CHAPTER ONE

PLAYMAKING AND PLAYWRITING:
EARLY PLAY CREATION FOR KABUKI

In earlier times, playwriting did not exist as a profession. Important actors would assemble to establish the plot. Lines would first be uttered at rehearsal on a trial basis and then fixed, so there was nothing like what we know as the script. With the day’s play in sections, the six-part construction like we have today was internalized by the actors. Later, actors’ memories weakened and they would record in memos the performances of earlier leading actors in order to remember them. Between then and now, practices changed little by little, and the changes were added to those memos. The manuscripts thus produced were the earliest scripts. Plays became increasingly detailed, and playwriting was recognized as a separate profession. To sum up, plots were created little by little with the actors, these plots were then developed by playwrights, and many actors wrote plays. (Kezairokū)¹

With the restrictions dealt kabuki over the first half of the seventeenth century, it began its change from an erotic sideshow to a dramatic art. During the ensuing decades, the improvements in the physical theatre, the effect of the change from single-act plays to multiple-act plays beginning in 1664, and later the increasingly developed storylines (due in part to the influence of jōruri on kabuki) necessitated written efforts by actors and later by troupe members specializing in creating plays. Early kabuki plays after the ban in 1652 on wakashū kabuki 若衆かぶき (youths’ kabuki) derived from nō and kyōgen or shared plots with earlier puppet plays, and thus the need for professional “playwrights” had not existed. This need arose as plays developed into increasingly complex entities. With the growing emphasis on the art of kabuki, plays required more attention. The production of good plays became a major contributing factor to the success of a theatre, and playwrights came to take a necessary and valued place of importance in the creation and performance preparation of kabuki plays.

¹ Kinsei geidōron, 502.
In his *Kabuki sakusha no kenkyû* (a study of kabuki playwrights) Kawatake Shigetoshi offers the following three-part periodization of kabuki plays and the work of playwrights:

1.) Infancy (*yôranki* 揚藍期); literally “the cradle period”); from kabuki’s beginnings until the Kanbun Period (1661-1673), sixty to seventy years;

2.) Growth (*hattatsuki* 発達期); from Kanbun until Hôreki (1751-1763), seventy to eighty years;

3.) Greatness (*taiseiki* 大成期); from Hôreki until Taishô (1912-1926), somewhere under two hundred years ²

During the first period, the position of playwright did not exist as a separate function in kabuki troupes. Nor can we speak of script writing. This is the period of improvisation (*kuchôdate* 口立), in which one-scene plays (*hanare kyôgen* 放れ狂言) were created through the manipulation of individual skills and pre-existing plot material. Such material included folk dances, current popular songs - often with unaltered lyrics - and borrowed material from other dramatic forms such as nô and kyôgen. Skits were comprised of simple, often humorous incidents with few characters. Top actors would sketch out a storyline idea, and individual lines would be improvised and determined by the actors. Much like Commedia dell’ Arte, or certain other world dramatic forms, actors worked with types in plot, character and actions and their roles were defined by set actions and gestures. Actor/playmakers’ talent showed in how they adapted, arranged and brought together chosen material. This improvisational method meant that performances of the same program might vary; audience desires and mood were the first criteria to be considered in preparation and during each performance.

As play preparation moved through different historical stages of practice, some of the features of this early method remained significant. Individual skills and pre-existing material remained the building blocks of play creation, and audience reaction was always paramount in determining not only the run of a play, but also day-to-day alterations and nuances in acting and performance.

² Kawatake Shigetoshi, *Kabuki sakusha no kenkyû*. Tokyo Tokyodô, 1940. 2.