

stage, and a chorus of six to ten singer-chanters stands on a platform. The absolute precision of the performance elements gives *nō* a ceremonial and mysterious quality unique in world drama.

Nō has never been a theatre of mass entertainment, and first-time patrons today—including many Japanese—often find it bewildering. As with Chinese opera, Western notions of plot are almost nonexistent. The language is poetic, but also elliptical and at times obscure. The cast is small, the action relatively static, and the pace, by the breakneck standards of contemporary culture, nearly glacial: the basic *nō* walk, said to be derived from tramping through rice paddies, is a deliberate slip-slide shuffle, with the feet barely leaving the ground. The actors are trained to keep their faces immobile and expressionless at all times, even when unmasked. Certainly *nō* is produced today more for enthusiasts than for the general public, but the number of such enthusiasts—at

least in Japan—is currently growing, not falling. Like the studies of martial arts, flower arranging, and the tea ceremony, *nō* remains a Japanese national passion. Its sublime mystery and serenity—reflective of deep Buddhist and Shinto values—resonate profoundly in contemporary Japanese life and have proven increasingly influential to Japanese as well as Western dramatists of the current era.

JAPANESE KABUKI

Kabuki theatre emerged two hundred years after *nō* and offered a more spectacular and accessible form of entertainment. Whereas *nō* is refined, dignified, and designed for small, studious audiences, kabuki is gaudy and exhilarating. From its earliest days, kabuki sought to delight large crowds of merchants, traders, courtesans, and ordinary city dwellers. Instead of the minimal acting styles



Bunraku is a Japanese puppet theatre, founded in 1684 and particularly popular in its hometown of Osaka. In this production of *Yoshitsune and the Thousand Cherry Trees*, two unmasked but silent and expressionless puppeteers operate the principal "characters" while other operators, completely covered in black cloths, assist them from beside and below. Shamisen players and chanters on and around the stage provide the music and songlike spoken texts. © Michael S. Yamashita/Encyclopedia/Corbis

212 Chapter 7 Theatre Traditions: East and West

of *nō*, kabuki performers present an extravaganza of dazzling effects. Actors flamboyantly dance and recite their lines with passionate emotion. Elaborate stage machinery adds riotous spectacle to the proceedings. And the audiences contribute to the overall energy by shouting their favorite actors' names or other words of encouragement at key moments in the play.

Kabuki was created in Kyoto around 1600 by the legendary shrine maiden Izumo Okuni, whose showy and dramatic style of dancing became hugely popular in Kyoto's brothels and teahouses. The lavishness of Okuni's costumes and the fact that women performed both male and female parts led the Japanese to name it *kabuku*, meaning "askew" (today we might translate it as "punk"). This exotic entertainment quickly evolved. The casting changed as the government passed a series of laws to forbid female actors. And the stories became more complex as they drew on the themes of traditional myths, historical incidents, local sex scandals and suicides, and even *nō* drama. This new format became known as *kabuki*, a term that combined three separate words: *ka* ("song"), *bu* ("dance"), and *ki* ("skill").

By the eighteenth century, elements of kabuki became more formalized. The staging began incorporating curtains and scenery, playwrights' names were now printed in kabuki programs, and star actors had emerged. Two

such stars gave birth to two principal kabuki acting styles: *wagoto* (the elegant and naturalistic "soft style" of actor Sakata Tōjūrō I, from Kyoto) and *aragoto* (the thundering "rough style" of Ichikawa Danjūrō I, from Edo, now Tokyo). The traditions of both these actors remain central to kabuki in the modern era. In fact, all current kabuki actors can trace their lineage—familial and professional—back to their kabuki-performing ancestors. The contemporary star Ichikawa Ebizō XI, for example, is the great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandson of Ichikawa Ebizō I, born in 1673; the celebrated family style has been directly passed, father to son, down through the centuries.

There are many types of kabuki dramas, but the major works fall generally into two categories: history plays (*jidaimono*, or "period things") and domestic plays (*sewamono*, or "common things"). The history plays dramatize—usually in spectacular fashion—major political events of the remote past. Often, however, the historical setting offers a protective cover for playwrights and actors to depict controversial political issues in their own time. Domestic plays, in contrast, deal with the affairs of the townspeople, merchants, lovers, and courtesans of the playwright's era, often focusing on the conflicts between affairs of the heart and the call of duty. A great many domestic plays end in



This fusion of Asian and Western theatrical styles was created by scholar/playwrights Sun Huizhu, Fei Chunfang, and Liu Lingzhi when they adapted Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* into a *yueju*-style opera in which all roles are played by women. Retitled *Hedda, or Aspiration Sky High*, this blend of Ibsen and *xiqu* (Chinese opera) was produced by the Hangzhou Yueju Opera Company in Zhanjiang Gang in 2008; it also played in Germany, India, and Norway. Zhou Yujun (left) plays Hedda, looking over the manuscript of her would-be lover as her husband looks on. © William Sun

suicide (many, in fact, end in double suicides), with the lovers vowing to meet again in the world to come. Such plays have often been banned since they have led to real suicides as a consequence.

Kabuki is mainly an actor's theatre; many of its plays are of unknown authorship and have been augmented over the centuries by actors' additions. One notable exception, however, is the kabuki author Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653–1725). Considered the greatest Japanese dramatist of all time, Chikamatsu was also a famous playwright of the Japanese puppet-theatre *bunraku*.

Theatre 213

The Theatrical Tradition Today: East and West

These eleven great theatre traditions of the past—Greek, Roman, medieval, Renaissance, Royal, and Romantic in the Western world, and Sanskrit, kathakali, xiqu, *nō*, and kabuki in the East—are all alive today, either in the form of regular and careful revivals or by a continuous tradition of performance. And all of these traditions have influenced the modern theatre, as we will see in the next chapter.