arch created a physical barrier between actors and audience, while the introduction of electrical lighting with its capacity to dim the auditorium further distinguished performers from spectators. Many of the theatrical forms that developed in Europe towards the end of the nineteenth century encouraged spectators to adopt the role of silent, invisible onlookers (Jannarone 78).

Roughly one hundred years later, experimental theater directors in Europe and the Americas explored different means of reversing the effects of what by then had become the traditional theater space. Schechner's Performance Group in the late 1960s began creating pieces of what Schechner called environmental theater, where the structure of the physical space invited audiences to move. "The audience," Schechner writes in his essay "6 Axioms for Environmental Theatre," "becomes a major scenic element" when not limited by individual seating and frontal action (49). Schechner strove to create theater spaces that allowed the audience to choose how to

participate in the performance, from crowding very close to a performer to running away from dangerous or unappealing scenes (49).

Similarly, the structure of kabuki theaters of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries included the audience in the action. Spectators had the freedom to walk around, moving closer to or farther away from the performers. Since actors performed on elevated platforms, these theaters maintained a slight physical separation between performers and spectators. The platforms, however, surrounded the audience, and performers were always close enough to touch. Kabuki spectators, engulfed on all sides by performers, could choose the degree to which they might interact with the performers.

The structure of the kabuki theater space developed over time, always with actor-spectator intimacy in mind. The earliest kabuki theaters were poor imitations of noh stages constructed on riverbanks in Kyoto (Bowers 41). Spectators could easily climb onto the stage, and performers readily descended into the audience. As kabuki theater gained popularity and status as a legitimate form of theater, performances moved to indoor theater spaces. There, theater managers strove to maintain the closeness between actor and audience that was so easily accomplished on the outdoor stages of its early years. New indoor stages were constructed to be very wide compared to the depth of the auditorium, so that no spectator was ever very far from the stage (Ernst 24).

As early as the 1650s, kabuki stages started to include a small platform located to the left of the center of the stage, where spectators could place gifts for their favorite actors. By 1724, the small platform for gifts had expanded into a 52-

foot-long pathway called the *hanamichi*, extending from the stage far into the audience (Shively 16). Over the next ten years, this physical structure developed into three separate structures: the *hon* (main) *hanamichi*; the *kari* (temporary) *hanamichi*, which extended into the audience on the side of the stage opposite to the *hon hanamichi*; and the *naka-no-ayumi*, running along the back of the theater (Raz 196). Action took place on all three bridges as well as on the stage, which meant that the audience was both surrounded and penetrated by performers.

By the eighteenth century, this configuration—one wide stage connected to three *hanamichi*—provided the model for kabuki stages in Edo as well as throughout Japan. “In a theater like this,” writes scholar Donald Shively, the “play moved easily into the audience” (18). Most of the dramatic action happened within the audience’s reach. If they desired, spectators could reach out and touch the actors whose faces they had seen on posters outside the theater and around the city for weeks prior. Actors spoke to one another just over the heads of their audiences (Bowers 111). Because entrances and exits typically took place on the *hanamichi*, it served as what Raz calls a “bridge of tension inside the audience” (198), connecting the audience to the performers through anticipation as well as physical proximity. An actor on the *hanamichi* was not so close to the audience so as to embarrass individual spectators by singling them out, but close enough to stimulate excitement: “there but yet not there” (199). Spectators at this proximity to an actor could experience his physical body while remaining firmly on lower ground. The *hanamichi* as physical structure thus integrated performers with audiences while maintaining the clear distinction between the two groups.

Kabuki audiences also experienced what Schechner calls “multi-focus”: spectators had to choose where to focus, with actions occurring simultaneously in different locations all around them (“6 Axioms for Environmental Theatre” 58). Spectators had the agency to select one action over another, and, if they wished, to get up and move—closer to one performer, or farther away from another. The structure of the seating arrangements encouraged this sort of movement. Audiences sat on mats on the floor, divided into *masu*—boxes that could accommodate about seven spectators (Raz 200). Spectators could easily move about within their boxes, walk to other boxes, or even climb across a row of boxes onto the stage. Susan Bennett suggests that this sort of freedom to choose enables audiences to feel liberated which, in turn, may give them a sense of equality or democracy with their more rehearsed co-subjects (Bennett 114).

A clear hierarchy existed between poorer and richer spectators. Spectators had different kinds of experiences during kabuki performances depending on the amount of money they were able to spend. Poorer spectators experienced physical proximity to performers as well as a degree of agency, but richer spectators interacted with performers in private, and so experienced the double presence of performers as both characters and as people in their real bodies. Richer patrons typically sat in curtained boxes called *sajiki*, which were linked to the *shibaijaya*, or theater teahouses, as well as the actors’ dressing rooms (Raz 171). During breaks, actors would enter the *sajiki* to eat, drink, and talk with the spectators. Just as in the early days of kabuki, performers and spectators often engaged in sexual relationships in these settings

(200). For the wealthier spectators, performers existed both as performers and as intimate companions.

As Erika Fischer-Lichte notes in her writing about the impact of touch in theater, the illusion of the non-real bodies of performers may be destroyed by spectators who are able to touch the performers' real bodies. Wealthier spectators of kabuki who made social and physical contact with the actors may not have invested in the illusion of the actors as characters. However, rather than eliminating the possibility for symbolic "touching," spectators' intimate knowledge of the actors' bodies seemed to establish a greater connection between spectators and performers. Spectators who came in contact with the real bodies of the performers during breaks may have responded even more viscerally and emotionally to the actions performed by the actors within the structure of the play afterward (Raz 157). Because of the actor-spectator intimacy enabled by the structuring of kabuki theaters, the two groups, while distinct, were caught in a constant and ever-changing state of exchange.

## *2. Role reversal: audience participation and audience agency*

The structure of the physical space for performance influences the feedback loop between actors and audiences, but does not determine how the interactions that make up the feedback loop will take place. Fischer-Lichte writes: "Conditions for perception created in a performance shape the dynamic of the feedback loop without securing full control over it" (*The Transformative Power of Performance* 60). By facilitating audience agency through multi-focus and by allowing intimate contact between actors and performers, the structure of the kabuki performance space

contributed to the nature of the relationship between performers and spectators—but role reversal, if it occurred, did so unpredictably and spontaneously.

When Fischer-Lichte writes about the reversal of roles in performance, she does not imply that the distinction between actors and spectators disappears entirely. Role reversal is “a process that transforms the conventional subject-object relationship” (*The Transformative Power of Performance* 40), re-defining the exchange between spectator and actor as more complicated than “the one who watches” and “the one who is watched.” Role reversal, however, does not necessarily place actors and spectators on an equal plane. The reversal of roles between actor and audience occurs when “subject and object [can] no longer be clearly defined and distinguished” (42)—the distinction between the two groups becomes hazy, constantly shifting over the course of the performance as actors and spectators respond to one another. The distinct groups influence one another reciprocally, and at a given moment in performance it may be difficult to determine which group is more actively influencing the other.

Written accounts of kabuki performances of the Genroku Era indicate that the blurring of boundaries between audience and actors occurred in these performances in two main ways. Spectators played an active vocal and bodily role in performances through the presentation of rehearsed cheers and gestures called *akegoe*, and influenced theaters financially and otherwise through fan clubs called *renju*.

### ***Kakegoe***

In a typical kabuki performance, spectators responded to the actions of performers with actions of their own. An average kabuki spectator who attended the

theater with some frequency was an expert in the performance of *kakegoe*: the rehearsed cheers and gestures spectators contributed to performances (Raz 185). To the untrained spectator, *kakegoe* might have appeared to be spontaneous cheers or outbursts of emotion. In fact, *kakegoe* were extremely difficult to perform correctly, following a specific structure. A well-performed *kakegoe* occurred at precisely the right moment in a performance, and lasted for exactly the right period of time. It corresponded to an actor's gesture, and provided the musical beat for the next gesture. A skillful *kakegoe* aided the performer—and might have been applauded by other spectators—while a less skillful *kakegoe* disrupted the rhythm of the performance (227). Spectators' performance of rehearsed *kakegoe* for an audience of both spectators and performers blurred the distinction between actor and audience, enabling spectators to join in the co-creation of the performance.

Kabuki actors responded to the *kakegoe* of their audiences, improvising in response to the audience's shouts. Once, when the famous actor Utaemon XI appeared on the *hanamichi* with the actor playing his onstage son, who happened to also be his son in real life, a spectator called out, "*Okakodo—n!*" (the name for a Japanese dish containing both chicken and eggs—or a "parent-child" dish). Utaemon heard the *kakegoe*, turned to his son, and said, "When we return home, how about eating *oyakodon?*" (Raz 228). A spectator might then have responded with yet another appropriate *kakegoe*. This back and forth of audience *kakegoe* and performer responses offers an explicit depiction of the feedback loop between actor and audience, and affords an example of the ways in which the actor-audience relationship was constantly re-negotiated during kabuki performances.

### *Renju*

Kabuki spectators also exerted external influence over the nature of performances through participation in *hiiki renju*, or fan clubs that offered support to theaters and individual actors. *Renju* influenced performances in three primary ways: they dictated the popularity of the actors, provided properties and set pieces necessary for performances to take place, and determined the cost of tickets for their members and for audiences in general.

*Renju* influenced actors' popularity through a ceremony they performed at the first performance of a new season (called the *kaomise*). Clubs rehearsed and then presented complicated clapping rhythms in honor of the actors who would be performing that season ("*Hiiki Renchū*" 112). At the end of the clapping, the clubs presented gifts to the actors, and performed songs and other displays of talent in their honor. The gifts and performances dedicated to more popular actors were more elaborate (116). By measuring the complexity of these *kaomise* performances, theater managers knew which actors were most beloved by audiences. Similarly, spectators who did not perform in the *kaomise* learned from the *renju*'s performances which actors were considered most skilled. By demonstrating their affections for performers, *renju* exerted influence over theaters' casting choices, actors' salaries, and performers' status in the public eye.

*Renju* also furnished the physical materials for performances. Club members decorated the theaters and provided hangings and lanterns for the upper boxes and the *shibaijaya* ("*Hiiki Renchu*" 116). *Renju* contributed gifts that were of material use to the actors, such as bales of rice and bottles of sake, and paid for doctors' visits when

the actors became sick or were injured. In addition, *renju* supplied the properties essential for most performances—everything from oars to flowers to weapons (Raz 190).

Because *renju* held the power to determine actors' popularity and provide theaters and actors with necessary materials, the clubs had the right to negotiate ticket prices (Raz 192). Without the support of the *renju*, theaters would not have been able to afford to mount performances. As a result, theater managers agreed to whatever demands *renju* made and showed their gratitude however possible. During performances, actors offered words of thanks to the *renju* that sponsored them. In fact, *Sukeroku*, one of the most famous plays in Edo during this era, included a greeting ceremony to the supporting *renju*, and could not be performed without that section (191). Thus, kabuki spectators who participated in *renju* influenced everything from the interior decoration of the theater to casting decisions and ticket prices. Furthermore, their active participation in the operation of theaters as well as in performances opened up the possibility for the existence of a community within performances.

### 3. *Community and horizon of expectations*

In the 1960s, many Western theater directors borrowed elements from other cultures' rituals in their experiments with creating communities of actors and spectators. Many such directors "believed that a community could only be created on the condition of the collective performance of specifically adapted rituals" (*The Transformative Power of Performance* 53). Experimenters of this time tried to incite

collective action by engaging actors and spectators together in the performance of a ritual. For example, in *Dionysus in 69*, Schechner offered the possibility for spectators to take part, alongside actors, in ritual actions (53). By initiating the co-performance of an often fixed series of symbolically meaningful activities, directors hoped to build communities of actors and spectators within the time and place of performance. German stage designer and theorist Georg Fuchs, who was experimenting with confrontations between actor and spectator in the twentieth century, describes the kind of community that may emerge within a performance as the state of

strange intoxication which overcomes us when, as part of a crowd, we feel emotionally stirred...[T]his is certain: there is an emotion which runs through each of us when, as part of a crowd, we find ourselves united in an overwhelming passion. (*Revolution in the Theatre* 3)

Fuchs's image of a crowd "united in an overwhelming passion" echoes the description Raz has compiled from numerous spectator accounts of kabuki audiences.

Raz recounts an atmosphere during kabuki performances that may have been similar to the atmosphere of community posited by Fuchs, explaining:

[A]s the play goes on...the excitement mounts, so that sometimes the actor cannot continue his show. Knowing that the cup of sake held by the hero contains poison, [the spectators] shout "Don't drink! Don't drink!" They "cannot help but crying" at moments of intense emotion, despite "knowing that it is (only) a play." (179)

Raz's description indicates that kabuki spectators, united in their response to the performers, were swept away by the communal energy within the theater space. He adds that "kabuki was probably one of the best ways of creating a community-type theatre in an urban environment" (207). Kabuki performances, however, facilitated these sorts of communities by different means than 1960s experiments.

The experiments of Fuchs and Nitsch (as described earlier in this essay) deliberately invited actors and spectators to jointly participate in staged rituals borrowed from an array of cultural sources. Spectators of kabuki performances engaged in actions different from the actions of the performers, but nonetheless were swept up in the communal experience of the actions they were performing. Kabuki developed long before theater directors in Europe and the Americas were using strategies such as staging rituals with the intention of creating communities. If kabuki performances allowed for the possibility of actor-spectator communities, such communities arose by accident.

One of the means by which kabuki performances allowed for the creation of communities was the spectators' familiarity with the codes of performance. During kabuki performances, both actors and spectators had a deep level of understanding of the means by which character, emotion, and story were communicated in the kabuki style. This familiarity invited the audience into the performance as active participants. In addition, spectators knew the guidelines for their participation, and knew that these rules lasted only for the duration of the performance. Through these two mechanisms — familiarity with the codes of the theater style, and awareness of the temporary

nature of performance—kabuki performances facilitated the emergence of ephemeral communities of actors and spectators.

### **Performance Codes**

Every aspect of kabuki performances, from the dramatic structure of the stories being told to the style of the speech and movement of the performers, was part of a carefully structured code that developed over hundreds of years of performances, constrained to one nation and—for a long time—separate from outside influences. Throughout kabuki’s “golden age” in the Genroku Era, before foreigners began attending kabuki performances, audiences arrived at the theater with a high level of training and familiarity with performance codes. The conventions of kabuki were “part of the game in which [spectators] came to participate, which demanded a certain amount of training on their part, and for which they came prepared” (Raz 189). Kabuki audiences knew what elements would make up a performance, and what each of those elements signified.

The aspects of kabuki acting with which audiences were so familiar can be distilled into *kata*, or codes. Kabuki *kata* include manners of speaking, gestures, props, costumes, and makeup (in other words, all the stylized components of kabuki acting) (Scott 105). *Kata* are signs, some of which are mimetic and others of which are more abstract. Mimetic gestures may imitate real-life movements or be derived from natural human gestures (such as pointing at oneself, or waving one’s hand back and forth to indicate the negative) (“Signs, Symbols, and the Hieroglyphic Actor” 249). Nonmimetic gestures are more decorative, and are used to suggest an emotion or atmosphere. There are often multiple meanings for these more abstract gestures in

kabuki dance, depending on the context and the character. For example, stamping could indicate anger or be no more than a rhythmic device (250).

Both the mimetic and abstract gestures of kabuki were familiar to kabuki spectators of the Genroku Era. This is because the *kata* were learned so precisely, handed down from father to son in kabuki families. Kabuki actors had a responsibility to their ancestors to learn *kata* exactly, or they might have lost the financial support of their family members (Leiter xvii). In this way, actors' skills were measured by the accuracy of their execution of the predetermined *kata*. Since actors strove to maintain the specificity of *kata* over the years, audiences easily developed an understanding of these codes.

In Susan Bennett's language, kabuki performances comprised of codes familiar to audiences were consistent with the audience's dominant horizon of expectations. She writes:

The spectator comes to the theatre as a member of an already constituted interpretive community and also brings a horizon of expectations shaped by the pre-performance elements...This "history" constructs the outer frame and is confirmed by the existence of commonly acknowledged theatrical conventions. At the center of the inner drama is the combination and succession of visual and aural signs which the audience receives and interprets, some fixed but the majority in flux, and which...signify on a number of possible levels. (140)

The audience, in other words, perceives the signs or codes that make up a performance, and assesses whether these codes are consistent with the expectations they have for that specific performance. Spectators' ability to comprehend a code system is subject to their prior knowledge of the sort of performance those codes comprise.

Spectators of kabuki were familiar with its codes, which changed only very gradually over time, and so performances were more or less consistent with audiences' horizons of expectations. This level of familiarity may have been a condition for the community atmosphere as described by Raz. By relying on audiences' preexisting cognizance of the codes of performance, kabuki facilitated the emergence of communities within performances.

### **Ephemerality**

Erika Fischer-Lichte notes that ephemerality is a crucial aspect of performance communities, writing that a community of co-subjects in performance is "not sustained for the entire duration of a performance but merely over fluctuating and limited spans" (*The Transformative Power of Performance* 53). Every theater performance necessarily ends, and when it ends the rules that governed it, which may not apply to everyday life, break down.

Kabuki performances constantly reminded spectators that they were in a theater space, experiencing a play (Ernst 80). In doing so, they drew spectators' attention to the temporary nature of the world being depicted onstage. Spectators who were fully aware of the distinction between real life and performance were also aware that the duration of the performance was limited. Performances emphasized their

unreal nature in several ways. Actors frequently stepped out of character to ask for the audience's favor, which drew the audience's attention to the performance as performance, rather than to the reality of the make-believe world (Shively 20). Actors also inserted their own names into their lines, or improvised dialogue commenting on the fact they they were actors performing a play in a theater (Ernst 80). "Kabuki," writes Shively, "was never intent on sustaining the illusion of reality. [So,] the audience considered such asides less an interruption than a familiar confidence" (20). Kabuki audiences readily acknowledged that performances were unlike life, and that the artificial world of the play ended along with the performance.

Kabuki scholar Leonard Pronko calls this audience acceptance of the unreality of theater a "double experience" (*Theater East and West* 179). Kabuki audiences, he writes, are doubly aware of the non-real world of the performance as well as the performance as performance. He suggests that this dual awareness may be one reason for the communal experience of passion in theater. Pronko observes:

We enjoy playing at least partly because we know we are playing and also because we like the sensation of creating within a restricted area an ideal world, conforming to certain laws or rules, and then entering into this created, artificial world as though it were real. We are aware and unaware at the same time, and this double experience is essential to the sense of profound joy that arises from theatrical experiences.

(179-180)

This "double experience" exists in a performance space where, for a short period of time, the world works different than in everyday life. Pronko suggests that the

participants' knowledge of the ephemerality of this experience contributes to the audience's communal sense of pleasure. Audience's awareness of the temporary nature of the rules governing performances contributed to their capacity to take part in temporary communities within performances. It is perhaps because of this awareness of the impermanence of the emotions and relationships associated with performance that the kabuki theater of this era was considered by critics to be the closest thing to a paradise on earth ("Signs, Symbols, and the Hieroglyphic Actor" 241).

## **CONCLUSION: KABUKI IN THE WEST**

### *The interweaving of cultures*

This essay examines Japanese kabuki of the Genroku Era through the lens of Western theorists, bringing together different cultural understandings of performance and spectatorship. Thus, a brief discussion of the possibilities for—and ethical implications of—attempts to present kabuki or kabuki-influenced performances in the Western hemisphere seems critical. The concept of kabuki-influenced performances taking place outside of Japan is not a new idea: in the early 1900s, Otojiro Kawakami's troupe was the first to travel through Europe and the United States, presenting adaptations of traditional kabuki plays staged in a more contemporary style. Starring Sada Yakko, Kawakami's wife, these performance were immensely successful. European audiences, seeking a "new" style of theater, were thrilled with Kawakami's movement-driven, textually spare performances ("Interweaving Cultures

in Performance” 393). For the duration of these performances, European spectators and Japanese performers shared a temporary emotional experience.

As the twentieth century progressed, directors worldwide began to experiment with theatrical traditions other than their own, creating what came to be known as intercultural theater pieces. These performances incorporated elements borrowed from theatrical traditions other than the tradition most familiar to the actors and spectators who participated in them. Directors like Eugenio Barba, Peter Brook, Ariane Mnouchkine, Tadashi Suzuki, and Yukio Inagawa constructed performances that wove together elements of their own (“target”) culture and another (“source”) culture (“Interweaving Cultures in Performance” 398).

These intercultural experiments included numerous attempts to fuse elements of kabuki with Western theatrical traditions. In the mid-twentieth century, the kabuki actor Onoe Baiko VII directed the play *Narukami* at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Theatre Arts (IASTA) in New York. Baiko presented the play in a traditional kabuki theater space with an American cast trained in *kata* (Mitchell 99). Earle Ernst directed an English-language production of *The House of Sugawara* at the University of Hawaii in 1951, in a style that borrowed from the original (*Theater East and West* 159). James Brandon presented several kabuki plays at Michigan State University in 1963, again performed by American actors in English. The style was Brandon’s own, derived from his study of the techniques of kabuki (160). A 1965 Pomona College production of *The Jew of Malta* borrowed kabuki techniques to invent a new code of gestures in an attempt to recreate the little-understood style of Elizabethan acting (164). In all of these cases, Western audiences unfamiliar with the

kabuki style witnessed performances that blended elements of kabuki with non-Japanese forms. Audiences attending these productions in the USA would have held a different set of cultural expectations from Japanese audiences. Thus the Western productions that incorporated kabuki elements could be categorized as intercultural in some way. Susan Bennett writes: “It takes one culturally specific spectator to make an intercultural performance” (171). If even one spectator is culturally distinct from the codes of performance she is perceiving, the performance is intercultural.

This gap between the spectators’ expectations and the actual codes of performance may at times alienate or distance audiences. Just as familiarity with the performance style invited Genroku Era kabuki audiences to become part of an active and engaged performance community, lack of familiarity with performance codes may cause a spectator to feel *uninvited*. Thus, if a director does not wish to alienate her audience, she may attempt to incorporate the horizon of expectations of the target culture into the performance into an effort to bridge the gap between “target” and “source.”

The risk in this bridging, according to Bennett, is that the representation of one cultural identity, blended with another and presented as a single entity, could offer affirmation to spectators that their conceptions of a culture or tradition unfamiliar to them are correct. The result is oversimplification and the sense that the “target” culture has mastery over the “source” (Bennett 186). Bennett defines this as appropriation, which, she writes, can reduce everything about the “source” culture to the perspective of the “target,” placing the “target” in a dominant position (202).

Peter Brook and Eugenio Barba, European directors known for creating “intercultural” or “multicultural” performances using a range of cultural sources, have defended their work against accusations of appropriation. In an interview with Dale Moffitt, Brook argues that a person’s culture is secondary to her personhood. “The living person,” he says, “is a living person; this is what the entire humanity has in common” (142). His performances are not, he says, “intercultural” simply because he works with people from different parts of the world. It is far too racial and cultural to call one’s work intercultural or interracial, says Brook. Instead, his work is about people, and “that deep sense of fellowship which brings people together” (144).

Similarly, Barba states that his work has nothing to do with being intercultural (Watson 239). “The value of the theater,” he writes, “is in the quality of the relations it creates between individuals” (255). He acknowledges that his work is “multicultural,” but asserts that this is not because he works with performers from different cultures or nations, but because these performers are trained in different techniques. In Barba’s estimation, a study of “the other” is not inherently incorrect; it is “not despicable, and of course you start from what you know, applying the criteria of your own professional or historical-biographical background. It is what you do with the results of this observation that can raise moral doubts” (247). For Barba, the danger lies not in the act of combining forms from different cultural or professional traditions, but in the way in which a director perceives the results of her work. If a director studies another group or nation or culture with the specific intention of asserting her superiority, then that is problematic. The other danger, according to Barba, is if a director were to do the opposite, and assume that in the very act of

creating a “multicultural performance” she is fixing all of society’s problems. “The very positive value attributed to multiculturalism,” he writes, “is the other face of its threatening aspect” (253). For Barba, performances are spaces to create new meanings and collaborations, but are not indicative of the state of the greater society. The temporary peace that may exist within a performance does not reflect the nature of the world outside of that performance.

Fischer-Lichte agrees that performances, existing as they do in a state of in-between, are a useful site for exchanges to occur between people (“Interweaving Cultures in Performance” 392). She finds that many of the intercultural performances of the twentieth century, however, served mainly “to eliminate deficits in one’s own culture by modernizing theatre” (397). These experiments often sought to improve the performance or social traditions of the “source” culture by their use of the “target,” rather than incorporating elements of both.

More recently, directors have begun to devise transcultural performances that weave together performance codes originating from multiple cultures, thereby creating “something new which [is] neither one nor the other but both at the same time” (“Interweaving Cultures in Performance” 397). For example, On Keng Sen’s *King Lear* brought together elements of Japanese Noh theater, Chinese Peking opera, Thai Kohn mask dance, Indonesian Pencak Silat, as well as music from all of these nations. Fischer-Lichte refers to this production as an “interweaving of different cultures” (398) rather than an “intercultural” performance.

In fact, Fischer-Lichte suggests abandoning the terms “intercultural” and “multicultural” in favor of the phrase “interweaving cultures in performance.” She

identifies two assumptions at work in the language of “intercultural” and “multicultural”: firstly, that different cultures remain distinct over time and secondly, that “intercultural” performances are necessarily constructed by Western theater practitioners looking to non-Western performance practices in order to modernize their own. Fischer-Lichte asserts that since cultures are not self-contained and are constantly undergoing change and exchange, it is impossible to pinpoint the exact cultural origins of each element in a performance. Cultures evolve and influence one another over time. Modernity, similarly, is not a straightforward concept for Fischer-Lichte. She writes: “As a normative, relational, and historical concept, modernity today is a contentious subject” (“Interweaving Cultures in Performance” 399). The goal, therefore, of “modernization” is confounded by numerous factors. Fischer-Lichte proposes disentangling efforts to create performances blending multiple theatrical traditions from attempts to modernize or Westernize. She suggests that instead artists treat the theater as a laboratory within which to experiment with different methods for transforming individuals with different cultural backgrounds into a community. This interweaving does not erase individual’s differences or [homogenize] them. Rather, because of the multiple states of in-betweenness...performances are particularly suitable as sites for different cultures to meet and negotiate their relationships through various processes of interweaving that result in something completely new and beyond the scope of any single participating culture. (400)

In other words, because of the in-betweenness of performance, the interweaving of cultures can occur in theater more readily than in everyday life—and performance is a useful vehicle for the exploration of this interweaving.

Fischer-Lichte's theories, as well as the work of directors like Brook and Barba, suggest that there is value to be found in performances weaving together elements of kabuki theater with other theatrical traditions. In a symposium on the preservation of the traditional Japanese arts, Genichi Tsuge asserted that three conditions were necessary for the continued existence of artistic styles: a deep understanding of the art, change, and cultural exchange (Tsuge 151). Because the performing arts are constantly evolving over time, to keep a form alive is to allow it to change. The attempt to hold onto forms as they once were may contribute, for example, to the kind of dry, dispirited kabuki that is performed in Japan today. The revitalization of kabuki may rely on what Fischer-Lichte calls the interweaving of cultures. The notion of an interweaving of kabuki with other performance traditions suggests the potential for further exploration of the exchange that took place between actor and spectator during the Genroku Era.

### *Starfall*

In the written portion of this thesis, I have explored the processes by which kabuki theater of the Genroku Era prioritized the autopoietic feedback loop between performers and spectators. I concluded with a brief investigation into the theories of interweaving cultures in performance, and the possibilities for experiments that bring

elements of kabuki into contact with other performance styles. My creative component was an attempt at such an experiment.

In collaboration with three performers and several musicians, I adapted the kabuki play *Sonezaki Shinju* by Chikamatsu Monzaemon into a new performance we called *Starfall*. The goal in constructing this performance was to draw focus to the autopoietic feedback loop through processes similar to those present in Genroku Era kabuki. To that end, I constructed a physical space that mimicked the structure of kabuki theaters, with a wide, low stage, and a *hanamichi* extending into the audience. In an attempt to present the audience with a performance style that was familiar to them, I framed the event as a concert (specifically, a cover band concert that might be held on any weekend night at Wesleyan University, where the performance took place). The student band Love Hotel played songs that my music director and I determined a broad range of Wesleyan students knew, and to which they might sing along. I inserted the *Sonezaki Shinju* story into the world of this concert as a fantasy in the mind of one male audience member—a love story between himself and the lead singer of the band. The actors and I devised our own code of movement, borrowing elements from the kabuki dance I studied at the Traditional Theatre Training Program in Kyoto, Japan, and movement styles in which they were experienced, such as hip-hip, breaking, salsa, modern dance, tai kwon do, and capoeira.

In several ways, this experiment was successful. Spectators responded vocally and bodily to the actors, calling their names and reaching out to them. I spoke to several students who said they felt comfortable coming and going as they pleased, speaking to one another and paying selective attention to elements both onstage and

off. A final number was performed only because the audience, relying on codes of audience participation familiar in this context, called for an encore. On closing night, two spectators threw their underwear onto the stage, indicating a degree of comfort and intimacy with the performers.

I do not think that the performance succeeded in interweaving cultures, but rather that it transplanted elements of one culture into another. Since audiences were comprised of spectators unfamiliar with the codes and traditions of kabuki, we presented familiar elements of performance (notably, the concert structure) in an attempt to bridge the gap between “target” and “source” traditions. In the future, I would like to work more closely with expert kabuki practitioners to create performances that more effectively weave elements together. Still, for me this experiment was a worthwhile exploration into actor-spectator relations, and offered evidence for my theory that the elements I have identified as essential to the engaged spectatorship of Genroku Era kabuki continue to be useful in contemporary Western performances.

Kabuki continues to offer an example of a theatrical form that encouraged the co-creation of performance by actors and spectators. In the Genroku Era, kabuki performances facilitated intimacy between actor and spectator through the structuring of the physical space, encouraged active audience participation, and allowed for the creation of actor-spectator communities. By exploring the processes by which kabuki performances prioritized the active and dynamic exchange between actors and spectators, directors today may uncover more about what Peter Brook calls the

“deepest...question in the theater of our time” (28): what occurs when actor and audience encounter each other.

## **APPENDIX: STARFALL TEXT**

### STARFALL

*Concert.*

**Teenage Dream (Katy Perry)**

**Everytime We Touch (Cascada)**

**Hey Ya! (Outkast)**

**Dark Horse (Katy Perry)**

**Paparazzi (Lady Gaga)**

*Transformation.*

**So Sick (Ne-Yo)**

### TOKUBEI

Ah—I am so glad to meet you

My name is Tokubei

But please, call me “Toku”

I am famous for my elegance and grace

I drink peach wine delicately, one cup at a time

And my styling regimen involves many fine products

But who can see this now? No one!

Having fallen from such great heights, I work as a clerk

The cuffs of my sleeves are stained with oil

I am ever a slave to the mere thought of my love

The courtesan Ohatsu

I must hide the love that burns within me

For fear of gossip and the shame of scandal

TOKUBEI

Ohatsu!

OHATSU

Tokubei!

*Reunion.*

OHATSU

I've been heartsick!

It has been so long!

They told me you had left the city, returned to the country,

Without a word for me

Could it be, I asked myself, that you would choose to leave so heartlessly?

I thought—perhaps this was his intent: a clean break

But I could not persuade myself that this could be so

TOKUBEI

Please don't cry—you mustn't cry

You mustn't be angry

Don't think that I left by choice

I have been so unhappy myself!

OHATSU

I waited for you to return

I waited for a word from you

What were you thinking? Why did you run from me?

I have had nothing but faith in you

Now you must tell me

**Bills, Bills, Bills (Destiny's Child)**

TOKUBEI

I will tell you the whole story now

As you well know, my master has always thought highly of me

And so he came upon the notion

That I marry his wife's niece

And of course I was flattered

But how could I marry when I am already in love with you?

And so I told him I was grateful for the offer, but that I would have to refuse it.

What I did not know was that my stepmother had already accepted!

She took the dowry and fled with it back to our home, in the country.

There I was: having refused the marriage to my master's wife's niece,

But with her dowry already claimed by my greedy stepmother.

My master said, "You must return the money."

He said, "I must have it by month's end or you will be forced

To leave this city forever.

I will see to it that you can never return."

How can I leave this city? I asked myself.

How can I leave *you*?

Ohatsu, let my bones be crushed to a powder

Let me sink to the bottom of the river

But never let me be parted from you

OHATSU

Oh, my poor Tokubei!

How you have suffered!

And all for me!

Listening to your story,

I am filled with sadness, but also happiness

I am grateful, but I am worried too

Tell me: what became of the money?

What did you do next?

TOKUBEI

I returned to the country

I snatched the money from my stepmother

And I planned to return it at once to my master.

But I'm afraid there is one more part of the story to tell...

OHATSU

What more can there be to tell?

If you were able to return the dowry

Then should this not be the end of the story?

TOKUBEI

No—alas not.

For just as I arrived in the city

Kuheiji—you know him, the oil merchant, and my dear friend—

came to me in desperation, begging me to lend him some money

And since he promised to return it by the next morning

and because I love him like a brother

I agreed, and I gave it to him.

But then he didn't come as he'd promised—

Not that morning, and not the next.

So this is what remains of my story

The money I fled the city to retrieve has evaded me again

But do not fear, Ohatsu.

I will go to see him myself this evening,

And I am certain he will return it to me then.

When he hears of my desperation, how can he not?

**Monster (Kanye/Jay-Z/Nicki Minaj/Rick Ross)**

Oh, there he is now!

*Kuheiji enters.*

TOKUBEI

Kuheiji! What a terrible performance!

And have you forgotten?

You have not repaid your debt to me!

KUHEIJI

What are you talking about, Tokubei?

TOKUBEI

The money I lent you! You must return it to me now!

KUHEIJI

Are you out of your mind?

I have never borrowed even a penny from you

In all the years I've known you

TOKUBEI

Kuheiji! You came to me in tears

You said you couldn't pay your bills!

I lent you the money you needed

And you took it with great thanks

I wrote up a receipt

And you signed it with your seal!

How can you deny it?

KUHEIJI

Oh?

I'd like to see this seal

TOKUBEI

Surely you don't think I'm afraid to show it to you!

KUHEIJI

Yes, that's my seal, all right

Or, it *was* my seal

Tokubei, I never thought you would do such a thing  
I lost that seal months ago  
And had a new one made  
You must have found my old seal  
And now here you are using it to try to extort money from me?  
I loved you like my own brother

TOKUBEI

I certainly thought you did!  
How can you lie to me this way?  
You have always been clever  
But I never thought you'd use your cleverness against me  
To dishonor me.  
I'll get the money back  
If I have to fight you for it.  
I am a man of honor!

*Fight.*

*Kuheiji wins.*

TOKUBEI

Kuheiji!  
Do you think I'll let you get out of this alive?  
*To audience:*  
I am so ashamed that you had to see me this way  
I assure you, I have not spoken a single false word

I lent Kuheiji that money  
 Even though it was as precious as life to me  
 It would have been better if I had died fighting him,  
 Than to have been humiliated this way  
 I'm sorry to have troubled you  
 Before this night is over, I will make amends  
 I hope you can forgive me

**Creep (Radiohead)**

OHATSU

Where have you been?  
 I have been out of my mind with worry

TOKUBEI

I have been the victim of my old friend's clever plot  
 Everything has turned against me now

**I Knew You Were Trouble (Taylor Swift)**

OHATSU

Did you hear that?  
 You must hide!  
*She hides him.*  
*Kuheiji enters.*

KUHEIJI

Hello, you  
 You're looking a little lonesome tonight

If you're short of clients

Why not spend some time with me?

It so happens that

I have something to tell you, in any case

You won't like it, but it's important that you hear

Your favorite client, Tokubei

Tried to cheat me with a forged note and my own lost seal

But I have taken care of him

He's finished now.

I suggest you be on your guard if he tries to see you

He's nothing but trouble, I'm afraid

OHATSU

You're wasting your time, Kuheiji

Tokubei has already told me everything

He's always shared with me all the secrets in his heart

So I know him completely, and I trust him.

The poor boy hasn't a deceitful bone in his body

To save his honor, I fear he will have no choice but to kill himself

Has he already resolved to die? I only wish I knew

*Tokubei stops the band.*

*Pause.*

*Tokubei makes the band start playing:*

**Welcome to the Black Parade (My Chemical Romance)**

OHATSU

I knew it, I knew it!

No matter how one lives

The end is always the same

KUHEIJI

What is Ohatsu talking about?

Why should Tokubei kill himself?

All this is absurd

Still, if he does, I'll take good care of you.

For it seems to me now that you have fallen for me!

OHATSU

You? You are a thief and a liar!

Besides, do you think I could go on living even for a moment if separated from

Tokubei?

If he dies, I die

KUHEIJI

How peculiar you are

You whores who hate only

The clients wealthy enough to pay for your services

Ah—poor Ohatsu, how far you have fallen

I'll leave you alone, then

*Movement style breaks down.*

*Kuheiji exits.*

*Tokubei and Ohatsu decide.*

OHATSU (*to Tokubei*)

Meet me at two o'clock

Farewell

*Tokubei exits.*

**Come Away With Me (Norah Jones)**

**Flightless Bird, American Mouth (Iron & Wine)**

TOKUBEI

Farewell to this world, and to the night, farewell

OHATSU

We who walk the road to death, to what should we be likened?

TOKUBEI

To the frost by the road that leads to the graveyard

Vanishing with each step we take on the frozen earth?

OHATSU

How sad is this dream of a dream

*They walk.*

OHATSU

Let's pretend that this bridge is not an earthly bridge

But the bridge across the Milky Way

TOKUBEI

And make a vow to be husband and wife stars for eternity,

Forever to light the night sky together.

*They walk.*

TOGETHER, broken up

How puzzling life is

Just yesterday—even today!—we spoke of our lives as if death did not concern us

As if death had nothing to do with us

And yet tomorrow it will be as if we never were

By sunrise we will be no more than memories

TOKUBEI

If the world will sing about us, let it sing

**Iris (Goo Goo Dolls)**

*The obi is wrapped around both of them.*

*He almost stabs her.*

*Doesn't.*

*The space transforms.*

*Concert.*

**Larger Than Life (Backstreet Boys)**

**A Thousand Miles (Vanessa Carlton)**

*Encore:*

**Die Young/Timber (Ke\$ha)**

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