

The Art of Kabuki: Experiencing Ancient Japanese Theater

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Japanese officials are using a five-city US tour to trigger interest and understanding of Japan and its culture.

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The Japanese Consulate-General wants Americans to see Japan in person.

To that end, the Consulate-General works with the Japan Foundation to produce an annual series of events aimed at promoting understanding of Japanese culture. Most recently, this partnership brought to Seattle a lecture and performance of Kabuki entitled "Backstage to Hanamichi: A Behind the Scenes Look at the Color, Magic, and Drama of Kabuki."

On October 19, at Benaroya Hall, two kabuki actors and a troupe of musicians and kabuki specialists offered two humor-filled lectures and presented two corresponding kabuki dance classics: "Sagi Musume" (The Heron Maiden) and "Shakkyo" (Lion Dance), to demonstrate the contrasts between the fluid, lyrical style of the onnagata (actor specializing in female roles) and the dynamic, acrobatic style of the heroic Lion Dance.

In this presentation that toured five west coast cities, actors Kyozo Nakamura and Matanosuke Nakamura alternated between offering charming lectures on the history, music, costume, and gesture of the 17th-century art form of kabuki and performing selections from two classics both separately and together.

Matanosuke Nakamura led the audience through a tour of each of the musical instruments, indicating the scenic and emotional aspects of each instrument and sound. After intermission, Kyozo Nakamura allowed the audience a rare "backstage" peek at the actor's costuming and makeup process, moving from bare skin and plain garments to being enveloped as a fully-painted lion in a headdress with an eight-foot mane and tail.

Throughout these demonstrations, the two actors clued the audience in on aspects of kabuki that would typically remain invisible to typical audiences in Japan, all for the purpose of making this highly stylized classical dance-drama form more intelligible to American viewers. Along the way, the audience tried out kabuki gestures and met the usually unseen costumers, wig masters, musicians, and prop masters without whom kabuki could not be possible.

Those who attended enthusiastically engaged in the audience-participation components of the lectures, which didn't surprise the event organizers, Mr. Yutaka and Mrs. Tazue Sasaki, and Consulate-General Seattle contact Aki Takeda.

Seattle has long been very receptive to Japanese cultural events. There are "more than a few individuals who are experts on the subject in this region, which has a large fan base for all types of theaters and Japanese culture, arts, and performing art," say the Sasaki.

However, the Sasaki note that the most recent major Kabuki performance held in Seattle was presented at the Paramount Theatre by Shochiku/One Reel, almost five years ago, in June of 2005.

So, about last month's presentation, the Sasaki say: "This was a rare opportunity to experience the 400-year-old Japanese theater, one of the most conspicuous traditional theaters being still performed."

"The organizers of this event would like to trigger interest and promote understandings toward Japan and Japanese culture through the course of presenting this program," they explain.

"Since this program is only a part of the normal four-to-six-hour length Kabuki performance played in Japan, it is one of the organizers' goals that those who experience this program would be further interested in Kabuki and would visit Japan to see more Kabuki plays and other aspects of Japan."

Toward this goal, the event organizers handed out full programs for the presentation, including English translations of the kabuki songs, as well as poster-size full-color Japanese travel booklets. In return, the performers, musicians, translators, and hosts enjoyed an enthusiastic audience and, at evening's end, received a standing ovation.