

It is easier to decipher what kabuki is when you look at the three individual kanji characters that make up its name: “Ka” (歌) refers to the music, “bu” (舞) highlights the dance while “ki” (伎) means “acting.” Simply put, this traditional Japanese theater is a form of dance-drama, in which the actors don elaborate costumes and full-face makeup (known as *kumadori*) and perform stylized and exaggerated movements.

Kabuki has been performed for almost as long as Shakespearean theater. But while Shakespearean theater started with men taking all the roles, kabuki went the other way. It was originally performed by women back in the 16th and 17th centuries, but due to what officials saw as kabuki’s sensuous and provocative nature, women were banned from performing in 1629 and the men took over. This tradition persists today; male actors playing the same sex are called *tachiyaku* while those who play female roles are referred to as *onnagata*. The musicians and the *kuroko*—near invisible stagehands dressed all in black—complete the ensemble.

Throughout its four century-long history, kabuki has not only incorporated fashion references of the times but also borrowed from other traditional performing arts such as noh and *bunraku* puppet theatre. This willingness to evolve and adapt has resulted in kabuki having an eclectic and interesting style, which adds to its enduring appeal. In 2008, UNESCO officially recognized kabuki as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

More recently, Japan has seen the emergence of an innovative style of kabuki known as “super kabuki.” This new interpretation seeks to broaden kabuki’s appeal by using modern-day Japanese language and adapting classic storylines to fit in with today’s contemporary culture.