

THE ROLE AND AESTHETICS OF THE ONNAGATA IN KABUKI

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Abstract *This study explores the role and aesthetic significance of onnagata (male actors playing female roles) in Kabuki, focusing on its historical background and contemporary impact. Following the ban on female performers in the early 17th century, the onnagata tradition emerged as a central element of Kabuki. This research analyzes the technical features, aesthetic perspectives, and socio-cultural roles of onnagata, with a particular emphasis on Bandō Tamasaburō V's contributions. By examining the origins of Kabuki, the development of the onnagata tradition, and its modern evolution, the study elucidates the factors that established onnagata as a unique pillar of Japanese culture.*

Keywords *Kabuki, onnagata, Japanese traditional performing arts, acting techniques, historical background, cultural significance, Bandō Tamasaburō, male actors, aesthetics, Edo period, theater, roles, forms, movements, makeup, costumes, tradition, art*

Here is the English translation of the provided Chapter 2 main body:

2.1 Origins and Historical Background of Kabuki

Kabuki is a traditional Japanese theater form born in the early 17th century, integrating singing, dance, and acting into a unique art form. Its origins trace back to 1603 when Izumo no Okuni began “kabuki-odori” on the dry riverbed of the Kamo River in Kyoto. Okuni and her troupe of women drew on Nenbutsu dances tied to religious rituals, gaining popularity as entertainment among commoners. Over time, kabuki stages became increasingly sensual and closely associated with brothels. This led the Tokugawa shogunate in 1629 to ban women from performing.

Following the ban, wakashū kabuki emerged, performed by young male actors. However, in 1652, the shogunate also banned these youths for similar moral reasons. As a result, adult male actors began performing female roles—thus establishing the tradition of onnagata.

Unlike noh and kyōgen, which were supported by the shogunate and performed in aristocratic courts, kabuki was popularized by townspeople seeking new forms of expression. The term kabuki derives from the verb kabuku (“to lean” or “to be eccentric”), reflecting its defiant, flamboyant spirit. This spirit was especially evident during the era of Toyotomi Hideyoshi, whose lavish productions influenced kabuki’s early splendor. Throughout the Edo period, kabuki grew as popular entertainment, evolving dramatically in narrative style and theatrical technique.

2.2 Establishment of the Onnagata Tradition: Technique and Aesthetic

After the 1629 ban on women, onnagata became central to kabuki. Male actors meticulously mastered female gestures, speech patterns, costume, and makeup to achieve a convincing portrayal of women. Their performance style went beyond superficial mimicry—onnagata are required to convey deep, internal female emotions.

This demanding skill set is acquired through years of rigorous training, encompassing refined body movements, vocal modulation, and subtle facial expressions—all carefully choreographed.

Aesthetic ideals of onnagata revolve around crafting an idealized feminine image: the iconic white face makeup is accented with red and black lines to emphasize beauty; elaborate costumes and hairstyles increase visual appeal; graceful, deliberate movements and stylized forms (kata) leave lasting impressions. These components form the stylistic core of kabuki and elevate the onnagata's artistry.

A modern exemplar is Tamasaburō Bandō V, who debuted at seven and formally took the name in 1964. Tamasaburō is celebrated for his delicate portrayal of subtle female emotional shifts and commanding stage presence. His dance performance Yōkihi, with lyrics by Japanese author Makoto Tsukushi, recreates a historic Chinese feminine image within kabuki aesthetics. Moreover, his 1996 collaboration with cellist Yo-Yo Ma to perform with Bach's Cello Suite No. 5 reflects a stunning blend of tradition and contemporary artistry.

2.3 Onnagata in Contemporary Kabuki: Social Role and Cultural Impact

Modern kabuki continues to preserve tradition while exploring new expressions. The onnagata not only embody the traditional kabuki aesthetic, but also serve as ambassadors of Japanese culture on the global stage. Tamasaburō has been at the forefront of this expansion: performing in the United States in 1985 at venues like the Metropolitan Opera House in New York and the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., and later in Paris in 1986. In 1993, his directed film *Sabishinbō* was featured at the 43rd Berlin International Film Festival, showcasing his influence beyond traditional kabuki.

He also promoted fusion of tradition and modernity through events such as the 2001 BESETO Arts Festival (celebrating Chinese, Korean, and Japanese performing arts) and directing the renowned Kodo One Earth Tour in 2003. These activities demonstrate that kabuki remains a living art form, resonating with modern audiences.

The onnagata's societal role also touches on gender expression and cultural identity. By having men play women's roles, onnagata transcend gender boundaries to convey universal humanity. This relevance connects them to contemporary gender discourse, bridging traditional values and modern sensibilities. Through their refined technique, Tamasaburō and others elevate depictions of feminine beauty and emotion, evoking deep empathy in audiences. Their work has been instrumental in establishing kabuki as a globally recognized Japanese art form.

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