

Virtual idols, anime and a rock 'n' roll spirit: Nakamura Shido II leads kabuki's evolution

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The audience, most of whom are in their 20s and 30s, wave glow sticks and holler as the lights go down for the start of the show. Above the stage, a frame of blue lights throbs and pulses like a circuit board before the curtain draws back.

A 3D hologram of Hatsune Miku, a turquoise-haired virtual idol beloved of Japanese subculture fans, appears on stage and the audience erupts in a wild volley of whoops and screams.

Music pounds around the auditorium. Graphics flash up on the huge projection screen at the back of the stage. Miku dances and the crowd roars, then the lights go down and a solitary bowing figure emerges center stage.

The lights go back up and reveal his identity — venerable kabuki actor Nakamura Shido II.

Hang on a minute, did you say *kabuki*?

“Preserving tradition while also catching up with innovation is something you want to do if you’re in the classical world,” says Nakamura, one of kabuki’s most famous actors and a household name in Japan, during an interview with The Japan Times in January.

“That’s not just limited to kabuki,” he says. “Whether you’re a classic brand of watches or cars, the companies that thrive are the ones that catch up with modern innovations. Kabuki has a 400-year history and, in order to appeal to a young, modern audience, you need to think about both the traditional and the innovative.”

Striking innovations

Innovation is very much at the forefront of the kabuki world’s thoughts at the moment. Stung by perceptions that it has become an out-of-date, out-of-touch relic enjoyed only by an older generation, the gatekeepers of the all-male classical performing art have been busy trying to reconnect it with its popular roots.

Kabuki began in the early 17th century but really hit its stride in the Genroku Era between 1688 and 1704. That period became known as the first great flowering of common culture in Edo, the old name for Tokyo, and kabuki troupes performed for large, raucous audiences in the capital’s proletarian quarters.

Kabuki continued to enjoy popular success throughout the Edo Period (1603-1868), but a performance in the presence of the Meiji emperor in 1888 raised its social status and shifted it away from its common origins.

Kabuki's classical nature — featuring stately pacing and archaic, often incomprehensible language — means it has sometimes struggled to stay relevant in the 21st century. A concerted effort to broaden its appeal in recent years, however, appears to be bearing fruit.

Shochiku, by far the biggest kabuki production company and the operator of the iconic Kabuki-za theater in Tokyo's Ginza district, has produced a number of new kabuki shows based on modern-day popular culture. These include versions of the anime franchises "Naruto" and "One Piece," and the animated movie "Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind," as well as a 2015 show in Las Vegas that projected giant images onto the Bellagio fountains tourist landmark.

One of Shochiku's most striking innovations has been "Cho Kabuki," a show featuring Nakamura and Miku, produced in collaboration with telecom giant NTT and media company Dwango. "Cho Kabuki," which is based on the classic play "Yoshitsune Senbon Zakura," has been performed several times at internet culture festival Niconico Chokaigi since 2016 and made its debut at Kyoto's Minami-za kabuki theater last year. The show will return to Niconico Chokaigi in April and Minami-za from June 2 to 24.

"Cho Kabuki" makes extensive use of cutting-edge technology to create a light and sound extravaganza, and incorporates pop-culture touchstones and modern language to make it accessible to a younger audience. The spectacular nature of the production has been reflected in the audiences' reactions.

"It's like a rock concert," says Shochiku Executive Officer Ippei Noma. "The audience gets up on its feet and gets really excited as the ending approaches. As well as the story, one of the great things about kabuki is the music. They work in synergy. The story develops and the music builds until they reach a crescendo, and that packs a direct emotional punch for the audience.

"It's very different from classical kabuki," he continues. "Standing ovations are rare at Kabuki-za. With 'Cho Kabuki,' it's not so much a polite appreciation, it's more like the audience is part of it. It's like a rock concert where the performers and the audience are as one. It feels like how kabuki would have felt in its original days."

Classical roots

"Cho Kabuki" is not the first production to attempt to bring kabuki to a wider audience. In 1986, actor Ichikawa Ennosuke III launched "Super Kabuki," a modernized production that upped the tempo and used contemporary Japanese, while 1994's "Cocoon Kabuki," held in the Tokyo youth mecca of Shibuya rather than the rarified atmosphere of Ginza, continued the trend.

Is there a danger of taking kabuki too far away from its classical foundation in the name of innovation? Noma believes it's a fine balancing act.

“There are fans who have told us they don’t think it’s kabuki,” he says. “Finding out why is very informative for us. We want to listen to the negative opinions so that we don’t make the same mistake again if we’ve taken something too far. If all we hear is positive, it will send us down the wrong path.

“The ‘Cho Kabuki’ story is rooted in classical kabuki, but we use that to create something new. It respects the classical text but arranges it in a modern way to create a new story. We try to speak directly to the young generation and capture their hearts.”

Shochiku has also produced an abbreviated version of “Cho Kabuki,” cut down from 2½ hours to 70 minutes, which the company hopes will attract overseas visitors to Japan on a busy schedule. Noma says that around 20 percent of the audiences for the shorter version are foreign tourists.

Trying so many new things in kabuki can, however, be a disorienting experience for the actors. Leading men are born into acting dynasties and spend their whole lives rehearsing and performing plays that have existed for centuries, making new productions with virtual co-stars a challenge to work on.

“It’s different from working with a real person and there is a difficulty involved in that,” Nakamura says. “With a play, you work with other people and there is a mutual understanding. It’s difficult to do that with Hatsune Miku but, through repetition since we opened the production, the digital team and the analogue team have gotten used to each other.”

If anyone is in a position to judge the complexities of kabuki acting, it is Nakamura. Born in 1972 as the son of actor Nakamura Shido I, he first appeared on the kabuki stage at the age of 8. The elder Nakamura quit kabuki a year later but the son continued his training and went on to become one of the biggest stars in the business.

Nakamura admits there was a period in his teenage years when he rebelled against kabuki, and he thought of joining a rock band or opening a clothing shop instead. Then he went to watch a kabuki performance as part of a school lesson, and realized that the origins of the word kabuki — from the verb “*kabuku*,” meaning to lean, or be apart from the mainstream — chimed with his modern-day interests.

“My friends at the time were all modern kids and they were in bands, and they came out of the theater saying kabuki was cool,” he says. “I heard that and I thought there must be something good about it if kids my age, kids who were into rock music and played the guitar, thought it was cool.

“I liked rock and fashion, but those things are also part of kabuki. You have words like ‘*kabukimono*,’ which means ‘a person with a rebellious spirit.’ Rock and punk were created by rebellious spirits. Kabuki comes from the same origins. Kabuki was banned by the government many times in the past but it didn’t give in to oppression and it survives to this day.”

Nakamura's experience of acting is not just limited to kabuki. He has also appeared in numerous movies, TV shows and theater productions over the years, including the 2006 Clint Eastwood film "Letters from Iwo Jima."

He describes these roles as being "like countries I visit for a holiday," before returning to kabuki, "my hometown where my soul was born and raised."

The weight of tradition involved in being a kabuki actor, however, brings its own particular set of pressures.

"Each generation has actors who are known as big stars," he says. "The actor from this generation did this, or that actor did that, and so on. Modern theater doesn't have the same stylized acting, and actors are from the first generation. Kabuki is passed down through the generations. Before you go on stage, you pray to your ancestors, people who you have never even met. When I perform modern theater, I don't think about my ancestors. Kabuki has 400 years of history, and you feel that history as you perform."

Pressure and expectations are things that Nakamura has gained a new perspective on since he was diagnosed with lung cancer in May 2017. While he was in the hospital recuperating, he had time to reflect on his life and career, and decided to block out all "unnecessary pressure" and focus on living a full and rewarding life instead.

Now he has a son of his own, 2-year-old Haruki, who was born after his health scare. Nakamura would like Haruki to follow in his footsteps, but he has no intention of forcing him to do anything he doesn't want to do.

"You have to start practicing and performing while you're still in your infancy," Nakamura says. "It's the responsibility of the parent to set them off on that path. If, when he reaches a certain age, he says he doesn't want to do it anymore, it's better that he quits. You can't do it if you hate it. For one thing, it's disrespectful to the audience. I think it's better that he decides that for himself when he's an adult."

True appeal

Will kabuki still be around when Haruki is old enough to become a leading man himself? The performing art's 400-year history suggests it surely will be, but in what form and in front of what kind of audience?

Shochiku executive Noma believes there will always be a market for the classical side of kabuki, but he also thinks there is room to keep pushing the boundaries of what the art form can achieve.

"I don't know if you can say kabuki is stuck in a rut," Noma says. "It's classical. It's the same with Beethoven or Bach's music. You can say it is stuck in a rut, or you can look at it a different way and say it's important to do classical pieces in a classical way. We felt there was a necessity to create something new while still paying respect to the classics. The classical and the new should always move forward together."

Noma is satisfied that the new shows have been a resounding success.

“The biggest proof of that is the fact that we’ve had a lot of people coming to our theaters,” he says. “School teachers tell us that productions such as ‘Cho Kabuki’ are great for students who are watching kabuki for the first time. We’ve had a lot of positive responses from school teachers.”

As for Nakamura, he believes that kabuki’s survival depends on being able to arouse the interest of today’s youth, and he personally feels he has a “responsibility to carve out a path to a new era.”

Despite all the technological innovations being used to wow audiences at “Cho Kabuki” and other new productions, however, he believes kabuki’s true appeal lies with something that transcends time.

“The basis for these stories is people, and that doesn’t change even 400 years later in the digital age,” he said. “We watch old plays and we can laugh and cry because the themes are just as relevant today as they were then.”

For more information on ‘Cho Kabuki,’ visit bit.ly/ChoKabuki