Robert Schneider and Nathan Schneider

A Dive and a Dance with Kabuki Vaudeville: *Taishū Engeki* Comes Back!

Taishū engeki occupies a niche in Japanese popular theatre between the all-male troupes of state-subsidized Kabuki and the highly commercial, all-female troupes of the Takarazuka Revue. Its origins are disputed: while some scholars trace it back to the thirteenth century, others say it is mostly a post-war phenomenon. Family-based, itinerant troupes comprising both sexes book theatres for a month at a time. They live in the theatre, sleeping onstage or in the house. They perform twice daily for largely working-class audiences. Tickets are cheap, but troupes supplement their box office with merchandise sales and with generous tips which patrons deliver in mid-performance. The form draws heavily on *onnagata* performance in Kabuki, less heavily on the *otokoyaku* (women in men's roles) of the Takarazuka Revue. In *taishū engeki*, however, actors of both sexes often cross-dress with star performers appearing *en homme* and *en femme* in quick succession. Like vaudeville, whose demise was repeatedly announced in the early decades of the last century, *taishū engeki* has often been pronounced dead. Yet despite its notorious geriatric core audience, there are signs that *taishū engeki* is coming back. Robert Schneider is an Associate Professor of Theatre and Dance at Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, Illinois. He is also a playwright and translator whose articles and reviews have appeared in the *New York Times*, *American Theatre*, and *Plays International & Europe.* Nathan Schneider is a writer and translator who lives in Tokyo.

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IN JAPAN, vaudeville came late and never died. It curled up in small theatres where it survived the televisual winter, seemingly unaware that its demise was announced year after year. Because it was Japanese, it fetishized its past. Because it had vitality, ordinary people came to see it – and still do. It is called *taishū engeki*, a weed in Japan's exquisite garden of classical theatre and a living fossil in the detritus of Asian modernity.

The venues vary. Tonight, we are walking toward a theatre in Jūjō, a working-class district in the north of Tokyo. We follow a narrow alleyway lined with small shops. The ground seems to give softly under us as if we are stepping on logs half-buried in mire, a semi-floating world. The air is electric: a human smell dominates because a mass of humanity swirls around us, parting at the smallest hint of impending collision. The smell of freshly baked octopus balls comes next, then the neutral smells of traffic and, under that, a whiff of sewage.

The Shinohara Engekijō, when we come to it, is tucked into a shopping street opposite a drugstore, yet it seems to vibrate like a cello string: tiny paper flags tremble across the facade; paper lanterns sway from bamboo poles; actors gaze down from giant posters on the hoardings, their hair glazed into cowlicks, their eyes liquid, their faces painted to mask-like perfection. The actors sport glitter in their hair and on their cheeks. They wear kimonos that Elvis Presley might have worn had he worn kimonos.

We buy our tickets (two thousand yen, about twenty dollars) and go inside. The head of the troupe, the *zachō*, kneels centre-stage. He greets the audience and says how happy he and his fellow artists are to be spending the month of June in a real theatre with a proscenium and a *hanamichi.* They were clearly used to worse. The troupes often play in multi-purpose rooms at health resorts; their audience there is almost exclusively elderly, an ever-dwindling remnant of the blue-collar workforce that rebuilt Japan after the Second World War.[1]

The most scholarly work on the subject in English, Marilyn Ivy's *Discourses of the Vanishing: Modernity, Phantasm, Japan* (1995), calls

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Young fans wait outside the Shinohara Engekijō to meet the performers after a show. Photo: Nathan Schneider.

taishū engeki 'an amalgam of what we might think of as largely superseded forms of public pleasure within earlier moments of modernity'.[2] For Ivy, whose fieldwork dates from the early 1980s, the meaning of *taishū engeki* is fatally bound up with its impending disappearance. In 2018, however, it still has not gone. On the contrary, tonight in Jūjō it seems positively trendy, reborn, a phoenix hatched from the atomic ashes of Fukushima. We saw fans in their teens or early twenties pose for selfies with the actors after the show. Two young women told us that they come to see *taishū engeki* ten times a month.

In 1987, a journalist from the *New York Times* reported that only 70 theatres like the Shinohara Engekijō were still operating.[3] By 2011, however, Ukai Masaki counted 120 theatres, substantially more than the *New York Times* figure.[4] Masaki estimated the number of *taishū engeki* actors nationwide at about a thousand, with a daily audience of 24,000 spectators: respectable numbers, especially compared with other traditional arts in Japan such as Kabuki, Bunraku, and sumo wrestling. Masaki, now a professor of sociology, spent a year and a half performing with a *taishū engeki* troupe when he was in graduate school. The current industry website advertises 147 venues hosting over 200 troupes.[5]

'*Taishū engeki*' means 'popular theatre'. We were first introduced to it in the summer of 2014 at a storefront space in Shimada, a depressed town lost in the tea plantations of Shizuoka Prefecture. Only eight people showed up for the show, including our party of three. The evening featured a short, Kabuki-like play; afterwards there were a series of dances. A man danced with a fan, or a woman with a parasol, or vice versa – and both sexes danced with swords. They were graceful, studied in their movements. Some moments screamed for applause while others were restrained, delicate, almost coy. Even when performed by a six-foot

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actor weighing, by our guess, 220 pounds, the gestures were reserved and feminine. Like the opening moments of a striptease, each new performer sized up the tiny audience and somehow created a mood of anticipation and delight. As in striptease, a form which reached a high pitch of popularity in Japan after the Second World War, the successful performer enters clothed in mystery but tacitly promising that something essential will be revealed.

After Jūjō, our next destination is the Mokubakan Theatre in Asakusa, a famous if slightly seedy pleasure district that now seems quaint for its concentration of buildings from the 1950s and 1960s. The Homuramai troupe is playing and the audience is much older. Several octogenarian members are seated near the front of the house. One of them, a woman wearing a paper hygiene mask, shuffles forward. The actor sees her coming and stops his dance. He kneels on the apron of the stage as she tries to slide a ten-thousand-yen bill clipped to a Snoopy greeting card into his kimono. Her arm shakes badly and she cannot find the fold. The actor waits, his music still playing, his number on hold. When she finally succeeds, he grasps her trembling hand and mouths, '*Arigatō gozaimasu.*' Had he spoken his 'thank you' out loud, it would have filled the theatre. *Taishū engeki* shows are heavily amplified with sound systems that range from passable to gratingly poor.

In Yokohama the theatre occupies a postwar building in a poor neighbourhood sandwiched between a canal and a shopping arcade. The owner is in her eighties, perhaps older. She stands behind a small glass counter in the lobby displaying fans and silk scarves for sale. At intermission her head bobs with pleasure as she talks with customers she knows: 'There's a new troupe every month. I can tell you all the leading actors.'

The troupe playing her theatre this month offers a sentimental play about a samisen player who is devoted to her art but whose alcoholic husband abuses her. She runs off with a handsome, sweet, and gentle man, but her new paramour refuses to let her play her instrument. Her husband visits her and apologizes; he says he has been crying into his saké every night. She goes back to him because she would rather endure his bad behaviour than forgo playing the samisen. The audience applauds her decision.

The Biho Gekidan, or Beautiful Phoenix Troupe, is performing in the shoddiest theatre we have yet seen – a tiny, run-down space on a side street well to the east of Kawasaki's main commercial district. The tickets are cheap (1,600 yen). The house is small but filled with aficionados. About fifty people have rented folding beach chairs – the best way to describe them – to place on the sloping tatami-covered floor. We copy other patrons who take the detachable cushion off and stuff it underneath to keep the chair from sliding toward the stage. The head of the troupe, the *zachō*, kneels centre-stage, saying the troupe is happy to be back. They have not been in Kawasaki for two years and he notices that things are changing: now there are foreigners in Kawasaki! The crowd applauds us just for being there. It is by far the warmest and most assertive audience we have seen, clapping rhythmically and calling out the actors' names as they appear on stage. In a throwback to old-time Kabuki, everybody snacks unselfconsciously in the auditorium.

Beautiful Phoenix is younger than most of the troupes we have seen, and it is all-male except for one ingénue and a *mama-san* (the troupe's business manager), who appears infrequently. The troupe does several 'friendship' dances in which two young men mirror each other's steps. Some troupes are more masculine and martial than others, but could there be such a thing as queer *taishū engeki*? The company's second man floats his performance on a quality that would be unbearable in a Western actor: an unshakeable conviction that his charm is irresistible. The feat is all the more impressive because he is on the portly side and no longer young.

Like the other troupes, Beautiful Phoenix presents a brief play in addition to the dances. This one is about a corrupt Yakuza chief who insists on keeping his favourite Geisha, even though her lover offers to buy her freedom. He taunts his underlings, claiming that none of them pours his saké as well as she does. The lover's friend intervenes to save the girl from the chief, but is distracted by a revenge-seeking samurai, the brother of a man he once slew. The friend and the samurai have a

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The duel in the woods begins. Photo: Nathan Schneider.

terrific sword fight in the forest. They inflict mortal wounds on each other and die shouting out their mutual admiration. The acting was solid and to the point, the lines spoken crisply and cues picked up sharply, exactly as if scripted. After the performance, however, the *zachō* assured us that none of this dialogue is written down. 'It's all in my head. It's all based on what my master taught me'.

The previous day we had seen an equally well-acted play from the Susumu Troupe in which a stranger who behaves gallantly to save a young woman from assault on the Tōkaidō road assents to her parents' plea that he marry her. Only later is it revealed that he already had a wife and child. He receives word that his first wife has gone blind. Accepting the demands of duty over the desires of the heart, he goes back to her.[6] The actor playing the bigamist performed with dignity and gravitas; the second wife made a fine speech renouncing her marriage to allow her husband to do justice to his first wife. The *zachō*, who played the first wife, now blind, made an even better speech about love and sacrifice – underscored with recorded music by Sergei Rachmaninov – which brought down the house.

The theatre in Tachikawa, a forty-minute train ride west of Tokyo, is the region's first new *taishū engeki* venue in thirty-eight years. The Tachikawa Yakéyaza, as this venue is called, occupies unused retail space below a dental office adjacent to a holding lot for city buses. The neighbourhood is a desert of above-street-level parking garages and small apartment blocks. While the theatre's exterior is colourful, the space inside disappoints: the ceiling is low and the *hanamichi* rises only kerb-height above a flat floor. In a televised interview, the CEO of the construction company that owns the building claims that installing a theatre downstairs was a public-service gesture designed to ward off senility in elderly

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Tachikawans.[7] It may be nearer the truth that no other tenant was available.

Origins

Since our introduction to *taishū engeki* we have tried to learn more about it. We started with the name, which we also saw translated as 'theatre for the masses', but found very little on the subject in English: Marilyn Ivy's book, as cited, and a Wikipedia article with two references, one of them a link to an NPR profile of Saotome Taichi, a celebrated sixteen-year-old performer.[8] We discovered that scholars differ on *taishū engeki*'s origins. At least one writer, Yukihide Endo, believes it is derived from various forms of street entertainment imported from China in the seventh century, including 'singers, dancers, acrobats, puppeteers, magicians, and human-animal-insect impersonators'.[9] According to this account, a certain number of these *sarugaku* performers became 'gradually refined by itinerant, yet artistic-minded, groups of performers' during the thirteenth century. This partially refined version of *sarugaku* would subsequently morph into Noh a century later under the direction of Zeami. Meanwhile, the performers who failed to become refined continued touring in their coarse and vulgar way. According to Endo, these irredeemable performers are the original practitioners of *taishū engeki*.[10] If Endo's account is true, *sarugaku* is the common ancestor of Noh, Kabuki, and Bunraku. While these later forms flowered into a glorious canopy, *taishū engeki* remained a stunted growth hugging the forest floor, the only form of classical Japanese theatre never to reach refinement.

There were no animal or insect impersonators in any of the shows we saw, but one aspect of today's *taishū engeki*, the troupes' itinerant lifestyle and brutal regimen of work, may well be a holdover from the days of *sarugaku*. The actors tour with their children, living from month to month in the theatres they rent, sleeping on futons in the house or on the stage. They give two shows a day, seven days a week, with one day off per month. Their final performance is a matinee and, as soon as it is over, the troupe packs up scenery, costumes, lights, wigs, and personal effects so they can move to the next venue. The trucks leave by midnight.[11] Organizationally, then, *taishū engeki* troupes are similar to Elizabethan companies on tour during a plague year, or to Molière's young company on its thirteen-year tour of the provinces.

Yasujirō Ozu's film *Floating Weeds* (1959) depicts itinerant players as marginal types who have escaped dull, working-class jobs and thus forgone any chance to find a respectable spouse or to settle down. At the same time, however, the players exert an erotic force on the sedentary village folk they play for. *Marebito* figures like those described by the ethnologist Shinobu Orikuchi, they remain perpetual strangers who, by stirring up latent longing and desires, 'bring not only (fleeting) joy but (lasting) misery' to the villages they visit.[12]

Taishū engeki troupes are archaic in another way: they forgo scripts. Ukai Masaki claims that the *zachō* of a first-rate company knows three hundred plots and three hundred dances by heart.[13] Tomeo Takei publishes a photo of a *zachō* seated on stage at 10 p.m. describing the next afternoon's play to company members. A woman extends a cassette recorder toward him so absent members can listen later.[14] Masaki remembers from his own experience what such sessions sounded like:

> Curtain up! The retainers Kumagoro and Tomagoro enter from stage left with the girl Ohana struggling between them.
>
> 'Let me go! I want to go home'!
>
> 'Shut up! You're coming with us.'
>
> 'Your father gambled and lost – you're the payment!'
>
> 'Forget about going home'.
>
> Now move to centre-stage like so . . .[15]

Commedia dell'arte troupes in sixteenth-century Europe may have worked under similar constraints and conducted summary 'rehearsals' of the same sort.[16]

Kabuki Modernized

If *taishū engeki* troupes seem to follow paths first blazed in feudal days and traced again in, in parallel, Renaissance Europe, they are quite modern in other ways. Consider Kabuki's use

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of wooden clappers to underscore dramatic moments in the performance. (The highlighted poses are called *mie*, the clappers are *hyōshigi*, and the acoustic punctuations are *ki*.) The *hyōshigi* in Kabuki make an oaken sound, but in *taishū engeki* the sound is sharply metallic, as if the clappers were made of steel and amplified. At most shows it seems the *ki* have been sampled digitally and played directly from the soundboard – a kind of stock sound effect that would not be out of place on a TV variety show. The levels are usually set too high for comfort.

A stick drum, a bamboo flute, or a samisen are rare in *taishū engeki*. The dominant tunes are recorded pop ballads called *enka*, a genre akin to country-and-western music. The melodies are lush, the vocals torchy, the lyrics speak of longing, regret, and death. When the song tells a story, it rarely ends happily. *Enka* tunes are staples in karaoke bars across Japan where older men use them to coax out tears. Western music is occasionally used. We heard Freddy Mercury on one occasion and the Carpenters' 'Yesterday Once More' (1973) on another. The Satomi Katashi troupe composed their own signature rap in English and Japanese. Nearly everything we heard in *taishū engeki* was post-war and, hence, manifestly post-Kabuki.

Taishū engeki has revamped another famous feature of Kabuki: the *onnagata*, a male performer who specializes in women's roles. Dancing to *enka* ballads instead of the samisen, they perform a wider range of dramatic situations and present a greater variety of female types than their Kabuki counterparts, and the tempos are generally faster. From these vantage points, *taishū engeki* does not appear to be a holdover from the thirteenth century at all. In contrast, Hiroshi Okada traces the origins of *taishū engeki* to the late 1920s and the early 1930s. Popular theatre at the time was dominated by period pieces with considerable swordplay and martial posturing, and inhabited a no-man's-land between Kabuki and the comparatively Westernizing post-Meiji theatre called *shinpa*. Here is how Okada explains it:

> Before the war, Kabuki, *shinpa*, the New National theatre, and the avant-garde stage were all collectively called *taishū engeki*. During the war, however, a split occurred between *engeki* and *taishū engeki*. In Showa 27 (1943), an official *taishū engeki* division was opened in the National Arts Festival, which is run by the Ministry of Culture, the first time it appeared as a separate category. *Taishū engeki* artists embraced the term out of pride and a desire to distinguish themselves from the other branches of theatre art.[17]

In this telling, *taishū engeki* only became nomadic in December 1952, when its home theatre in the Asakusa district, the *hyakkuman futsu gekijō*, was converted for strip shows.

Aping Takarazuka

Whatever *taishū engeki*'s historical relation to Kabuki, there is no doubt that the older form is a major stylistic source as *taishū engeki*'s stylized poses, vigorous plots, and *onnagata* make clear. A second source must surely be the Takarazuka Revue, the celebrated performing ensemble founded in 1914 by a railway magnate in Hyōgo Prefecture. The Takarazuka companies are as rigorously all-female as present-day Kabuki troupes are all male. The Takarazuka audience in Japan is 90 per cent female and extremely loyal. The biggest stars are the *otokoyaku*, women who play the men's roles. Even in videos, it is clear how well the *otokoyaku* have mastered their craft. Whether dancing, acting, or romancing the female characters, they move with the easy authority attributed to men, speak and sing effortlessly in a lower register, and handle themselves with studied machismo.

It is reported that senior members of the company updated the company's norms, perceived to be masculine in the 1950s, by copying behaviour from Marlon Brando's films.[18] Successful *otokoyaku* have legions of fans who declare them to be finer and more desirable than real men. Western observers speculate that *otokoyaku* function to legitimize lesbian attractions in a still-patriarchal society, but such judgements may be overstating the *otokoyaku*s' physical appeal while slighting their merit as performers.[19]

Other Takarazuka performers master a sort of gender neutrality, an androgynous stage identity that combines desirable traits from

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both sexes. These characters are called *chūsei*, meaning 'neutral' or 'in between'.[20] The nearest Western example might be Cherubino in Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*, who is unequivocally male, but who sings in a register few men can reach. There is also the non-human character of Ariel in *The Tempest*. Actors of both sexes have played Ariel – the role has also been shared by male and female performers in the same production – but the analogy is flawed where gender is concerned, since 'either or both' is not the same as 'in between'. By combining traits from men and women, *chūsei* characters are resolutely non-binary.

When we first discovered *taishū engeki*, we pursued its gender-bending and gender-avoiding aspects eagerly, especially because we wanted to know whether female audience members preferred to tip male performers and, if so, whether they preferred male performers appearing as males or as *onnagata.* We wanted to know if the gender of the *enka* vocalist determined or inflected the gender of the dancer performing to it. We failed to find hard-and-fast rules for any of the above. *Taishū engeki* plays *with* gender, but it also quite simply *plays* gender. A performer can represent a man or a woman as easily as a bamboo stick can become a flute or a *katana*, depending on how it is held. Masculine choreography, for example, requires dancers to turn out and rise as they spin, whereas female characters turn in, keep their arms close to the body and dip as they spin. The movements of both sexes are largely governed by a formalized rhythm – *jo, ha kyu, zanshin*, or 'slow, fast, faster, stop', which Alex Kerr first encountered when learning how to wipe the tea scoop during the tea ceremony:

> At first, I thought this rhythm was a peculiarity of tea, but I soon found that it applies in exactly the same way to the foot movements and raising of the fan in Noh drama. In martial arts and calligraphy as well, this rhythm governs all movements. Over the course of the seminar I realized that *jo, ha, kyu* underlies every single one of Japan's traditional arts. The teachers went on to explain that *jo, ha, kyu, zanshin* is the fundamental rhythm of nature – it defines the destinies of men, the course of eras, even the growth of galaxies and the very ebb and flow of the universe.[21]

While Kerr describes the rhythm as distinctly Japanese, connoisseurs of Western ballet will recognize the principle: movements of the arms and feet are more dramatic when they accelerate – and more dramatic still when the rate of acceleration also changes. Fans of Broadway musicals see it in the gestures that performers adopt to intensify the last eight bars of a song – a movement of the arm, for example, that begins slowly and accelerates but culminates on a snap of the wrist and sudden immobility. In both cultures, 'slow, fast, faster, stop' surprises and delights the eye.

The progression is equally satisfying in reverse: the dancer slows the gesture through a steady gradation of speeds such that the 'stop' at the end comes as a complete surprise. The air around him seems to thicken like paste, yet such is the force of his movement that complete stasis seems impossible – but come it will. A skilled performer makes the sweep of an arm or the unfolding of fingers into a tiny drama of opposed forces, a drama that is suddenly resolved in stillness.

The 'Show to Show Faces'

The performance begins with a half-dozen or more dance numbers featuring junior members and sometimes a 'special guest star'. We saw two who performed solo numbers but did not appear later as *onnagata*, and neither was cast in the subsequent play. One seemed to be semi-retired, an elderly man who smiled and danced, seducing the crowd with his enthusiasm and joy. After the show, as is customary, he chatted with us on the sidewalk in front of the theatre. At this moment we were flabbergasted to discover that 'he' was, in fact, a middle-aged woman. The performer's effervescence was her own; she had merely transposed it to a different age and gender.

The other special guest star used the stage name 'Arashi', and he was in his early forties. Arashi did a very masculine *nihon-buyō* dance/pantomime, stretching the sleeves of his kimono in a menacing way and pointing meaningfully into the middle distance. In a particularly aggressive gesture, he would quickly pull one arm, or both, out of his kimono and present

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his hand, or hands, in front of his chest – a move popularized by actor Toshirō Mifune in films like *Seven Samurai* (1954) and *Yojimbo* (1961). Does this represent a sudden freeing of the sword arm? Does he convey greater authority by keeping his sword arm inside? It might well be that quickness and dexterity with sleeves is simply part of a samurai's vocabulary of menace. Arashi's dance led us to consider *nihon-buyō* more closely. We noticed mimetic gestures recognizable in other performers: 'drinking saké' (from a cupped hand or from a fan), 'weeping' or 'blotting tears', 'holding a baby', 'looking at a reflection', or 'gazing at the moon'. Often, they corresponded to actions recounted by the song lyrics, giving a kind of pantomime within the dance. However, the bulk of Arashi's gestures remained opaque to us.

Chit-chat from the *Zachō*

After the 'show to show faces' (and a brief pause) comes a combination of greeting and ballyhoo. The head of the troupe or his assistant (the *fukuzachō*) kneels centre-stage and praises the show, the theatre, and the audience, just as already described above. Sometimes other cast members join him so as to run through the calendar of upcoming performances and announce what plays and dances will be presented. Yui Matsui, the *zachō* of the troupe that bears his name, expertly ran through the list of merchandise that would be available on the sidewalk outside the Yokohama theatre after the show: fans, mugs, DVDs, hand towels, tote bags, scarves, and so on. A junior company member unfolded and/or displayed each object as it was mentioned with admirable rapidity and economy of movement. Marilyn Ivy reports that, in the 1980s, the typical *taishū engeki* troupe was always in dire financial straits: a month or more without bookings could sink them.[22] This bazaar appeared after almost every show, and even the children of the troupes sold merchandise.[23]

A personal greeting of this sort is part of every performance. Similar moments in Kabuki are rarer and much more formal. At the Ginza district's Kabuki-za in 2014, we saw a ranking player present his twelve-year-old son to the audience for the first time. The boy's father and colleagues knelt beside him at the curtain line. Each spoke in turn to present the new actor to the audience, begging for its support and continued patronage. For his part, the boy promised always to perform to the best of his ability. *Taishū engeki*'s rapport with its audience is folksier, but it shows a similar solicitude for the patron's approval and consent. It continues after the show as company members socialize with patrons for as long as the patrons wish to stay. We saw a conclave of this kind still going strong outside the Mokubakan at 10.30 in the evening, after the company had already given two three-and-a-half-hour performances.

The *Shibai* Play

Next comes a play, called a *shibai*, whose lineage has been traced to comic interludes performed in Noh drama, but the *taishū engeki* version is longer and is not necessarily comic. Set in the Edo period, a *shibai* may be performed in mock-Kabuki style with asides to the audience commenting on the conventions encountered. In *Subversive Laughter* (1994), Ronald Jenkins remembers Tomeio Umezawa's trick of following a *mie* with a quick aside: 'I'm working very hard to act in the Kabuki style and I'd appreciate it if you'd show your appreciation in a Kabuki-like manner.'[24] Much of the dialogue is delivered in a sort of highfalutin Japanese, an idiom that is used in historical pageants and samurai movies. The grandiloquent speeches can be undercut at any moment by a character speaking in everyday parlance. Charlotte Kate Fox, who has worked extensively in Japanese television, came with us to a show at the Mokubakan. She commented that Japanese actors, like Brecht's, remain ever-present as actors: 'They're always commenting on what they think their character is like. It keeps the act of imitation from overwhelming the audience.'[25] The acting we saw was often broad and coarse. Actors garbled lines, spoke over each other, and smirked uncontrollably. They shouted to show anger, tapped a foot to show impatience, and performed elaborate, vaudeville-style 'takes' to the audience.

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Metatheatre abounds in *taishū engeki*, perhaps because it abets and decorates these tendencies to self-commentary. The first time we saw the Super Brothers troupe, the *shibai* concerned a poor widow who had run foul of a gang of loan sharks. A worthy character in a purple kimono appeared and chased them off. It was later revealed that he was having an affair with the woman's eighteen-year-old daughter, played by a woman fairly advanced in years. The actor in the purple kimono slipped out of character to reproach her: 'Aren't you ashamed, trying to pass for eighteen?' The actress defends herself as best she can, but the joke only lands completely when the same reproach is made to a twelve-year-old actor playing the daughter's eight-year-old sister: 'Aren't you ashamed, trying to pass for eight?' This byplay draws laughs, but more was to come: when the actor in the purple kimono presents his business card, it is actually the show's publicity postcard. Later, one of the loan sharks flaunts a plastic Evian bottle. Anachronisms also pop up in the text. In the 'blind mother' play, for example, a crafty servant tries to evade his angry master:

SERVANT: I have to go shopping right now!
MASTER: Where?
SERVANT: Costco.

The audience roars at these antics, or at least chuckles. Some of the metatheatre is musical. At Jūjō we saw two characters launch into a lip-synced rendition of a song from the Japanese version of *Frozen.* In Asakusa, a raffle at an Edo-period shrine was performed to the same jingle as the televised drawing of the national lottery.

The scenery usually consists of a generic drop, often depicting the Kamo riverbank in Kyoto, the birthplace of Kabuki. There is generally a second decor, an interior that can serve for a peasant's hut, a middle-class house, an inn, or a brothel. A third set would



Actors' banners, some created and donated by fans, hang over the *hanamichi* in Jūjō. Photo: Nathan Schneider.

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be needed if the play ended with a sword fight in a deep wood. Regardless of setting, however, paper cherry blossoms (usually intended for the grand finale) leak from a snow drop at odd moments throughout the evening. After the show, all the troupe's scenery was arranged compactly behind the raised cyclorama. It would probably all fit into a large rented van when the troupe changes venues.

Costumes are big-ticket items for a *taishū engeki* troupe, but they are rarely used realistically. No attempt is made to conceal the microphones clipped to the lapels of actors' kimonos or the bulky battery packs tucked into their underwear. The silliest costumes were a pair of black kimonos with cut-outs to reveal red flounces like a cancan dancer's petticoat. These were used for a dance representing the romantic tryst of two vampires. The number was very well received and got an added boost when the female vampire's mother, similarly attired, burst in to break up the assignation.

In *taishū engeki* even child performers wear wigs. Typically, the hair piles up on top but also hugs the neck and shoulders like downward-pointing flames. Sometimes a single curl of lacquered hair arches over the forehead, and is rigid enough to conceal a tiny microphone. If a traditional look is the goal, the wig will be black. For more modish numbers, the choice is limitless: metallized, particoloured pastel wigs, giant pink pompadours, wild manes in bright green that hang down to the performer's buttocks – anything is possible. Because performers do multiple numbers in an evening, they wear a web of Velcro straps attached to a latex swim cap. With this device, the different wigs can be doffed and donned in short order. Wigs are the last thing on and the first thing off when actors enter or leave the stage. One well-established company travels with five hundred wigs, costing an average of 2,000 US dollars apiece.[26]

Lighting is used casually. Follow-spots spill onto the flats, creating pale circles behind the actors. In a short-handed troupe, two follow-spots will be run by a single operator, the beams bouncing recklessly around the stage. The Edo-period scenery is often framed by scaffolding or chromed IKEA shelf units that support side lighting. Somehow the visual dissonance caused by a slather of modern lighting instruments makes the Edo-period play seem rather more archaic than less. Traditional elements of stagecraft like the *hanamichi* become more prominent in non-traditional contexts.

The quality of the *shibai* play varied from troupe to troupe. The Susumu troupe offered one of the tightest, appearing to have been scripted. The Brocade Troupe in Tachikawa put on the shoddiest of any we saw. It told of a poor woman who comes to a bridge where she plans to abandon the baby she could no longer feed and then to jump to her death. An out-of-work carpenter who is also planning to jump catches her in the act. He reproaches her and, indicating the audience, tells her that 'any of these good people would be willing to raise your child'. After much discussion, he agrees to forgo suicide and raise the child himself. The woman vanishes, only to reappear in the second act, fifteen years later. She has become wealthy and well connected, and wants her daughter back. The girl, who has grown into a perfect flower of young womanhood, refuses to leave her adoptive father. The father and a colleague plot to substitute the colleague's stupid and ugly daughter (played by a pudgy, rouged-up adolescent boy) for the adopted beauty. The boy raises laughter as his character utterly fails to learn how to pass for the daughter of an aristocrat, even the daughter of an aristocrat raised by carpenters. When the ruse collapses and the substitution is discovered, the real and adoptive parents agree on joint custody, but only after extensive protesting, crying, and apologizing on all sides.

The play seemed interminable. Actors with different notions of where the scene should go tugged back and forth at the improvised dialogue, repeating and re-contextualizing their partner's lines to their own advantage. An actor's wig fell off when he took a tumble. The other actors smacked it back on, telling him to be more careful. The sound system was awful, and the carpenter colleague shouted into his microphone, causing his voice to distort. At one point he stumbled into a rack of speakers and caused an excruciating feedback

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shriek. Without breaking character, the *zachō* blamed the technicians, but this time the metatheatre failed to amuse. Suddenly the exoticism of the event fell away and we found ourselves face to face with an irreducibly amateur play.

You would suppose that, when actors perform twice a day in front of demonstrative audiences, their work gets better and better; that they learn not to bump into things or shout into their microphone. Perhaps the *zachō* and the *fukuzachō* were too heavily involved in the *shibai* to notice how shoddy it had become. Or there were other reasons: quarrels in the company; blurred hierarchy; a refusal or inability to communicate; no one in a position to point out errors and ask that they be corrected. However, the weakness of the Brocade Troupe might also be a sort of trademark – habitual incompetence designed to endear it to the public. Unable to compete in professionalism with other troupes, company members thus try to finesse their ineptitude into audience support. We regret that we failed to pursue these questions when we had the chance to do so.

The *Gurando Shō* and Audience Tipping

An evening (or afternoon) of *taishū engeki* ends with a 'grand show' of music and dance. The first piece is usually a group effort with a senior member doing a step dance and the junior members clapping hands or twirling parasols behind him. At Tachikawa, the choreography is not strenuous. The dance captain is visible right away: he is half a beat ahead and keeps an eye on the other dancers. The make-up on one of the dancers is so thick that he seems to be wearing a plastic mask like a hockey goalie. The sound is too loud. The next item is a solo dance for the young man of the troupe, the *wakazachō*, who is dressed in a black, faux-leather kimono with fishnet panels ornamented with spangles. His music is up-tempo and he dances energetically, lip-syncing the song intermittently. This was clearly a crowd-pleaser, bound to receive tips, although none came.

Tipping, we learned, is called *ohana*, and the proceeds are earmarked for props and costumes.[27] Initially, we had supposed that *ohana* was governed by sexual attractiveness. Over time, however, we saw audience members of different ages and sexes tip performers *en homme* or *en femme* in ways we were unable to predict. The sums were impressive, especially for spectators well into retirement age. We asked our informants if the tips were similar to offerings at a Shinto shrine, oblations to cultural ghosts and local spirits that the performer makes manifest. They assured us that it was quite different, although both acts are public. *Taishū engeki* audiences applaud good tips as lustily as they do good performances. An audience member in her sixties told us she liked to give *ohana*: 'It makes me feel I'm responsible for the show, one of the producers. And it comes back to us in the form of costumes and hair. If the actors become more beautiful, that also benefits the audience.'

There was another oddity. Passing money from hand to hand in Japan is usually avoided. In shops, customers are expected to place bills and change in a special tray, yet a local TV programme shows aficionados how to fan out crisp, ten-thousand-yen notes so each can be seen.[28] They are then advised to tape the ends so the full sum remains visible. To attach the fanned-out notes to the performer's costume, the theatre sells costume jewellery clips. A star *onnagata* caught on one of our *taishū engeki* DVDs is plastered with these gifts to the point where the banknotes obscure the line of his kimono. An image of modest, self-effacing Japanese womanhood, he dips, turns, and shuffles offstage festooned with a sum equal to $2,500 in cash. Elsewhere on the same disk, the *zachō* appears with a perfect rectangle of banknotes – equivalent to $1,000 – clipped to his wig like the solar panel of a satellite. Sometimes audience members slide paper bags containing in-kind offerings onto the stage. One man offered an ornamental sword, a woman offered a kimono. Attendants pick up the gifts during a number, display them to the audience for applause, then carry them offstage. More modest emoluments can be made by presenting the performer with a plastic lei available in the lobby for a thousand yen (about ten dollars). Some *taishū engeki* tippers

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prefer to put money in an envelope with a card of thanks.

The young man in the fake leather kimono referred to earlier exits and a woman in a black kimono takes his place. She comes on with a fan and a plastic smile: she is not very convincing and appears unsure of herself. Does she present her own femininity or does she copy the *onnagata* and so become (essentially) a woman playing a man playing a woman? With practice we learned to spot female performers by the tension that appears in the representation of femininity itself. If it seemed tentative in any way, we were probably looking at an actual woman. In fact, it seems easier for *taishū engeki* women to play men than to present their own sex. In *otokoyaku* mode the undertaking is uniformly artificial and conventional – in the Marlon image. When playing Edo-period femininity, however, there is a danger that traces of twenty-first-century womanhood will emerge.

The woman in black finishes, and the *zachō* of the troupe, Noeni Tachibana, takes the stage with studied elegance. His make-up is nearly orange, a movie-star tan. His eyes shadowed and his lips glossed, he moves down the *hanamichi* like a holdover from the Rat Pack era, an impossibly famous star participating (perhaps) in a charity fashion show, reining in his normal swagger in deference to his clothes, which are Western: a tomato-coloured, double-breasted jacket worn with slacks. His movements snap with authority: a pistol-like gesture of his right hand, two pointing fingers coming together as if drawing a narrow square in the air. Then he spreads both hands like a priest giving benediction. The progression of gestures is periodically broken by *mie*, which are underscored by the *ki* clappers. The poses break his movements into discrete frames like panels in a manga, the pulp comics that Japanese of all ages consume in vast quantities. Audience members shout '*zachō*' at the exact height of his *mie*, just as aficionados shout '*olé*' at a bullfight, although it's not clear here – any more than at a bullfight – if this is an encomium, an exhortation, or a cry of recognition when some unworldly spirit seems to possess a successful performer. The *zachō* plays the house with panache; he is not dancing but fixing a baseline in our minds, a he-man masculinity that he will purposefully overthrow later in the programme.

As soon as he leaves, the actor previously in fake leather comes back as an *onnagata.* He is even sexier as a woman, playing his own gaze against the gaze of the audience. All of his *mie* finish with a look, sometimes sultry, but more often demure, glancing sweetly over his fan or looking up shyly, with head bowed. There is a special kind of sexual delicacy at work here. His geisha turn does not banish the pop-star male he presented earlier; rather, the two entities are superimposed. He is saying, in effect: 'I'm on to you women! I know you coming and going, sending and receiving. I know all the tricks you women use to ensnare a man; let me demonstrate!' As his act advances, the actor's gaze becomes both hot and coy, his character clearly aroused and in deep flirtation with the audience. This time he draws tips.[29]

How did he make such a quick change? *Taishū engeki* make-up is designed for speed of application. It abstracts faces into the fewest possible items: two slits for eyes, outlined but not shadowed; a straight, sensitive nose; and small, precisely painted lips. The faces are as elegant and refined as porcelain teacups. They seem to say that men and women become more beautiful as they fade into each other, melding into a foetus-like glory of pure potential, its phenotype yet to be determined.

The Brocade Troupe's star *onnagata*, Kamui Ryūko, is now on stage. Kamui (who claims that he has been imitating women since he was three) is gifted with a swan neck and flawlessly feminine features: symmetrical, limpid, demure, his lips full and perfectly drawn.[30] Even watching him later on a DVD with the possibility of freezing frames we could still be fooled. Roland Barthes maintained that the strength of drag performance is its imperfection, approximation, and its inevitable failure: the male actor does not copy the woman but merely signifies her.[31] Barthes was wrong. Here, the illusion is perfect – more perfect than in Kabuki because Kamui never speaks and so avoids the drawling, artificial falsetto of a Kabuki *onnagata.*[32]

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An actor kneels to receive a tip in mid-performance. Photo: Robert Schneider.

Now he removes a scroll from his belt. A poem, or a letter from a lover? Unrolled, it is about ten feet long. He spins around, causing it to spiral over his kimono like the stripe of a barber's pole. Caparisoned like this, he bends backwards and continues to spin like an ice skater, transforming the pole into a candy-striped arch, the classic pose of a Kabuki character submitting to fate. In a lesser performer it would seem like a stunt, a gymnastic move, but here it simply says that the scroll contains terrible news. When it is over, he vanishes as smoothly as a column of smoke.

It's the *zachō*'s turn again after another lightning change. On his last appearance he sauntered around like a pudgy, aging man; now he has become an aging geisha in all her finery. Had he seen *My Geisha* (1962), in which Shirley MacLaine plays an American actress who passes for Japanese so that her film-director husband (Yves Montand) will cast her as Cio-Cio-san in a film version of *Madama Butterfly*? In the film, the director goes to Tokyo and hires what he thinks is an authentic Japanese geisha for the role. The filming is nearly finished when a technical problem requires him to check the colour negative.

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A white backdrop causes the performer to pop with manga-like suddenness. Photo: Nathan Schneider.

Only then, when he sees the geisha's black hair rendered as MacLaine's normal red, does he realize that he has been directing his own wife. Like a colour negative, *taishū engeki* reverses social conventions of masculinity and femininity in the way a colour negative reverses black and red, but there it is in the final print: humanity transcends gender.

The *zachō*'s number is slower, more assured, and more delicate than his younger colleague's. His movements are like velvet. They are also more rhythmic and better attuned to the music. People clap along or wave light-sticks in the darkened house. As before, applause erupts with shouts of '*zachō*' at the crest of each *mie*. He receives the equivalent of a $300 tip from two elderly women.

The bodies of the *onnagata* seemed fully as feminine as their faces. When Yui Matsui appeared for a gag number wearing a mini-skirt, it was clear that he was still wearing the artfully padded leotard from his *onnagata* piece just before. After this act, silly even by *taishū engeki* standards, an amplified voice from offstage begged pardon 'for this disgraceful display'. It was not disgraceful, but it did reveal the secret of the *zachō*'s curves. In another gag act, this one in the Super Brothers

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show, a sword-waving samurai threatens his unfaithful mistress. While the samurai strikes poses, the mistress performs an elaborate burlesque of Kabuki dance, apparently an adieu to her earthly existence. As the dance ends, however, the mistress strips off her kimono to reveal a tawdry pink slip above a pair of hairy calves. The actor, a man after all, had not even shaved his armpits. A Western drag performer lives for the instant at the end of the number when he can whip off the wig and confront the audience with its error. But the *onnagata* of *taishū engeki* are coolly professional. If they derive private thrills from fooling spectators, they do not let it show.

More recently, drag balls in New York, chronicled in Jennie Livingston's documentary *Paris Is Burning* (1990), have embraced realism in pursuit of an individual vision – a particular woman whose 'look' and behaviour can be grafted onto a particular man. As the New York balls grew, categories proliferated: schoolgirl, housewife, hooker, meter maid, secretary – the possibilities must have seemed endless. Kabuki, in contrast, has tended toward essentialism, towards a generic ideal, red-lipped and kimono-clad, with skin as white as rice flour. In this, *taishū engeki* is closer to the New York events than to Kabuki. The *zachō* of the Susumu troupe we saw in Yokohama also conjured up specific personalities of both sexes. As a man he was smooth and suave, a bit rakish. *En femme*, he acquired a very different quality, possibly recalling, for North American spectators familiar with popular films, a disoriented vamp with shades of the Norma Desmond character in Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (1950). He was tipped 50,000 yen.

Like vaudeville (and the revue form generally), the grand show perpetually seeks an ending. The Yui Matsui troupe mounted a full-on, Kabuki-style, highly choreographed *tachimawari* fight scene as a finale, the hero blazing his way through rank after rank of opposing swordsmen. The swords were steel, dangerous, even when used in a stylized way. Where did they find the time to rehearse this? We do not have any strong recollection of the other concluding numbers. Our notes tell us that they were group affairs, a bit sentimental and pointedly elegiac, as if saying 'Here we are, all of us, so sad to see you go'. On two occasions, a senior member of the company thanked everyone for attending, and then led the audience in a little clapping game. Three quick claps plus one, repeated three times, then seven short claps to finish. It was the only clapping we heard at the end of a show. There was never a curtain call.

The number that serves us mentally as *taishū engeki*'s finale is Yui Matsui's last appearance on stage in Yokohama. It is commonly said that the basis of Kabuki dance is sculptural, derived from figures in Buddhist statuary whose primal quality is balanced tension. It is said that the *ki* sounds from the *hyōshigi* are distant echoes of the rattle that Shiva shook at the creation of the world, when he stood on the demon's back and danced to calm its anger. The *zachō* in Yokohama eased into his *mie*, varying the tempo constantly, endlessly modulating the acceleration and deceleration of his movements: *jo, ha, kyu, zanshin*! He delayed the actual *mie* as long as possible, moving toward it asymptotically until it seemed it would never arrive. He teased us almost to the point of irritation. Then, when we had almost let go of waiting, when we had all but forgotten what we were *waiting for*, the *mie* was suddenly there – the surprise more perfect for having been somehow expected all along. At the apex of the *mie*, when the *ki* sounds at last, post-gendered grace, having been exalted in movement, becomes deified in stasis. Shiva has come to Yokohama.

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2. Marilyn Ivy, *Discourses of the Vanishing: Modernity, Phantasm, Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1995), p. 193.
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5. ASTOM Corporation, *Kangeki: Entertainment Magazine Spreading from Theater* (年7月号) July 2016, <http://e-kangeki.net/taishuengeki_first_study/> (accessed 9 June 2017).
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12. Endo, 'Reconsidering the Travelling Theatre', p. 158.

13. L4You!, '*Gekidan Kusuo ōkawa ryōtarō zachō TV shutsuen*' (Zacho Ryotaro Okawa TV appearance), *YouTube*, 13 January 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ApP5faOvsok> (accessed 6 October 2017).

14. Takei, '*Une vie d'itinérance*', p. 6.

15. Ukai Masaki, 'Travelling Troupes Play to the Masses', *Japan Quarterly* [*Asahi Shinbun*] (1998), p. 57.

16. Marilyn Ivy explains that the actors can retain so many roles in memory because '*taishū engeki* is deeply conventional and clichéd in its fund of characters and themes' (*Discourses of the Vanishing*, p. 206).

17. Hiroshi Okada, 'Taishu Engeki', in Agi and Eiki Taneka, eds., *Taishū geinō shiryō shūsei* (Tokyo: San'ichi Shobō, 1981), p. 308.

18. Ian Buruma, *Behind the Mask: Sexual Demons, Sacred Mothers, Transvestites, Gangsters, and Other Japanese Cultural Heroes* (New York: Random House, 1984), p. 114.

19. Jennifer Robertson, *Takarazuka: Sexual Politics and Popular Culture in Modern Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), p. 178.

20. Ibid., p. 50.

21. Alex Kerr, *Lost Japan* (Hawthorn, Victoria: Lonely Planet, 1996), p. 98.

22. Ivy, *Discourses of the Vanishing*, p. 229.

23. We suspect the actors sell things in the street to avoid giving the theatre a percentage. Typically, the troupes split ticket sales fifty-fifty or forty-sixty with the theatre. We were unable to learn whether or not there was a similar division of merchandise sales.

24. Ronald Scott Jenkins, *Subversive Laughter: The Liberating Power of Comedy* (New York: Free Press, 1994), p. 150.

25. Charlotte Kate Fox, in conversation with the authors, 5 June 2016.

26. Nippon Television Corporation, 'Zacho Ryotaro Okawa TV Appearance', *YouTube*, 7 May 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xWoLakkFdwU&t=9s> (accessed 10 June 2017).

27. L4You!, '*Gekidan Kusuo ōkawa*.

28. Osaka Television, '*Popular Dramas Battle in Osaka*', 7 July 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=tgV7E4c0oAo> (accessed 29 June 2018).

29. We rarely saw an *onnagata* tipped on his first appearance as a man. Tips came thickest after the performer had changed gender at least once. The tipping may be a cumulative reward or a tribute to the performer's gender versatility. All the star *onnagata* we saw made initial appearances *en homme*.

30. In Japan this is not as rare as in the USA. We frequently saw young men in the Tokyo subway who would make sublime women: there would be hardly anything to change. In fact, the practice of exquisite men cross-dressing as women and posting selfies on social media has grown into a full-fledged subculture here, mirroring the *bishomen* phenomenon of manga culture.

31. Roland Barthes, *L'Empire des signes* (Paris: Flammarion, 1970), p. 73

32. *Taishū engeki* often uses women to play female parts in the *shibai*. In consequence, the *onnagata* speak less. We never heard falsetto in *taishū engeki*.

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