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An Evening at the Kabuki
Chizuko Bando

The Kabuki-za theatre is a ten-minute walk from the underground station along Ginza street. The street was quieter and more relaxed than usual that day, the second day of the three-day weekend in February. The Kabuki-za, with its classic appearance, has a 120 year history but the current theatre was actually rebuilt in 1951. I am told that another rebuilding plan is in the offing as the current building is getting quite old.

It is the ‘Matsumoto Hakuo 27th anniversary memorial performance’ at the Kabuki-za this month, with programmes consisting mainly of plays which were Hakuo’s favourites, played by actors who are closely related to the late Hakuo in one way or another.

‘Matsumoto Hakuo’, formerly called ‘Koshiro’, was well known as an actor with a presence, an actor of high calibre, a representative actor of his times. The current ‘Koshiro’ who succeeded to his name is his son, who used to be called ‘Somegoro’. The son of ‘Kosihro’ is now called ‘Somegoro’. The names ‘Hakuo’, ‘Koshiro’ and ‘Somegoro’, passed on from father to son, are eloquent testimonials to the hereditary family structure which is the backbone of the kabuki world.

A son born to one of the great kabuki families is trained in dance and song from a very young age. He learns from watching his father and starts acting on the stage even as a child. It is in this way that the tradition of kabuki has been preserved and continued over the years.

As it is a special performance today, five actors closely related to the late Hakuo – his two sons, his grandson and two other relatives – welcomed the audience by lining up on the stage during the interval, dressed in traditional formal attire, consisting of a stiff sleeveless jacket and a long, pleated skirt. They recounted episodes
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from the life of the late Hakuo, including some humorous ones that aroused laughter from the audience, another manifestation of kabuki being very much a family business.

The word ‘kabuki’ derives from the word ‘kabuku’, a word which describes someone who acts or dresses unconventionally, unlike anyone else. A kabuki play, which presents a dramatic story using exaggerated gestures and lines, flourished as a popular entertainment for the common folk in the Edo period – from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. Loyalty as the mainstay of the ideal samurai, or the emotional ties between parent and child, between brothers, or between lovers, were intertwined and dramatized to evoke laughter or move the audience to tears.

In spite of those beginnings, kabuki is often considered ‘inaccessible and difficult’ today. When I first started going to kabuki, I, too, felt it strange that heavily made-up male actors were speaking in female voices. In particular, I could not bring myself to like the exaggerated gestures of the actors and the growling gidayu chant, but I was soon overwhelmed by the colourful costumes and the beautiful colour schemes of the stage settings. In the dance plays, the stage takes on an even more ethereal quality, for a short while making you forget the mundane world and enjoy yourself in a world of dreams.

My seat that day was at the centre of the first row on the first floor balcony, so I had a full view of the stage. On my left were two elderly ladies sitting in a relaxed mood. On my right, my husband seemed very pleased with his rented audio-guide. This audio-guide is a great idea, carefully guiding the uninitiated through the world of kabuki. You first pay 650 yen plus a deposit of 1000 yen, which you get back when you return the audio-guide. There is an English version, too.

A special treat at the Kabuki-za is the theatre lunch box which you can enjoy in your seat during the intermission, a pleasure I look forward to each time. I think it must be a remnant of the times when kabuki was played in humble playhouses hundreds of years ago. Soon after our appetites were satisfied, the next play, The Revenge of the Soga Brothers, began.

The play is performed keeping time with music. Kabuki is made up of three elements, music (ka), dance (bu) and acting (ki). As