

DEVIL IN DISGUISE

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ALEX FAULKNER, CURATOR

BY LISA ROVNER

—Kabuki is a popular form of Japanese musical drama characterised by elaborate costuming and make-up, highly stylised dancing and larger-than-life gestures, music and acting. The name kabuki means "song and dance technique" and is believed to derive from the verb *kabuku*, meaning to be tilted, off beat, eccentric, or extraordinary. One of the most famous aspects of kabuki is its use of *onnagata* – male actors in female roles. In conversation here with Lisa Rovner, Alex Faulkner, curator of a recent *onnagata*-themed woodblock-print exhibition, examines the political and cultural constraints that prohibited women from performing, why elaborate costume and make-up were integral to the work, and how the intriguing artform has remained largely unchanged for hundreds of years.

Lisa Rovner: Kabuki was first performed in Japan in 1603 by a troupe of women led by the shrine maiden Okuni. In 1629, only 26 years later, women kabuki actresses were banned from the stage. How did a theatre that was created by women end up prohibiting women from participating in it?

Alex Faulkner: I think like most prohibitions, this is an issue of class and religion. The Japanese ruling class had welcomed the refining influence of China and introduced formal theatre, tea ceremonies and flower appreciation as pastimes. The middle class and the peasants had little entertainment and no access to these things – like elsewhere in the world they made their own entertainment, which was bawdy, irreverent and subversive. The new government in 1603 concerned itself with quashing dissent and establishing order. Onna kabuki (women's kabuki) was just one of the irritants they suppressed. Of course, kabuki was originally performed by prostitutes in plays such as, *Hiring a Prostitute* or *The Teahouse Brothel*, so there was an element of moral righteousness in all of this too.

Lisa: It's a pretty dramatic example of how state regulations can influence the history of an art form. As a result, it fell upon men to play both male and female roles, and the profession of *onnagata* was born. Can you talk about the training and some of the theatrical tricks and techniques used by the *onnagata* to achieve the woman's manner?

Alex: These parts are not just female impersonation as we witness it in the west, these are roles – separate entities where the female character has to express very particular attributes – grace, heroism, wickedness, cunning and so on. The question for the actor is therefore how this character is conveyed within the dramatic sense of the performance. These are fixed

points, it is in no way an evolving theatre – the performances remained more or less unchanged for centuries. As for dramatic tricks, from the 17th century kabuki was forced to be spectacular since the sexual element of performances had been legislated against. The response was elaborate staging, dramatic tricks and special effects, extraordinary costume and make-up. For the *onnagata*, make-up was essential and became quite literally a painted-on face, the actors habitually wore shoes that were too small and pointed their toes in, but given the exaggerated gestures and so on, it's hard for us today to say that they are terribly feminine in the conventional sense. It's more that they perfect the role of the character rather than mimic life.

Lisa: Kabuki scholars claim that the *onnagata* is not mimicking woman, rather he is embodying the "essence" of woman. Samuel L. Leiter has gone so far as to say that an *onnagata* is "a man who typifies the essence of femininity more effectively than would an actress playing the same role". How would you describe kabuki's vision of feminine "essence"?

Alex: I think where people get confused is in thinking about gender rather than character. Remember, these roles were written by men with male actors in mind; it would be interesting to see a female actor take on one of these parts. The roles say more about how men perceive women or at least their fantasies about certain sorts of women. Without making insulting generalisations, the Japanese (as do so many cultures) have a history of anxiety around powerful women – contemporary Japanese pornography is obsessed by the subject. Hence many of the traditional kabuki *onnagata* roles are of female magicians, female warriors, murderers and the like or else they tend to be stereotypes of submission and devotion. These are male templates and not a reflection of real life.

Lisa: What I think is interesting about kabuki theatre is that it disrupts and transcends the reductive duality of existing gender categories. Some go as far to claim the *onnagata* is a gender of its own. In her book *Beautiful Boys/Outlaw Bodies: Devising Kabuki Female-Likeness*, Katherine Mezur reminds us that the *onnagata* are not playing women, but rather fictions of femininity. Furthermore she writes: "On the kabuki stage, I do not see 'women' at all. I see *onnagata*." Do you agree?

Alex: Yes, very much. The *onnagata* actor is an extraordinary creation, one is minded more of the character that is being portrayed than anything else – by this I mean

that the *onnagata* doesn't so much portray the essence of woman as the essence of a specific character. To the kabuki audience these roles are folk legends of course, with so many of the plays reviving well-known figures from myth and legend as well as recent, scandalous events. In the drama *Modorihashi*, the actor is required to play the alluring Sayuri who dances and seduces the hero Watanabe Tsuna in a very sexual way. The same actor must then transform into a terrifying flying demon who fights an army of warriors, eventually losing her arm. I think it's worthy to say that on the kabuki stage I do not see "men", I see demons.

Lisa: I read: "Kabuki has been compared to a living woodblock print, in that each moment of a kabuki play, if frozen, would capture a scene of remarkable beauty." Almost every major kabuki performance during the 18th and 19th centuries were immortalised by dozens of different prints. It is true that these prints are equivalent to today's posters of film stars?

Alex: It's an easy allusion to make and there's some truth in it but I think the relationship between the theatre and the woodblock-print artists is more complex than that. Both *ukiyo-e* (woodblock prints) and kabuki were popular art forms, comparable to today's cinema, and kabuki actors attracted every bit as much adulation as Hollywood stars do today. There's a tradition of face-masks on fine cloth made from the impression of an actor's heavy make-up. These *oshiguma* (face pressings) were the ultimate souvenir and are still highly regarded today. However, theatre and print remained outside of official approval and subject to censorship and prohibition. Several of the great print artists were imprisoned and kabuki actors were forced to live outside the city and sometimes were stripped of their wealth. It's hard to think of a comparison – maybe German expressionist theatre of the Weimar Republic and the prints and designs associated with it, or possibly the milieu of Toulouse-Lautrec and Degas and the theatre scene in Paris at the end of the 19th century. Even these don't really equate with the outsideness of the *ukiyo-e* kabuki scene. Kabuki theatre prints are complex artefacts, they're entirely urban and underclass and frequently highly political – there was a strong tradition of association between historical events in the dramas and overt criticism of the failing government of the 19th century. The decadence of the aristocratic scene – the ruling class having

become effectively redundant after so many years of middle-class prosperity, meant that there was little talent in the area of the high arts. Consequently the great artists of the 18th and 19th centuries were part of this bohemian sub-class – artists of great repute like Kuniyoshi, Hiroshige, Utamaro and Kunichika. The kabuki stage has a straightforward construction of flats and stage apron. The prints tended first and foremost to be works of art, though. Some are literal transcriptions – frozen moments if you like, but most play with elements of the stage properties and principal characters to re-imagine the performance as a static tableaux. There were hundreds of portrait prints of great actors, often done in series and these are closer to fanzines or souvenirs, but even these prints – commissioned as publicity, often use unimaginably complex imagery, allusion and puns to avoid censorship or merely to entertain.

Lisa: Can you talk about the *onnagata*-themed woodblock-print show you curated. **Alex:** Yes, we staged a show of actor prints illustrating the roles of the great *onnagata* performances at the Toshidama Gallery earlier in the year. The idea was to show the range and subtlety of the artists but also to illustrate how fixed these roles are, how immutable. Expressions, gesture, costume, all of these remain fixed, as do the plays themselves. It is only years after the Meiji restoration in the 1860s, that you start to see a reinvention of kabuki theatre itself with new plays and new staging – these innovations are still rooted in the past but you see jarring notes creeping into the work of the late prints of Kunichika – western clothes and hairstyles and so on.

Lisa: How does one identify the *onnagata* in a woodblock print?

Alex: To be honest, the actors look quite male, especially towards the end of the 19th century. In his two great actor series, *100 Roles of Ichikawa Danjuro* and *100 Roles of Baike*, Kunichika portrays both actors as quite manly. Some clues lie in the hair line; *onnagata* actors were very heavy, very static wigs. *Onnagata* actors were obliged to shave the front of their head, a hangover from the prohibition of boys on stage who traditionally wore elaborate forelocks. The legislators thought that by banning the forelock they could eliminate the boys. A new tradition developed whereby actors wore a purple cloth to cover up the unsightly stubble and this is often pictured in prints. Of course – if it's a kabuki theatre print then any female actors are bound to be *onnagata*.

