

Japanese Theatre

日本の演劇

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Japanese Theatre

What do you know about Japanese theatre? Perhaps you have heard of kabuki, with its colourful costumes and striking make-up. Kabuki is just one of several types of traditional theatre in Japan. The noh theatre is older than kabuki - similar in some ways but with important differences. Bunraku is the puppet theatre: some of the stories are the same as those used in kabuki and noh, and the costumes the puppets wear are similar to those worn by the actors in noh and kabuki.

This worksheet will introduce some important features of traditional theatre, looking at noh, kabuki and bunraku. To complete the activities, you will need to use the internet. The addresses of useful websites are given on page 6.

The Stage

When you go to the theatre in this country, actors are usually on stage some distance away from the audience, often above them. The stage is usually in front of the audience. Japanese theatre stages are a little different. The **noh** theatre has a stage with a permanent backdrop, showing a pine tree. It has a corridor from the dressing rooms to the stage which is open, ie. the audience can see the actors walking along it before they get on stage. So the actor is on show, but not yet part of the action

? How should the actor behave when walking along the open corridor? Should he be already in costume, or still fastening his clothes? Should he walk calmly along or is it ok to rush on at the last minute? Imagine you are watching a play. How would you feel about seeing actors before they come on stage? Would it have an effect on the play?

? Can you find out what the pine tree represents in Japan? And what this might mean in the context of a **noh** play?

The **kabuki** stage also has a pathway to the stage which the audience can see, called the **hanamichi** (meaning flower path). This is a raised platform which runs through the middle of the audience. So actors can enter from behind some of the audience and pass

through the middle of them. Often actors will stop on the **hanamichi** and strike a pose, or **mie**. The audience will clap and sometimes shout the actor's name.

? In **kabuki**, actors pass very close to the audience as they walk along the **hanamichi**. What effect do you think this has on the audience?



Noh theatre was developed before kabuki and dates back to the 14th and 15th centuries

Photo: JICC

Movements

The way that actors move, particularly in **noh** is **stylised**. This means that, for example, when they walk, it is not a natural walk, but must be done in a particular way. **Noh** actors must stand in a set position.

TRY THIS: Keep your upper body still but relaxed (from the hips up) and tilted slightly forward. Bend your knees slightly, so your bottom sticks out! To walk, hold your body in this basic position, then slide your foot forward keeping it flat. Then at the last moment, lift the heel and then lower it. Steps should be small, and the whole thing very slow.

Bunraku puppets are about half life size and skilled puppeteers ensure that all eyes focus on the puppets, which seem lifelike in their movements. Each puppet is moved by a team of three men, clothed in black. One man is in charge of the puppet's head, body and right arm, one the left arm and one the legs. The last two have black hoods to hide their faces.

? In **bunraku**, you can see the people who move the puppets. What effect do you think this might have?

Masks

There is no make up used in **noh**, but masks are often worn. In fact any character who is not a middle aged man (all **noh** actors are men) living in the present will wear a mask. Masks are wooden, and painted with a simple design. Actors will move their heads to tilt the mask very slightly, using the light and shadows to change the expression. Obviously the change will be small but it is possible to make a face look sad or happy using the same mask. Look at the Masks section of the *Elements of Noh - Kyogen* website to see some masks in action.

? If a **noh** actor is wearing a mask, he will have to sing and speak from behind the mask. Imagine what that will sound like: what problems do you think it might cause? Look at the position and size of the eye holes. How much do you think the actor can see? What effect might that have?

Kabuki actors do not wear masks but do wear a great deal of make up, particularly if the character is playing a dramatic role. Supernatural characters are made up in a specific way known as **kumadori**. To find out what this means, look at *the Kabuki Story* website under 'Make-up'. As with **noh**, all actors are men: actors playing female characters are known as **onnagata**. Find the **onnagata** putting on his make up on the *Kabuki for everyone* website.



Bunraku puppets are about half life size and are manipulated by teams of skilled puppeteers

Photo: JICC



Bunraku performed by high school students.



Bunraku puppet



A puppet head

Storylines and dialogue

The stories of **noh**, **bunraku** and **kabuki** plays are often taken from history or popular legends. They have been compared to the stories of Shakespeare's plays, which are also taken mostly from history or popular **legends**.

? What is the difference between history and **legend**?

? One of the most famous Japanese plays tells the story of the 47 **Ronin**. Find out what the story is about, and when it happened. The Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas has some useful information (www.ukans.edu/~sma/chushin/chushtxt.htm).

KAKEKOTOBA

Chikamatsu, Japan's most famous playwright wrote his scripts in formal prose which is almost poetry. One of the devices he used is the **kakekotoba**. This refers to a 'pivot word' which links two other words. For example, playpen-knife.

TRY THIS: Think of five **kakekotoba** of your own. Then try writing a short story which uses two or more of them.

Music

Noh, **bunraku** and **kabuki** all have music linked to the drama. In **noh** and **kabuki** there is a group of musicians who sit on the stage. So as well as adding music to the play, the musicians add to the scene on stage. Go to the music section of the **Kabuki for everyone** or **the Kabuki Story** website to hear examples of music used in kabuki.

? When you watch a musical or an opera in this country, where do the musicians sit? Why do think this is? Why do you think musicians in traditional Japanese theatre sit on stage? What effect will this have on the play and the experience of the audience watching?

In **kabuki**, there is also a group of offstage musicians, known as the **geza**. Much of what they play can be described as sound effects - drums for thunder, **shamisen** for crickets... Often, only experienced **kabuki** - goers will understand the sound effects because they are not realistic. For example there is a certain melody which is used to let the audience know that the scene is snowy. But snow is silent, so it can't sound like snow. The audience

knows it is snowing because it recognises the tune and knows what it means. The 'snow' melody is just one of many melodies used in this way.

? Melodies are sometimes used in this way in opera and musicals. Do you know any tunes which are used like this?

? One composer used a similar technique called leitmotif in his operas. Find out what this means and who the composer was.

Ki patterns

Ki, or wooden clappers, are used throughout a **kabuki** play to give signals to actors, stagehands and the audience. They are clapped rhythmically together, starting slowly then accelerating, then slowing down again - like the noise of a bouncing ball. You hear this pattern before the play begins, when the curtain goes up, at the end of scenes, at important moments during the play and at other times as well.

TRY THIS: Drop a ball from waist height. Listen to the rhythm of the bounces. Now try and clap the same rhythm. Then try and play the rhythm on a drum.

To learn more about the **geza** ensemble look at the 'instruments' section on ***the Kabuki Story*** website.



Kabuki actors wear lavish costumes and use make up instead of a mask.

Photo: JICC

USEFUL WEBSITES

Kabuki for everyone: www.fix.co.jp/kabuki/kabuki.html

A great resource - lots of background plus colour images of actors and instrument. Also video clips of actors and dancers, soundbites for key instruments.

The Kabuki Story: www.lightbrigade.demon.co.uk

Another great source of information, covering history, dramatic elements, music, costume, theatre design and more. You can hear samples of music and there are activities for schools, particularly for music.

Noh Plays: <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/japanese/noh>

A good source of information focusing on the explanation of Noh Plays. You can also learn special Noh words in the glossary.

Elements of Noh-Kyogen: www.iiynet.or.jp/NOH-KYOGEN/

Another wealth of information. Useful explanation of some stylised movements, categories of masks, diagram of the stage and placings of actors and musicians.

The Bunraku: <http://osaka.yomiuri.co.jp/bunraku/english>

A great source of information covering history and the role of music instruments and puppeteers. Also you can see photos of famous Bunraku scenes and puppets.

GLOSSARY

bunraku the traditional Japanese puppet theatre

backdrop the picture at the back of a stage

Chikamatsu an important Japanese playwright (1653-1724)

geza musicians positioned off stage in a kabuki play

hanamichi a walkway to the stage through the audience for actors in kabuki

kabuki traditional Japanese theatre developed in the Edo period

kakekotoba a word which links two other words either side of it

kumadori the most distinctive make-up style in kabuki to make characters' nature and expression exaggerated

legend a traditional story passed down through generations, often by word of mouth – not written down

mie a dramatic pose, usually by a kabuki actor on the hanamichi

onnagata female role played by a male

noh traditional Japanese theatre developed before kabuki

ronin - samurai without a lord/master

shamisen 3-stringed lute, a traditional Japanese instrument

stylised - not natural, according to a set of rules