Shin Kabuki

Literally “new kabuki,” a modern outgrowth of traditional kabuki and one of the fruits of Japan’s modernist theatre movement.

The term was first coined by Kasuyama Masao and later defined by Kagayama Naozō as plays written in kabuki format but with Western ideas incorporated and with literary merit. As used today, it refers to works written since the late Meiji Period (1868-1912) by intellectuals unattached to the kabuki establishment. These works were staged with kabuki’s apparatus but without such traditional kabuki acting and staging conventions as climactic poses (mie), stylized makeup, and quick role-change (hayagawari). With these plays, kabuki came to be divided into “classical” (koten) and “new” (shin) categories.

Following the Meiji Restoration, government leaders returning from trips to the West sought potential counterpart of Western drama in Japan, as part of Japanese high culture worthy of entertaining the upper classes and foreign dignitaries. This desire of Meiji leaders coincided with the indigenous modernist efforts to reform this traditional performing art to suit the times. This led to the appearance of zangiri-mono and katsureki-mono. However, after the death in 1893 of Kawakate Mokuami, who had provided most of the scripts for such reformative efforts, there was no playwright of comparable caliber to support kabuki reform. This gap, coupled with the growing influence of Western theatre and the era’s great social changes, facilitated a transition away from the old practice—scripts were exclusively by playwrights attached to a company—and the appearance of intellectual playwrights unrelated to kabuki.

Tsubouchi Shōyō’s *Kiri Hitoha* (A Paulownia Leaf), published in 1894 but not staged until 1904 due to conservative objections, is considered the first shin kabuki play. The positive response to its premier inspired others outside the establishment to try their hands at this new genre, including Fukuchi Ōchi (1841-1906), Mori Ōgai (1862-1922), Matsui Shōyō (1870-1933), Yamazaki Shikō (1875-1939), Oka Onitarō (1872-1943), Okamoto Kidō(1872-1939), Osanai Kaoru (1880-1928) and Nagai Kafū (1879-1959). Plays by these playwrights brought to kabuki a psychological dimension.

Shin kabuki’s wide acceptance owed much to Ichikawa Sadanji II (1880-1940), Japan's most popular actor in 1910s-1930s and an enthusiastic theatre reformer who sought to produce plays reflective of notions like psychological egotism, art for art’s sake, and love for love’s sake. Best known shin kabuki include Yamazaki’s *A Tale of Kabuki* (Kabuki Monogatari, 1908) and Okamoto’s *Shūzenji Monogatari* (Tale of Shuzenji, 1909). Soon, all the major kabuki stars began to act in this genre.  New playwrights also appeared, many famous novelists, including Yamamoto Yūzō, Kikuchi Kan, Tanizaki Jun’ichirō, Mayama Seika, Ikeda Daigo and Uno Nobuo.  After the war, playwrights were encouraged by the Occupation authorities to counteract the feudalism of classical kabuki, leading to a tendency to dramatize novels. Although classified as shin kabuki, these works differ from earlier ones in style. Innovative kabuki pieces continued to be written after the Occupation, as with Mishima Yukio’s *Iwashi Uri no Koi no Hikiami* (The Sardine Seller's Net of Love, 1954), but such pieces are often called “newly created kabuki” (shinsaku kabuki). A post-1994 innovation is Cocoon Kabuki (Kokūn Kabuki), started by Nakamura Kanzaburō (1955-2012). Named after Tokyo’s Theatre Cocoon (Shiatā Kokūn), this company renders classical pieces, such as *Yotsuya Kaidan* (The Ghost Stories of Yotsuya) and *Sakura-hime Azuma Bunshō* (*The Scarlet Princess of Edo*), with a modern sensitivity.

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