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# Global Drama: How Noh and Kabuki Troupes Transformed Theater in the West and Japan

by KAYLEE WHITE

Noh and Kabuki are ancient forms of Japanese theater that are highly symbolic and stylized, especially when compared to the realistic nature of Western theater in the early 1900s. Around that time, theatrical troupes from Japan began to perform Noh and Kabuki shows overseas in the United States and Europe but modified the content and style to be more appealing to Western audiences. Most people had never experienced theater with fantastical elements or non-colloquial language, but nevertheless, the shows were immensely popular. The modification of Noh and Kabuki shows for Western audiences made them more accessible and entertaining, resulting in increased interest and acceptance of the theater forms. Western playwrights began to apply Japanese theatrical techniques in their own work, and Japanese troupes brought home aspects of Western theater that influenced drama in Japan. Without the modification to overseas Noh and Kabuki shows, such cultural exchange may not have taken place.

**Keywords:** Japan, West, theater, Noh, Kabuki, realism, symbolism

Noh and Kabuki are irreplicable forms of Japanese theater steeped in history, culture, and otherworldly essence. Both types of theater combine music, singing, dancing, and spoken lines to create a unique rhythmic and highly stylized drama. Researchers have attempted to understand and share this extraordinary theater with the world, explore how Noh and Kabuki have shaped drama in the West, and investigate how Western theater sparked new styles of drama in Japan. Theater critic Earle Ernst and author Toshio Kawatake have both analyzed how overseas Noh and Kabuki troupes altered their shows to suit Western audiences—changes that were encouraged by some and condemned by others. Additionally, Earle notes how Western playwrights have taken inspiration from Noh and Kabuki and that many in Japan have learned from Western theater as well. Adaptations made by overseas troupes were a result of cultural barriers as well as differing theatrical styles, which Noh performer and scholar Noboru Yasuda asserts was Western-style realism versus Japanese-style symbolism.

Modifications of Noh and Kabuki performances by overseas troupes were necessary in order to appeal to Western audiences and,

in turn, inspire new genres of theater in Japan and the West. Critics of the non-traditional shows believed that Japan was being misrepresented on the world stage. However, modifications helped Westerners understand the basics of Japanese theater as well as popularize its symbolic style, which was refreshing in a time where realism was stifling the advancement of Western productions.

The beginning of this essay contains background information about Noh and Kabuki theater and compares the naturalistic theatrical style in the West to the symbolic style of Noh and Kabuki. Following that comparison, I will analyze the introduction of Noh and Kabuki to the West, including the first troupes and the intent behind the alterations they made to suit Western perspectives. Part of my main argument is that these adaptations, though they were inaccurate, were essential in order to share Japanese theater with non-Japanese people. Hence, the third section will expand on the impact of the altered shows by exploring Western reactions to Noh and Kabuki (specifically highlighting reactions from French critics) and several Western playwrights who took inspiration from Japanese performances.



Hideta Kitazawa's masks on exhibition.

**Image Credit:** Sohta Kitazawa

Furthermore, I will examine the Japanese perspective about the adaptations made in Noh and Kabuki shows, and analyze how Japan was impacted by Western theater (with an emphasis on French theater), focusing on the Shimpa theater movement in Japan. Finally, I will illustrate how Japan and the West drew from each other's styles to create new forms of theater, and prove that the adaptations made by Japanese theatrical troupes might have been necessary for this cultural exchange to take place.

### **Basic History and Differing Theatrical Style**

In Noh and Kabuki theater, there is power in silence, meaning in subtle allusions, and whispers of indescribable emotions in Noh masks. Noh has been performed in Japan for roughly 650 years, enduring periods of radical change and yet remaining an immutable aspect of the theatrical culture—so deeply rooted that when translating ancient Noh works into modern Japanese vernacular, allusions and details may become lost. Noh is performed by all male actors and originally for a small, elite audience who would be able to understand certain historical and cultural references. One trademark of Noh are special masks worn by actors that allow them to portray mortals, gods, or other creatures, and to help make feminine roles more realistic. Noh masks also provide a different kind of expression than an uncovered face can, due to their anatomically incorrect features. Rounding out what can be a serious or intense theatrical experience, between acts in

a Noh show, short, comedic pieces called *Kyōgen* are performed by a few actors. In his book, *Noh as Living Art*, Yasuda mentions the great Meiji author, Natsume Sōseki (1867-1916), who describes the heart of Noh as not derived from “any skill at presenting the raw human feelings of the everyday world but from the clothing feeling ‘as it is’ in layer upon layer of art, and in a kind of slow serenity of deportment not to be found in the real world.” Sōseki eloquently describes Noh's unique ability to transport its audience to new realms through fantastical scenes and emotions. Contrary to Noh, Kabuki is catered toward the general population and uses intricate makeup to enhance actors' faces as opposed to masks. Going to a Kabuki show may be a daylong endeavor, including multiple shows and breaks for meals. Overall, this style concentrates more on dance and music, rather than the spirituality and slow movement in Noh.

As Yasuda has explored, a key difference between Western and Japanese theater is their differing degrees of realism. In Japanese theater, plays are not bounded by time and space. Without needing to create scenes and dialogue that correspond to reality, Japanese theater can skip around in time, create scenes with no resemblance to the world we live in, and immerse the audience in a truly magical experience. Due to the design of the main stage in Noh, which juts out into the crowd, actors are more a part of the audience than they are a separate group. The rhythmic, unnatural movements of the actors are another deviation from the real-world

norm, and their perfect intonation and expressions complete this unnatural style. The concept of manipulating reality was essentially nonexistent in Western theater in the early 1900s, where instead plays mirrored the real world. Perhaps this was so audience members could relate to characters and fully understand certain scenarios, allowing them to slip into someone else's life during a few hours of entertainment. Although, efforts to be realistic stunted the extent to which Western theater could expand in style. In the early 1900s, several Japanese people recognized the market for Noh and Kabuki shows in the West, as there was nothing similar being performed at the time, but knew they would need to make changes to serve Western perspectives and norms. Troupes adjusted the amount of realism in their performances, and along with a few other alterations, the resulting Westernized shows carried changed messages, traditions, structure, and more.

#### **First Troupes & Noh and Kabuki Adaptations**

Kawakami Otojirō (1864-1911) became an important Japanese actor in the West along with his wife Sada Yakko, who was compared to some of the greatest actresses of the time. The pair took a troupe to the United States in 1899 to observe Western techniques of theater, and ended up performing in several plays. They went on to do a second tour eight years later where they performed more adapted Kabuki shows in the U.S. and around Europe, and were met with high appraisals. One of their changes included casting females for the feminine roles—rare for traditional Kabuki shows—and it upset critics such as Gordon Craig, who argued that these choices were misrepresenting Japanese theater. And he was correct, to some extent. Craig felt that these changes distorted the art of the East, but they were the reason that Western audiences had a generally positive reaction, since the changes reduced the foreignness of Kabuki. Had these troupes performed as they did in Japan, it is likely that their reception in the West would have been one of confusion and dislike. But there is a fine line between appearing too modern or too traditional. In 1930, a new troupe made their debut in America, but faced unfor-

fortunate timing when their shows were compared to a Chinese opera star who was touring at the time. Tsutsui Tokujirō, the leader of the troupe, and the director, Ito Michio, received criticism from Brooks Atkinson, who wrote: “Unlike Mei Lang-fang’s Chinese troupe, the Japanese actors from Kyoto are not steeped in ceremony, which makes them at once more modern and less interesting.” Performers continued to seek a balance between tradition and modernity in order to attract and maintain Western interest.

In order to do this, troupes studied theatrical trends in the West. Interestingly, even after the alterations, the spirit of Noh and Kabuki remained the opposite of stereotypical Western style, but they were able to fascinate Western audiences nonetheless. Ernst argues that “The Noh has attracted the West because it is an exquisitely precise theatre based on the artistic principle of reduction to essential forms, the Kabuki because it expands into and explores a variety of styles. But both seem the antithesis of Western theatre generally.” Audiences became intrigued because the shows were “exotic,” but had some familiar, grounding elements that made interacting with something foreign feel more comfortable. Based on his research and experience, Toshio believes that drama is another important factor that Western audiences can relate to. More specifically, this is a melodramatic style, wherein characters go through exaggerated emotions and conflicts centered on family or relationships, and the play concludes when this drama is resolved. Toshio describes his experience at a Kabuki show in the U.S., called *Chūshingura*, where directors were concerned about a scene involving *seppuku*. The directors went ahead with the scene anyway, and the show was met with high acclaim for its incredible intensity and deep emotion. Toshio asserts, “It is my firm belief that precisely because the dramatic development here is on the same wavelength as Western drama, the next scene, ‘Hagan’s *Seppuku*,’ and the one that follows, ‘The Forfeit of the Castle,’ were able to surmount all cultural barriers and elicit such an intense theatrical response from Western audiences.” Similar to how troupes incorporated realism, mimicking Western style drama is

another adaptation that made Japanese theater, especially Kabuki, more inviting for Westerners.

### **Western Reactions to Japanese Theater**

If troupes were able to strike a balance between modernity and tradition, and utilize aspects of Western melodrama, audiences in Europe and the U.S. were usually enthralled. Other times, plays fell flat because they lacked familiar character development or clear storylines. After observing a Kabuki performance, Toshio realized that the upbringing of a person affects their reaction to certain scenes. He witnessed Japanese people raised in a Western style and Westerners share a similar reaction to a Kabuki show, different to his own as a Japanese person raised traditionally. This small interaction supports the idea that the way someone is brought up influences how they may interpret Kabuki theater and it solidifies the theory that alterations were necessary to appeal to Western audiences, because cultures and norms around the world vary.

Noh and Kabuki's expansive style made a refreshing and somewhat jarring impact in the West as playwrights began to incorporate more symbolism and similar theatrical techniques in their work. One of these playwrights was Paul Claudel, a French poet, who was greatly impacted by Noh. Inspired by Noh's combination of structure, rhythmic movement, singing, dancing, and dialogue, Claudel attempted to create Noh works of his own, writing a play called *Jeanne d'Arc*. This endeavor is everything that Ernst argued against, maintaining that "The Western theatre will gain nothing by imitating them [Noh and Kabuki]; it will gain a great deal by studying the technique by which this fusion is accomplished." Granted, an imitation of Noh may not be as wonderful as an original show, but there is still value in that imitation because it spreads Noh's influence as an ancient art form. It is natural for art to branch out and morph from its roots in order to stay alive and flourish in an ever-changing world.

Also influenced by Noh was William Butler Yeats, who wrote a Noh-inspired play, *At the Hawk's Well*, in 1917. Several French critics were disapproving of Yeats' plays, stemming from their adherence to realism. They "repeatedly

pointed out, and objected to, the ritualistic style of the actors, their unnatural and monotonous voices, their moving about as though they were hypnotized." Arguably, these aspects are what makes Noh unique, but these French critics may have had an internalized distaste for anything other than realism. As Noh productions progressed, this initial dislike, whether from French critics or otherwise, lessened. In fact, "As knowledge of Japan became increasingly popular in the West, the aesthetics of Noh that were initially ridiculed began stimulating the interest of theatre practitioners who found in Noh a way to salvage their own drama from the decadence of bourgeois culture." Once Noh became more accessible, it stimulated the interest of many in the West, and was ultimately viewed as an asset to refresh melodrama that had long grown stale.

### **Japanese Perspectives on Modified Noh**

A Japan emerged from seclusion in the mid 1800s, there were efforts to establish Japan as a powerful and culturally important country, and to do this, Japan looked to the West. As part of an initiative by the government, diplomat Iwakura Tomomi led an almost two-year journey to study the ins and outs of Western countries. While in Paris, the group went to an opera house, which was considered "the official entertainment offered to foreign guests in Europe," and this experience made Iwakura believe Japan should have something similar. There was a strong sense that whatever was chosen to represent Japan had to be thoroughly and traditionally Japanese. Iwakura's secretary Kume Kunio expressed that "If we were to make a wrong decision, from the perspective of national entertainment, Japan would suffer an extreme calamity. This was how we came to realize the artistic value of *nō* theatre." Noh was the obvious choice to represent Japan to the world, as it is entrenched in centuries of Japanese tradition. Hence, as the country went through the Meiji Restoration and modernization efforts, Noh became viewed as an anchor of Japanese culture during an influx of Western influence. It appears that modified Noh shows, especially those performed in Japan, were likely crafted to present a positive depiction of

the country in order to advertise and establish Japan as a significant and worldly power.

### Western Theater's Impact in Japan

During the introduction of Noh and Kabuki to the West, Japanese people were studying art and entertainment overseas, either firsthand or from afar, and these observations culminated in the Shimpa ("new school") theater movement in Japan. The theater movement infused parts of Western theatrical techniques into a new school of theater that contained "Contemporary life, using colloquial language and eschewing the dance and music of Kabuki in the interests of 'realism.'" Ernst makes it clear that this was not realism in a Western sense, but rather, in a Japanese one—meaning it would appear as hardly realistic from a Western point of view. The new plays, made mostly by amateurs, depicted "crimes of passion" in "gruesome detail" and it was targeted toward the "lower and uneducated classes." Other changes included casting women for some roles and creating storylines around current events. The Shimpa theater movement happened strictly between 1888 and 1905, and thereafter morphed into a type of theater called Shingeki, which was essentially another form of combined Western and Japanese theater.

### Conclusion

As a result of modifications to Noh and Kabuki performances, Westerners engaged with and enjoyed Japanese theater, something that would have been less probable without alterations. Using techniques like realism and melodrama, shows like Chūshingura captivated audiences and inspired Western playwrights to use aspects of Noh and Kabuki in their own work. Japanese also studied Western theater and created a new fusion of style in the Shimpa theater movement which broke down long-standing traditions as Japan was swept toward modernization.

One cultural exchange that took place around this time involved Sada Yakko, who wanted to bring Parisian-style opera to Japan. Once again, Gordon Craig had something to say about Sada: "She is doing both the country and its theatre a grievous wrong." Craig held a firm belief that art was best when created traditionally and in

its original environment. Sometimes that may be true, but it is improbable to think—especially in an increasingly globalized world—that cultures should not influence each other. When foreign traditions inspire others, beautiful progress can be made; like how Sada helped advance Japanese theater by mixing up what had always been done, and how modifications of Noh and Kabuki inspired new creations in the West

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