

THE ACTORS' ANALECTS (YAKUSA RONGO)

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Edited, Translated and with an Introduction and Notes by
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Excerpts from The Actor's Analects;
Chapter on omnagata acting

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The Actor's Analects

omnagata made a success of a *keisei* role, all others were easy to perform. The reason for this is that, since he is basically a man, he possesses, by his nature, a faculty of strong action, and he must carefully bear in mind the softness of the *keisei* and her feminine charm. Thus, the greatest attention should be paid to the training for *keisei* roles.

COMMENT: At this time kabuki was not portraying respectable merchant's wives and maidens, and the most feminine of the *omnagata* roles was the *keisei*. Others, such as the warrior's wife and elderly woman, although feminine, were less distant from the male characteristics.

C. The Words of Ayame

Set down by
FUKUOKA YAGOSHIRO

INTRODUCTION

The Great Yoshizawa was the most highly skilled *omnagata* of the past and present, so I have enquired and set down what he told various people on the subject of *omnagata* acting, and also what I heard from him myself. I have written this down and have named the thirty items¹ which this comprises *The Words of Ayame*. They should be taken as a guide to the art, kept strictly secret and not divulged to a soul. The items now follow.

COMMENT: The secret tradition, the confidential information passed on only to chosen pupils, or those who have qualified in some way, formed, and to some extent still forms, a great part of the instruction in Japanese artistic pursuits. It is, of course, not restricted to Japan, but also had its place in medieval Europe.

NOTE: 1. This total includes the introduction.

ITEM I

A certain *omnagata* asked the Great Yoshizawa how best to prepare oneself for the profession. His reply was that if an

ITEM III
One of Yoshizawa's utterances was that in *omnagata* playing, her outward appearance should be coquettish, but her heart chaste. And to make a *samurai's* wife unfeminine just because she is a *samurai's* wife is bad acting. When one is playing the role of a strong-minded woman, one must see that her heart has some softness.

ITEM IV
Jūjirō said that women keep their right knee upright when half-kneeling,¹ and men their left, and that it is the same when they start walking.² This is what he taught his pupils, but the Great Yoshizawa told him on one occasion when they were alone that although this was in fact the case, it depended upon the look of the thing, and one should not raise the knee that is on the side of the audience. If one went only by consistency, it would not be *kabuki*. It is probably good, after all, to make a mixture of half realism and half imagination. After that Jūjirō too considered the look of the thing.

COMMENT: There is a tendency even today in kabuki circles to attach a great deal of importance to apparently meaningless consistency, and to criticize those who depart from it merely because they do so, without consideration of artistic effect. It is refreshing to find Ayame attacking this narrow view, and telling Jūjirō, in private, of course, so as not to embarrass him before others, to consider the general look of the thing.

NOTE: 1. I.e., with one leg in the kneeling position, and the other with the part from the knee to the foot upright. 2. Women moved their right foot first when starting to walk, and men their left.



The *onnagata* role has its basis in charm, and even one who has innate beauty, if he seeks to make a fine show in a fighting scene, will lose the femininity of his performance. Or again, if he cries deliberately to make his interpretation elegant, it will not be pleasing. For these reasons, if he does not live his normal life as if he was a woman, it will not be possible for him to be called a skillful *onnagata*. The more an actor is persuaded that it is the time when he appears on the stage that is the most important in his career as an *onnagata*, the more masculine he will be. It is better for him to consider his everyday life as the most important. The Master was very often heard to say this.

ITEM X

For one who is an *onnagata* to say that he might just as well become a *tachiyaku* is to pile shame upon shame. One who says that he might just as well change from an *onnagata* to a *tachiyaku* cannot help being a bad *onnagata*. One who changes to *tachiyaku* parts and does badly at them should do well when acting as an *onnagata*. This is what Ayame always said, and indeed when he became a *tachiyaku*,¹ he was in fact no good. I have come to the

ITEM XI

If one who is an *onnagata* gets the idea that if he does not do so well in his chosen career he can change to a *tachiyaku*, this is an immediate indication that his art has turned to dust. A real woman must accept the fact that she cannot become a man. Can you imagine a real woman being able to turn into a man because she is unable to endure her present state? "If an *onnagata* thinks in that way," he used to say, "he is ignorant of a woman's feelings." How right the Master was!

ITEM XII

There is an *onnagata* role of the wife of a senior official who appears before her lord and delivers a judgment in place of her husband. At all costs, this should be played without making her too strong a figure. To do so would be like an actor in the role of a male senior official wearing a woman's cap.¹ This does not mean that just because she is the wife of an elder official she should be completely at ease before a number of people engaged

in discussion. She might be so tensed up by this that her whole body is shaking, but if an enemy should come and hurl terrible insults at her, then she should stiffen herself and react. When it comes to situations of this sort, a woman has more that she wants to say than a man. However, in this case, he used to say, the play should be in a somewhat less natural style.

ITEM XIII

The *onnagata* should make it a principle not to depart from

the conduct of a virtuous woman. In this respect he should be willing to accept the standards of a real woman. However popular a play might promise to be, he should refuse to take part in it.¹ This is the most important sort of occasion when an *onnagata* might criticize his part. This was part of Ayame's advice to his young actors.

COMMENT: This can be taken as another example of the sentiment expressed in Item IX, but at the same time it introduces a new element into the relation between conduct on and off the stage, already touched on in Item VIII. Now, not only must the *onnagata* live his life by feminine standards, but also he must carry his impersonation of a modest woman onto the stage. It should be noted that virtue is perfectly reconcilable with the status of *keisei*. In the first place, the virtuous *keisei* did not usually choose her profession, or if she did, it was not because she liked it, but for some reason of loyalty, to save a father or husband from poverty or worse; then, she pursued her profession according to rules of loyalty and decency. There was all the difference in the world between a *keisei* and an adulterous wife. All the same, Ayame's insistence that the *onnagata* should only accept virtuous roles forms a contrast with the professionalism of an actor in the Western theater, in which the consideration might rather be whether a role was dramatically satisfying.

NOTE: 1. I.e., if the new role might in some way be incompatible with the conduct of a virtuous woman.

ITEM XX

“Once, when I called to see Nizaemon, Sampachi¹ turned to me and said ‘I don’t know how you will take my saying this, but I think that it would be a good thing if you were to go to Shimmachi² and see what the *teashop*³ are like. Their style has changed considerably in the last five years and the way you play them is as they were five years ago. It is true that their ways are nowadays considerably inferior to what they were formerly, but the audiences are all seeing them as they are today and I hear that there is a lot of talk among them about whether the way you play them is as they actually are or not.’ In reply to this I said ‘I am very glad to have your comments, but I think that it is good for a *teashop* to be a person of superior elegance. If there has occurred so great a change within the mere space of five years, then they must have been of surpassing elegance twenty years ago. I am really grateful for your excellent advice. I should like to go further back than five years and portray them as they were twenty years ago. It is good that *keisei* should be of the old style and somewhat fantastic. Teashop girls and bath girls should be played as over-modern. This is the only way to understand these roles.’ When I said this, Nizaemon said that he liked my use of the term ‘over-modern’ for teashop and bath girls.” Ayame gave me the above account of this conversation.

COMMENT: This slightly peevish Item shows that Sampachi knew his man when he apologized before giving Ayame advice. It also shows that Ayame was not interested in portraying *keisei* as they were, but as an ideal type. Teashop bath girls were of low reputation, adding to their profession that of unorganized prostitute. These Ayame did not idealize, but suggested that they be portrayed naturalistically.

NOTES: 1. See Azuma Sampachi. 2. A brothel district in Osaka, established c. 1630. 3. *teashop* 茶坊, the top rank of organized prostitute, of which there were thirty in Shimmachi in 1702, the greatest number in the “Three Cities.”

ITEM XXVII

The *onnagata* should continue to have the feelings of an *onnagata* even when in the dressing room. When taking refreshment, too, he should turn away so that people cannot see him. To be alongside a *tachiyaku* playing the lover’s part, and chew away at one’s food without charm and then go straight out on the stage and play a love scene with the same man, will lead to failure on both sides, for the *tachiyaku*’s heart will not in reality be ready to fall in love.

COMMENT: Once again the theme is that the *onnagata* should play his role offstage as well as on. There is also the hint that the *tachiyaku* cannot be expected to act the lover really successfully unless the *onnagata* is capable of inspiring him with love at all times.

ITEM XXVIII

“Should an *onnagata* be concealing the fact that he is married, and people talk about his wife, he should feel like blushing, otherwise he should not be performing *onnagata* roles, and will not make his way in the profession. An actor who, regardless of the number of children he has, still keeps a child’s heart is a born genius,” said Ayame.

COMMENT: There is an apparent contradiction between this Item and the preceding one, but it is probably only a matter of degree. Ayame seems to be accepting what must often have happened, namely that *onnagata* married and begot children. They should, however, keep this side of their life away from the theater, and he thinks that a father, with all the experience of life that this state implies, who still portrays a naive female with conviction, is indeed an acting genius.