Notable Spectacles in the Late 19th-Century Kabuki Stage

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During the late Tokugawa period and the Meiji era, which is about the second half of the 19th century in the Christian era, Kabuki direction using props and gunpowder was prominent. I aim to examine the actual situation of these directions.

In Edo Kabuki during the late 18th century to the early 19th century, the popularity of flashy directions using prop gimmicks has often been pointed out. In particular, TSURUYA Namboku IV has written many works that used such effects. Namboku's works used the so-called spectacle to show the superhuman abilities of entities such as ghosts and sorcerers. The direction in *toita-gaeshi*—in which one actor, in quick changes, plays the ghosts of a man and a woman crucified on both sides of a single-door panel, devised at the premiere of the masterpiece *Tôkaidô Yotsuya kaidan*—and in *chôchin-nuke*, in which a ghost appears from a burning lantern, added in a replay of the same work, is well-known and still used today with refinement.

ICHIKAWA Kodanji IV is one of the actors who played an active role in the latter half of the 19th century while inheriting the abovementioned directions from ONOE Kikugorô III, who appeared in Namboku's works and in many ghost stories, and from HASEGAWA Kambei XI, a stagehand. I abstracted stage directions that seem to have used the gimmick from Kodanji's work:

> With usu-dorodoro [weird drum sounds], from under the armrest that Hikosaburô [disguised as Masatomo] leans on, Kodanji appears as a ghost of Tôgo and looks up at Hikosaburô's face from below.

> Looking at Imba. Ô-dorodoro [violent drum sounds]. Imba changes into the appearance of the ghost of Tôgo played by Kodanji, and because it looks reproachful [...][1]
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> [...] usu-dorodoro, netori [weird flute sounds], hitotsu-gane [a bell sound], fire on alcohol burns with uncanny music, and from the stage left an artificial corpse which is covered with woven straw, and on which a wild goose puppet perches, comes into the center. [. . .] The wild goose mentioned above flies away. The corpsegradually gets up, and the woven straw mat falls, then Kodanji, who plays two roles [in this piece], opens his eyes possessing the body of Koheiji and he goes immediately up to the stage with a gimmick. He tries to enter inside, scared by a paper charm [. . .] The body of Kodanji [Koheiji's ghost] enter in front of the lattice with a gimmick. After dorodoro, Shimazô [a servant woman] gets up with the sound of waves, looks at the trace.
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> Sanjûrô puts a sake bottle into a steel bottle to warm the sake, and drinks it. Dorodoro, netori, hitotsugane, uncanny music, Kodanji as Koheiji appears from the edge of mosquito net and advances to a suitable spot.
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> With dorodoro, netori, and uncanny music, Kodanji appears as Koheiji from the yukata [casual kimono] put by [Otsuka, played by] IMAI Kumesaburô, and advances to a suitable spot.[2]

Here, the ghosts appear and disappear from objects such as the armrest, the yukata clothes, and mosquito nets. Also portrayed are the appearance of other people instantly turning into the shape of ghosts, their strange way of walking, and others. Many of the techniques used for such directions are unknown in detail, but some of them are illustrated in Edo period drama books such as *Shibai kinmô zui* (1803), and some have been inherited by the current stage.

Furthermore, from the late Edo period to the Meiji era, with the development of prop gimmicks, theatrical performances depicting events different

1 "Higashiyama sakura zôshi" (1851). Cited and translated from Kokuritsu gekijô chôsa yôseibu 2015: 272-273.

2 "Kohada-no kaii ame-no furunuma" (1860). Cited and translated from Kokuritsu gekijô chôsa yôseibu 2013: 233-235.

from those involving ghosts and monsters—disasters and wars—have become prominent.[3]

Also, in reality, the late 19th century was a period of frequent disasters in Japan. Buildings of the Edo period heavily used wood, which meant large-scale fires often occurred in large cities such as Edo. In addition, in 1854, the Ansei Tôkai Earthquake and the Ansei Nankai Earthquake, both estimated at M8.4, occurred in rapid succession, and a large earthquake directly underneath Edo struck the following year.

On the other hand, the Edo era was a peaceful time in which no significant civil wars as well as foreign wars took place after the Shimabara Rebellion from 1637 to 1638, but from 1868 to 1869, after the Boshin War, when government troops fought against the former Shogunate forces, rebels broke out everywhere and continued until the Meiji period. The last but largest one was the 1877 Satsuma Rebellion. Japan in the Meiji period would also experience the First Sino–Japanese War of 1894–1895, the Russo–Japanese War of 1904–1905, and wars with other foreign countries.

At least until the Sino–Japanese War, drama in Japan still maintained its role as news media. At a time when movie did not exist, it was of great value to show the damaged areas and battlefields in motion, which could not be seen by people in real time.

At the end of the Tokugawa period, despite the fictional narrative of works such as *Takagi Oriemon budô jitsuroku* (1848) and *Tsukimi-no hare meiga-no ichijiku* (1862), one can see scenes of flashy underwater movements. As an example, let us examine the designation of props for flood scenes, which was set up in the finale of *Ichibannori meiki-no sashimono*, which was staged in 1865:

> The backcloth in the middle part of the stage is turned back and becomes silver waves. A three-tiered *jigasuri* [cloth that cover the stage to express the ground] is turned back, undulated and also becomes silver waves. The first fence painted waves is pushed out to the pillar on the right stage and fill the perpendicular direction. The second and third fences are also pushed out successively at the good timing and the boxes on both sides are undulated. The entire flat stage is covered with waves, and finally it begins to rain: the whole is the representation of a flood. (Kawatake (n. d.))

The spectacle of the flood was represented by a backcloth that drew waves as well as wave cloths ranging not only from the stage but also to the boxes, that

3 For disasters and wars in the Kabuki theatre of the time, see Hioki 2016: 101-164.

is, the audience seats. And on the stage, three partitions called wave-fences (*nami-tesuri*) were installed, which also generated waves, and the actors came and went in the waves and performed various acts.

In the Meiji era, more realistic effects were performed. For example, *Torioi Omatsu kaishô banashi*, which was performed for the first time in 1879, features a scene in which a heroine falls from a cliff to rough seas and is saved by a steamboat, and when *Hyôryû kidan seiyô kabuki* was performed, a new method for drawing scenes on the sea was created by HASEGAWA Kambei XIV, a stagehand. Kambei was dissatisfied with the production of the traditional scenes on the sea.

> In the previous plays, when they showed scenes on the sea, they only placed wave panels on the stage and used wave cloth in the background, which were very simple props. Now, when he shows scenes of wrecks on the sea, he can never use such old props that do not move, so the perfectionist Kambei has eagerly thought of somehow showing how real waves move.[4]

Holding such thoughts, Kambei rode a ferry across the Sumida River in a storm. While observing the surface of the water, he came up with a new trick using props.

> The wave cloth is stretched all over the stage, and two-inch square sticks are erected in some places under it to create a free space. Some people hide beneath the cloth and kick it, and then, it looks like the real waves are rising. The spring of a rickshaw is attached to the back of the ship, and it passes through the road between the waves, so it sways as if it were drifting in the waves due to the spring mechanism.[5]

Two years later, in *Shima-chidori tsuki no shiranami*, which premiered at the same Shintomi-za theatre, one can see a scene where the protagonist, Akashi no Shimazô, rows in rough seas, and here, the new technology in *Hyôryû kidan seiyô kabuki* was likely reused.

Sampu goko utsusu gentô, also staged in 1887 in Shintomi-za theatre, is based on the Normanton case in which a British-registered cargo ship, the Normanton, wrecked and killed all its Japanese passengers, and it was later found that it was impossible to hold its British captain criminally liable for abandoning the passengers because of the unequal treaty between Britain and

4 "Shogei ichiryû ima no meijin." In: Yomiuri Shimbun, October 21, 1903.

5 Ibid.

Japan at that time. In a picture on the program, one can see the words "A Great Spectacle of Steamship Sinking!," indicating that it was one of the highlight scenes. According to KIMURA Kinka, a playwright and producer, the magician KITENSAI Shôichi showed the moon using a magic lantern and ignited magnesium to express lightning. Kimura said, "The scene showing a terrible wreck of a large ship presented as a stage set being swallowed by heavy waves and sinking was realistic and earned applause" (Kimura1943: 764-5).

The technology used to depict floods and shipwrecks in a fictional world has become increasingly sophisticated and has been used to portray real-world accidents. Many plays based on the Meiji Sanriku Earthquake Tsunami in 1896 may have been performed using such techniques. The tsunami that struck on June 15 of the same year has been staged in theaters around the country since early July 1896. Although it is not Kabuki but rather a play of the new school, *Ô-tsunami,* played by the Ii Yôhô Company in Asakusa-za theatre in Tokyo, and the play that had the same title by FUKUI Mohei in Kyoto-za incorporates an event reported in newspapers in which SATÔ Jin, an elementary school teacher at Okirai Village (now Ôfunato City) in Iwate Prefecture, rescued an imperial portrait enshrined inside the school, heedless of danger. The program in Miyako-za theatre shows a man with the imperial portrait braving through the waves, and this scene may have also been performed using wave cloths, as described above.

Also, fires and other disasters were actively depicted on stage during the Meiji era, and war cannot be overlooked in terms of reflecting actual events. As mentioned earlier, the Meiji era began with the civil war and was an era of many wars, including foreign ones, which Kabuki also depicted.

Hazama gunki Narumi no kikigaki, performed at Morita-za in 1870, and *Meiji nenkan azuma nikki*, performed at Shintomi-za in 1875, depict the Ueno War in May 1868, a battle that took place in Ueno, near the city area of Edo. It is recorded that the use of gunpowder attracted the audience's interests; the battle scene of *Okige no kumo harau asagochi* at Shintomi-za in 1878 depicted the Satsuma Rebellion, a civil war that broke out the previous year: "The scene with a hail of bullets looked realistic, and the use of Western-style fireworks at the scene of death and falling from a horse in battle surprised the audiences because such fireworks were rare at that time" (Tamura 1976 [1922]: 206).

During the First Sino–Japanese War and the Russo–Japanese War, plays depicted the battles between warships. Act IV of *Nippon daishôri* of Harukiza in September 1894, which was performed during the Sino–Japanese War, showed Qing (China) warships being sunk by the Japanese navy and soldiers

jumping off into the sea, performed as follows: "The cannons roar and shoot from the warships of Japan. They hit on the [warship] Kôraku, and the Kôraku breaks off and gradually sinks. The smoke fireworks burn and Qing soldiers cry, wander, and finally jump into the wave cloths."[6] There was also the scene of a naval battle in *Aizu-san Meiji no kumijû*, which was staged at the Meiji-za theatre in October. The script says,

> Their lines stop, and they hit a beat. Then, the center of the Qing warship is broken by the gimmick, fireworks sound, a fire breaks out from inside the warship, the fire rises here and there in black smoke, and the ship gradually sinks. The rifles sound often, the ship sinks into the sea, and there is left only its mast. The sound of wind is strong, and the Qing flag is cut, flies by the strings, turns round and round, and is drawn up to the upper stage; meanwhile, the mast gradually goes into the sea. (Kawatake 1929: 687-8)

As seen above, the production, including its mechanisms, is described in detail.

Also, in the Russo–Japanese War from 1904 to 1905, the sinking of the Russian fleet was set as a stage. Engeki-za's *Ryojun-kô heisoku* depicts the Port Arthur Blockade Operation, in which Lieutenant Colonel HIROSE Takeo famously died. The following description of the scene is interesting:

> In the last piece, *Ryojun-kô heisoku*, the gimmick is used to show the sinking of the Normanton in Shintomi-za last year. When the hull sinks underwater, an officer on the mast, commanding, takes down the boat, jumps on it, and rows offshore. Meanwhile, the officer is represented by a child actor and then by a puppet [the officer looks smaller and smaller, and the impression that the boat is receding into the distance is created], and the scene moves naturally. The gimmick is like a movie.[7]

The direction of the *Normanton* sinking in Shintomi-za was diverted to the sinking of the Russian warship. When they depicted the officers who fled to sea by boat and went offshore by emphasizing perspective using child actors and dolls, "wave-fences," as seen on the stage set of *Ichibannori meiki-no sashimono,* must have been used. Indeed, disasters and wars are two sides of the same coin in terms of stage direction and technology.

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6 Kabuki shimpô, no. 1605, September 1894.

7 Miyako Shimbun, June 6, 1904.

Finally, I would like to consider the factors surrounding the popularity of such productions during the late Tokugawa period and the Meiji era. There is no doubt that a desire for realistic expression through Kabuki existed during this period, or in the art of the same period, including paintings. However, this may be thoroughly discussed in future studies. What I would like to simply point out, as a technical or theater history issue, is that the Kabuki stage expanded during this period. In the early 19th century, from 1804 to 1818, Nakamura-za, the most prestigious Kabuki playhouse in Edo, had a frontage of about 20 m—not the size of a theater but that of a stage. The oldest surviving Kabuki theater, Kanamaru-za, is said to have been constructed in 1835 to imitate the size and structure of the Ônishi theater in Dôtonbori, Osaka. The width of the hut itself is about 23.6 m, and that of the stage is about 10.9 m. On the other hand, the stage in Shintomi-za, which was opened in 1878, is about 14.5 m. In Kabuki-za, which opened in 1889, the stage expands to about 27.3 m. Large-scale theaters required spectacles that attracted the attention of many spectators, and the expansion of stage space allowed for such large-scale productions.

The end of the Tokugawa period and the Meiji era was a major turning point in the history of Kabuki theater as well as that of direction.

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