**Eastern Theatre Quick Facts**

**1. What is Theatre in the East?**

There is no single Eastern theatre. There are a number of theatrical forms-- Sanskrit drama in India; Beijing Opera in China; Kabuki, Bunraku (traditional Japanese puppet theatre) and Noh drama in Japan. Although they share several common characteristics, each theatrical form is different.

**2. What is generally considered the earliest Asian Theatre?**

Indian Sanskrit drama dates back to the eighth century BCE, approximately 200 years before the birth of classical Greek tragedy. These "scripts" are some of the earliest theatrical texts.

**3. What are some of common characteristics of Eastern Theatre?**

Eastern, or Asian, Theatre is...

Seldom "spoken." Instead it is sung, chanted, danced and mimed.

More visual and sensual than literary or intellectual. A Kabuki script is seen by the Japanese as a production vehicle, not a literary text. The plays are seldom read, even in Japan.

Loosely plotted. There is a strong emphasis on storytelling, but the plotting techniques of Western drama-- escalating incidents, plot reversals, climaxes --are absent.

Highly stylized. The formalized acting techniques are typically passed from father to son.

Deeply traditional. Scripts and concepts which were developed three or four hundred years ago are still presented to a modern audience with minimal changes.

**4. What is one of China's major theatrical forms?**

Beijing Opera (jingju, "theatre of the capitol") is a traditional form of Chinese theatre which combines music (both vocal and instrumental), mime, dance and acrobatics. This theatrical form arrived in the capitol city of Beijing from the mountains of Anhui at the end of the 18th century and was fully developed by the mid-19th century. Beijing Opera was extremely popular during the latter part of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912) and is today considered one of the cultural treasures of China. There are major companies in Beijing and Tianjin in the north, and Shanghai in the south. The repertoire includes over 1,400 works, mostly based on Chinese history and folklore.

**5. What eastern nation is the home of both Kabuki and Noh?**

Japan.

**6. When was Kabuki born?**

Kabuki was invented by a Kyoto shrine maiden, Izumo Okuni, around **1600** and reached its peak during Japan's shogun-dominated *Edo* era: 1616 to 1853.

**7. What are the three categories of Kabuki plays?**

1. **History** plays-- *jidaimono* [period things] --dramatize major political events from the past-- 9th to 15th century.
2. **Domestic** plays-- *sewamono* [trouble things] --deal with the affairs of townspeople from the playwright's era.
3. **Dance-dramas**-- *shosagoto* [pose things] --which are very popular, often deal with the world of spirits and animals.

**8. Describe a Kabuki theatre.**

A Kabuki theatre is a proscenium house with an extremely large (90 feet wide by 30 feet deep) stage. Because the musicians are a part of the company they perform on the stage instead of being buried in the orchestra pit. The flat, two dimensional, painted scenery is stylized, but not abstract. It is used to give location. From a historical perspective, the Kabuki was the first theatre to use rolling wagons, an elevator stage (1727) and a turntable (1758).

**9. What is the *hanamichi*?**

The *hanamichi*, or "flower way," is an **entrance ramp** which runs from stage right (house left) to the rear of the auditorium.

**10. What is Japan's most revered and cerebral theatre?**

The **Noh** drama is a mysterious, tragic, usually supernatural, ceremonial music-dance-drama. There are about 240 Noh texts. All were written about 500 years ago by the members of one family. All Noh dramas focus on a single character, the *shite* who is interrograted, prompted and challanged by the *waki*. The Noh is not "the drama of mass entertainment." Many, including the Japanese, find these small cast, slow paced, static plays bewildering. Most Western audiences echo George Bernard Shaw's comment: "Noh drama is no drama."

**11. Describe a traditional Noh theatre.**

The traditonal Noh stage is an eighteen foot square platform. The audience sits in front of, and stage right (house left) of the deck. There is a bridge, the hashigakari, which leads from the dressing room to the (stage) right rear corner of the platform. A six to ten member chorus of singer-chanters is on the actors left and the four musicians, a flute and three drums, or located at the rear of the stage. A stylized image of a single dignified pine tree is painted on the back wall.

**12. How has Asian theatre influenced Western drama?**

Starting in the middle of the twentieth century, non-realistic playwrights, directors and designers began using elements of Eastern theatre in their presentations. Bertolt Brecht's *The Good Woman of Setzuan*(1943) and Disney's Broadway production of *The Lion King* (1997) were both influenced by Eastern theatre.