

Kabuki

Kabuki is a classical Japanese drama that involves dance and music. It dates to 1603 and developed fully in the Genroku period (1688–1704). Kabuki was originally performed by women, but they were banned from appearing on the stage in 1629, and since then all the roles have been played by male actors. The female role specialists are called *onnagata*.

Kabuki was the most popular performing art in the Edo period, although the Tokugawa government periodically attempted to ban it in order to keep it under control. It continued to attract audiences in the Meiji period as well. Kabuki declined for a while after the Second World War, but these days it is the most popular of the traditional styles of Japanese drama, and its stars are household names who often appear on TV, and also in movies and advertisements. Bando Tamasaburo is one such famous *onnagata*. Kabuki has greatly influenced Japanese culture and also appears in various forms of pop culture, such as anime. Indeed, it is seen by some as one of the most significant sources of pop culture in Japan.

There are several types of plays: history plays, contemporary plays, and dance pieces. History plays (*jidaimono*) often depicted real events in Japanese history but changed the setting to another period to avoid the censorship of the Tokugawa government. Contemporary or domestic stories (*sewamono*) often feature family drama and romance, and some of the most famous are about love suicides. In addition, there are some delightful dance pieces.

Kabuki is famous for the stylization of its drama and for the elaborate costumes and makeup of the actors. Kabuki theaters are also celebrated for their many unique features, such as the *hanamichi*, the walkway that extends into the audience and is used not only for dramatic entrances and exits but also to enact important scenes of the play. A variety of other devices also serve to enhance the performance, such as trap doors with differing functions and a revolving stage.

These devices are especially important in kabuki because the plays often involve a sudden and dramatic revelation or the transformation of a character. The *hanamichi* and trap doors are a highly effective means of creating the necessary drama for such revelations. Stage effects, including the actors' rapid appearance and disappearance, employ these devices too. The plays sometimes involve flying scenes as well, in which the actor moves about in the air above the audience, and this is one of the most popular stunts in Kabuki today. All these devices can be seen at the Kanamaruza, which is the only kabuki theater where a complete tour is possible.

In 2008, kabuki was inscribed in the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.