

Traditional Japanese Theater

An Anthology of Plays

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Elements of Performance

Interaction between the puppet and kabuki theaters is almost as old as the genres themselves. Both evolved in the seventeenth century, struggled to cope with strict government regulations and financial and social restraints, and competed for the same urban audiences. This rivalry led to extensive borrowing: as each genre produced new texts and invented new techniques, the other adapted them to suit its own needs. For example, kabuki, whose initial subject matter was daily life in the pleasure quarters, staged a love suicide (*shinju mono*) between a courtesan and her patron in 1683. The topic immediately became popular in kabuki, and Chikamatsu Monzaemon adapted it to his puppet plays, creating masterpieces such as *Love Suicides at Sonesaki* and *Love Suicides at Ten no Amijima*, which were then revised for the kabuki stage. Rivalry with kabuki probably spurred on the puppet theater to develop elaborate, three-man puppets capable of enacting more lifelike movements. In turn, the kabuki actors copied some of the dolls' movements when they adapted puppet plays and music (*gidayū*). As a result of centuries of such interaction, the two theaters—one starring puppets, the other humans—share a large number of texts, performance practices, and music.

Since the last of its rivals closed in 1914, the Bunraku Troupe of Osaka has been the major professional group of puppeteers in Japan, and the term *bunraku* has become synonymous with puppet theater. Other troupes and traditions, however, are also active. In 1987 the Hyōgo prefectural government built a new puppet theater on the southern tip of the island of Awaji, located south of Osaka Bay in the Inland Sea, which now supports a professional troupe that performs chiefly for tourists. Scores of small semiprofessional or amateur groups—some deriving from the Awaji–Bunraku tradition, and others quite independent—are active elsewhere in Japan.

The Bunraku Troupe, housed since 1984 in the National Bunraku Theater (Kokusai bunraku gekijō) in Osaka, consists of approximately thirty chanters, twenty shamisen players, and forty puppeteers, plus backstage musicians, costumers, and



FIGURE 3.1. A three-man puppet dressed for the character of Michizane in the play *Sugawara and the Secrets of Calligraphy*. His *karaginu* robe is closed with a *koshi obi*, with its broad ends hanging down. The male puppets have feet, whereas most female puppets are legless; the puppeteer manipulates the bottom of the skirt to indicate leg movements. This puppet head (*kōmei*) has movable eyes and is used for noble characters. (Photos by Aoki Shinji.)

other professionals. Each year it presents five runs of fifteen to twenty days each in Osaka (in January, April, July, August, and October), four fifteen-day runs at the National Theater in Tokyo (February, May, September, and December), annual performances in Kyoto and Yokohama, and as many as sixty performances on the road in Japan. In addition, every few years the troupe makes a foreign tour.¹

Although father-to-son transmission has always been less common in the puppet theater than in the other traditional performing arts, many performers are still trained in the traditional manner, studying from childhood to become puppeteers, shamisen players, or chanters. Others, however, enter the profession in their late teens or early twenties through a two-year training course established in 1972 by the Bunraku Association, a group founded with government support in 1963 to preserve the art form. By May 1997, this course had produced thirty-six performers: six chanters, ten shamisen players, and twenty puppeteers.² When a performer becomes a professional, he takes one of the eight traditional family names (two for chanters and three each for shamisen players and puppeteers) and is given a stage name, which may change during the course of his career.

1. For a detailed and moving description of the troupe and its work, see Adachi 1985.

2. Figures provided by the National Bunraku Theater.

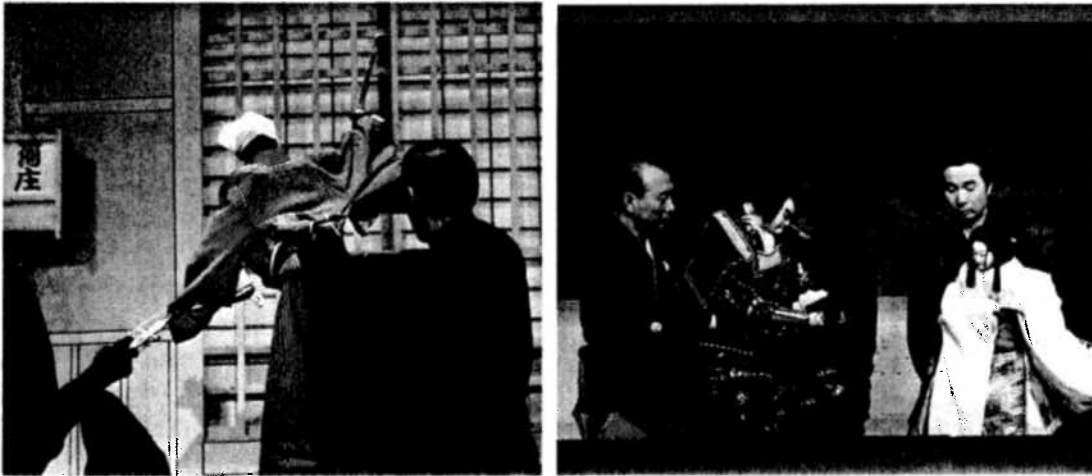


FIGURE 3.2. Manipulation of a three-man puppet. The head puppeteer (unhooded) uses his left hand to control the doll's head and his right for its right arm. The second puppeteer holds a long toggle-pole in his own right hand to move the doll's left hand, and he manipulates props with his left hand. In the photograph on the right, the "prop" is a head. The third man manipulates the feet. In the photograph on the left the puppeteers spread out to give the audience a view of the doll. Only the cap of the third puppeteer is visible. (Left: photo by Barbara C. Adachi; right: photo by Aoki Shinji.)

The puppeteers train individually rather than as a team. Each operator first learns to manipulate the doll's feet, an art that traditionally required ten years to master, and then to manipulate the left hand. Finally, after long years of experience, he earns the position of head puppeteer and begins to specialize in either male or female puppets. In his first appearances as head puppeteer, a more experienced operator may support him by serving as the left-arm operator. During any performance, the head puppeteer may work with more than one set of assistants, with the more experienced performers, of course, assigned the major roles.

Bunraku puppets range from two and one-half to almost five feet tall, weigh from eight to fifty pounds, and may have movable mouths, eyes, eyebrows, wrists, or fingers (figure 3.1). Three operators (*ningyō zukai*) are required to manipulate each major puppet. The head puppeteer inserts his left arm into the doll's trunk to control the head and uses his right hand to maneuver the puppet's right arm. He controls the movable joints with toggles. With his right hand, the second operator manipulates a fifteen-inch-long wooden rod with cords attached to the puppet's left arm. The third, junior manipulator works the puppet's feet or, in the case of most female dolls, the hem of the kimono, to simulate leg movements. He also stamps his own feet for sound effects. The second operator uses his left hand to manage the hand props, generally handed to him by a stage attendant (figure 3.2). The puppeteers generally insert their own hands through the doll's sleeves to grasp and maneuver these props (see figure 3.21). One-man puppets (*tsume*) are used for minor roles such as the Chinese soldiers in *Coxinga* (see figure 3.14) and the fox in the *Yoshitsune* travel scene (see figure 3.34).

The main puppeteer usually wears a formal kimono and hakama, although for certain scenes, such as the Hirado Beach scene in *Coxinga* (see figure 3.7), he dress-

es like the two other operators, entirely in black with a hood covering his head and face. The various families of puppeteers wear differently shaped hoods: the Kiritake puppeteers wear flat-topped hoods, and the Yoshida and Toyomatsu wear pointed ones. High wooden clogs wrapped in straw give the main operator the height to manipulate the puppet's head and also enable him to move quietly; the other puppeteers wear flat straw sandals.

The puppet for a specific character is assembled out of reusable parts: a frame for the trunk, a head, hands, feet, and an elaborate costume. The parts are highly specialized; for example, there are nine major types of hands, with another twenty-four available for special needs. The hands range from those in which fingers, knuckles, and the wrist can move independently to those with only wrist movement. Forty types of heads are in general use, plus thirty special ones. The National Bunraku Theater owns more than three hundred individual heads, and some puppeteers have smaller collections. The heads are broadly categorized by sex, age, and nature (such as good, evil, and comic) and may be used for various characters. The Young Woman's head (*musume*) with immobile features, for example, is used for Okaru in *Chūshingura*, Shizuka in *Yoshitsune*, and the Kannon in *Tsubosaka*. The Genta head (named after a young but accomplished warrior), which usually has moving eyes and eyebrows, is used for Kampei in *Chūshingura*, Tadanobu in *Yoshitsune*, and, in a special variation with smallpox scars on it, for Sawaichi in *Tsubosaka*. The most important male head in bunraku, called Bunshichi after a character in *Otokodate itsutsu karigane* (1745), expresses courage and a powerful, secret grief. This head is used for Matsuōmaru in *Sugawara* and Kumagai in *Ichinotani*. A version in which the mouth as well as the eyeballs and eyebrows move is used for the evil Prime Minister Shihei in *Sugawara*. The effect of the heads varies considerably with the type of wig and other headgear worn with them.

Specialists in heads, wigs, costumes, and props (which include headgear and footgear) create and maintain the puppets' parts; specific puppets, however, are assembled by the puppeteers themselves. Once the head has been selected, the wig master creates the appropriate hairdo. The costume director and seamstress prepare a costume, made primarily of silk, but sometimes cotton, velvet, and brocade. Each puppeteer has his own set of puppet frames of different sizes and shapes to suit the various characters and the manipulator's personal preferences. He carefully sews the costume pieces, given to him by the costume director, around this framework to create the gentle curves of a courtesan or the larger bulk of a warrior. He then attaches the arms and head and gives the doll to the junior operator, who attaches the legs and sews on leggings or split-toe socks. The propman provides the footgear and headgear, and the puppet is ready to go onstage.

As is true in *noh* and *kyōgen*, the puppet theater employs a fixed number of movement patterns. The forty-odd basic patterns are of two types. *Furi* evoke human movements such as sitting, running, crying, panting, or smoking; and *kata* are poses that accent the beauty of a woman's kimono (for example, the *ushiro-buri* in figure 1.9) or reveal a man's intense emotion. Some of these movements were created for the puppets and subsequently were adopted by kabuki actors,

whereas others are based on *noh* and *kyōgen* movements or were adapted from *kabuki*.

In addition to the puppeteers, chanters (*tayū*) and shamisen players (*shamisen hiki*) assist in bringing the puppets to life. For most scenes, one chanter and one shamisen player sit on an auxiliary stage that projects into the auditorium at stage left (see figure 1.15). Generally, a pair plays for a single scene in a period piece and an act in a domestic piece, both of which last from a few minutes to nearly two hours. The center of the auxiliary stage then revolves, and another pair takes over. A chanter changes his voice to produce each major role and attempts to express the essence of character in a stylized manner that both mimes and exaggerates natural speech. The words of the characters are usually produced in speechlike patterns (*kotoba*) and descriptive passages are sung (*ji*), but a intermediate mode of recitation (*iro*) also exists, and the transitions between dialogue and narrative are far from clear-cut. The chanter's face is highly expressive, and his delivery is often exaggerated, especially in long crescendos of sobbing or laughter. Certain scenes, for example, the travel scene in *Yoshitsune*, use several chanters and shamisen players. Multiple chanters may narrate in unison or divide the script by roles (*kakeai*). The latter practice, which gives each of the major characters a unique voice and a more distinct personality, may well have been inspired by *kabuki*.

The *gidayū shamisen* (or *samisen*) used in the puppet theater is the largest of three common types of this instrument. Its three strings are made of braided silk and are plucked with a large ivory plectrum to produce strong, incisive sounds. The music consists mostly of set phrases, with chords and single notes commenting on the recited passages, and more sustained, melodic passages accompanying the songs and dances and serving as preludes to the acts or as transitions between movements or narrative sections. The shamisen music establishes the mood or atmosphere, underlines and decorates the narrator's expressions, and regulates and accents the puppets' movements. In addition, the shamisen player produces various vocalizations to direct the tempo of the entire production and to increase or ease the dramatic tension. The partnership between a shamisen player and a chanter is intimate and usually long-lasting. After years of playing together, each can immediately sense the other's mood. The older member of the pair serves as mentor to the younger, who in turn later takes on a younger partner to guide.

Another group of performers are the "offstage" musicians who perform in the small music room (*geza*) at stage right over that exit. A bamboo blind conceals the musicians from the audience but enables them to see the stage. The room contains a variety of drums, flutes, whistles, gongs, bells, various stringed instruments, and three or four musicians, who sometimes add their own voices to the sounds of their instruments. These performers create sound effects as required by the text: pitched battles and raging storms, the gentle patter of rain or the gurgle of a creek, the cries of birds, insects, and babies. More important than accurate imitation is the creation of the proper mood for a scene. The deep tolling of a temple bell, for example, is often used to indicate the loneliness of a quiet evening. Much of the activity in the music room occurs at the beginning of an act, just before the curtain opens; then, for long sections of dialogue, the room may be deserted.

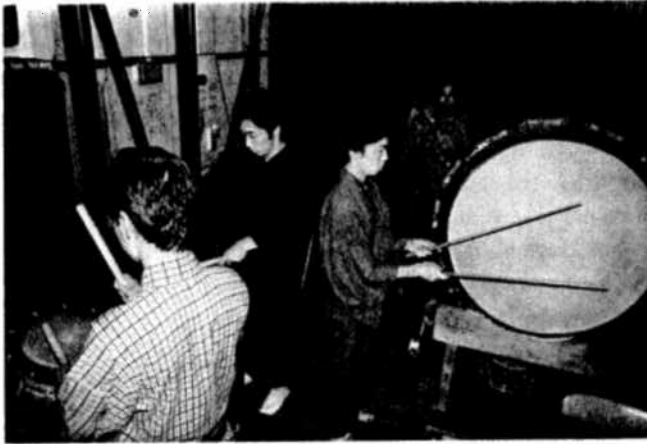


FIGURE 3.3. Kabuki instrumentalists (*narimono*) playing in the music room (*geza*). A stick drum (*taiko*, at left) and a flute are also used in *noh*; the large drum (*ōdaiko*, at right) is unique to kabuki. (Photo by Aoki Shinji.)

The music room plays a more important role in kabuki than in the puppet theater. In the kabuki theater, it is at stage level and contains two types of musicians: the general instrumentalists (*narimono-shi* or *hayashi-kata*), who play percussion and wind instruments adapted from *noh*, religious, and folk music, and the *nagauta* performers, shamisen players, and chanters. *Nagauta* music, played on the smallest shamisen, is the music most closely associated with kabuki. Another typical kabuki instrument is the large drum (*ōdaiko*), which beats out a dozen or more atmospheric patterns, including the sound of wind, water, rain, waterfalls, waves, and snow, as well as special

patterns for the entrance of ghosts, villains, and other character types (figure 3.3). In general, *geza* music (*geza ongaku*), which is used in all kabuki plays, creates atmosphere, defines character, accompanies dances, produces sound effects, and heightens tension. In many “pure” kabuki plays, such as *Yotsuya Ghost Stories* and *Benten the Thief*, all the music is produced in the music room, except for that of the sounds of the wooden clappers (described later).

Dance plays use large, onstage orchestras, called *debayashi* when the music is in the *nagauta* style and *degatari* when other styles are employed. In *The Maiden at Dōjōji*, for example, as many as ten *nagauta* shamisen players, ten chanters, and eight *noh*-style flutists and drummers sit on a two-tiered platform along the back of the stage, with the shamisen players (stage right) and the chanters (stage left) seated on the upper level and the drummers and flutists below. The color of the stand and the patterns in the players’ costumes match the backdrop (see figure 3.94). The same type of platform may also be placed at either stage right or stage left or be divided in two, with half the musicians on either side, and the music played may be in other styles such as *Kiyomoto* or *Tokiwazu*, both of which employ medium-size shamisens.

Plays derived from the puppet theater also use *Gidayū* music (*gidayū-bushi*, also known as *Takemoto* music, both names being from the famous chanter Takemoto *Gidayū*). The *gidayū* shamisen and chanters (jointly called *chobo* in kabuki) are usually seated at stage left, either on a raised platform on the stage or in a second-story room. Depending on their importance to the scene, they may be revealed to the audience or be hidden from view by a bamboo screen. Sometimes the chanter sings an entire passage while the actor mimes (as in *The Maiden at Dōjōji*). At other times the chanter recites only the descriptive passages, and the actors speak the words attributed to their characters (such as in *Suma Bay*). The *nagauta* shamisen in the music room may alternate phrases with the *gidayū* shamisen. Another musical style used for the selections in this anthology is *ōzatsuma* music. In *Saint Narukami* an *ōzatsuma* en-

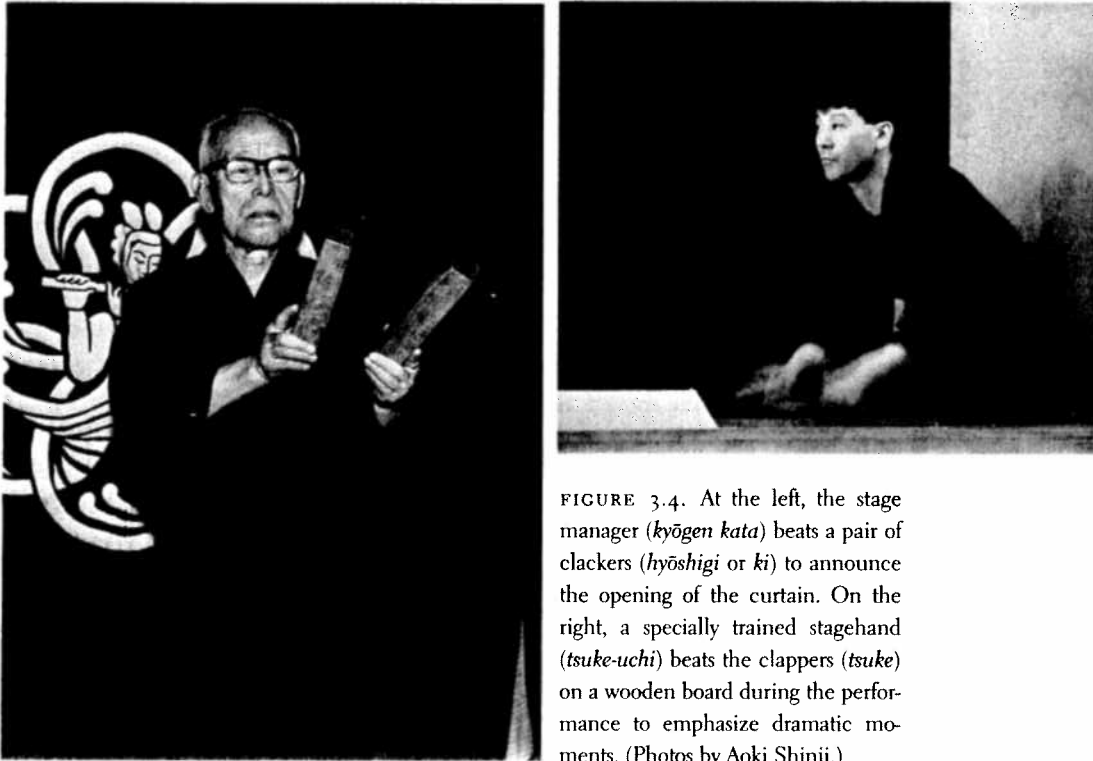


FIGURE 3.4. At the left, the stage manager (*kyōgen kata*) beats a pair of clackers (*hyōshigi* or *ki*) to announce the opening of the curtain. On the right, a specially trained stagehand (*tsuke-uchi*) beats the clappers (*tsuke*) on a wooden board during the performance to emphasize dramatic moments. (Photos by Aoki Shinji.)

semble is seated on a dais located at downstage left (see figure 1.34). They are hidden by a curtain that is removed when they play and then replaced.

Two types of wooden clappers play important roles in both kabuki and the puppet theater. The clackers (*ki* or *hyōshigi*) are two rectangular hardwood blocks that are clacked together to signal the opening and closing of the main curtain and to give cues for pending actions to the crew and cast. *Tsuke* is the art of striking two shorter wooden rectangles or clappers on a flat board placed on the floor at stage left. The beating of these clappers emphasizes entrances, exits, running, striking, falling, or fighting, and they also intensify the movements of actors during poses (*mie*). The clackers' (*ki*) function is technical, whereas the clappers' (*tsuke*) is dramatic.³ Although the sounds from both sets of clappers add to the total aural effects of the performance, the players are not "musicians" but stagehands. The *ki* is played by the *kyōgen kata*, who is a general stage manager, and the *tsuke* is the responsibility of a trained stagehand called a *tsuke-uchi*. Both are clad in black (*kurogo*) and are visible to the audience at front stage left (figure 3.4).

Important as the music and stage effects are, in kabuki the actor is central. In puppet drama, the puppeteers and musicians work together to convey the text, whereas in kabuki, the musicians, stage effects, and even the text serve to highlight the actor and his art. More than three hundred professional kabuki actors are currently active, performing most often at the two major theaters in Tokyo: the Kabukiza and the

3. For a description of the patterns used by both instruments, see Brandon 1975:351–356.

National Theater (Kokuritsu gekijō). These theaters produce a new program each month in a run of twenty-four or twenty-five days. Other theaters in Tokyo, Osaka, and Kyoto stage fewer performances, and groups of kabuki players also present shows abroad. The actors are divided into two broad groups: those of the first rank (*nadai*), whose names appear prominently in programs and on billboards, and the others (*nadaishita*), whose names are simply listed in the program. Although there are now biennial exams for entrance into the upper level, it is, in practice, difficult to attain that status unless one is born or adopted into a prominent kabuki family.

Traditionally, kabuki actors have specialized in specific roles (*yakugara*), and only a few actors have been able to move successfully beyond their specialization. Early women's and young men's kabuki divided the roles in the same way as noh does into the shite, waki, and tsure parts. But once these two groups were banned from the stage, adult actors began to specialize in either male (*tachiyaku*) or female roles (*onnagata*). In the Edo period, the latter sometimes even lived as women in their daily life. The number of roles gradually increased, with divisions based on age, the nature of the character, and acting—style as well as gender. Classifications included the bravura-style player (*aragoto-shi*), the power-seeking villain (*jitsuaku*), the soft and somewhat effeminate lead (*pintokona*), the high-ranking courtesan (*tayū*), and the evil woman (*akuba*). The institutionalization of roles encouraged the codification of makeup, wig, costume, and performance styles and influenced the composition of plays. By the late Edo period, however, this extreme specialization began to disappear, and today actors may still specialize in women's roles, for example, but they are more likely to play a variety of roles. Plays such as *Yotsuya Ghost Stories*, in which one person plays several roles, provide actors with unusual opportunities to demonstrate their versatility.

Onstage there are several ways in which an actor can “advertise” himself as an actor. In some cases, actors refer to themselves or to the play in which they are appearing. In *Saint Narukami*, for example, the young priests exclaim how great the play is, and Saint Narukami mentions his name as an actor when he is flirting with Taema. The same type of exchange occurs in *Hamamatsu-ya*. Visually, actors may identify themselves by putting their family crest in the design on their costumes, a lantern, an umbrella, or some other prop. The chrysanthemum design in Benten's kimono (in *Hamamatsu-ya*), for example, identifies the role with the Kikugoro (*kiku* means chrysanthemum) lineage (see figure 3.88). Towels with the actor's crest on them are distributed to the audience in the dance play *The Maiden at Dōjōji*. The audience responds to the actor as a star by shouting his “shop name” (*yagō*) at appropriate times during the performance. Shop names first appeared in the early Edo period when actors, whose status was too low to permit the use of surnames, adapted a name derived from the businesses in which they participated as sidelines or from places connected with their family. Some forty shop names have been handed down and are currently used by one to a dozen or more actors. The most common names are Otowaya for members of the Onoe and Bandō families, Narikomaya used by some Nakamuras, and Matsushimaya used by some Kataokas.

At prescribed times and on certain formal occasions, the performers address the audience directly. During puppet performances, for example, a black-clad figure announces the names of the chanter, shamisen player, and head puppeteers each time

there is a change of players. In kabuki, formal announcements are made when a performance serves as a memorial service for a deceased actor or when an actor is making his first stage appearance, has been promoted to the first rank (*nadai*), or is receiving a new name. In the last case, a rather elaborate ceremony (*shūmei hiro*) may be held, with all the actors in the performance appearing onstage in formal attire as the newly named actor, costumed in a role related to the name he is assuming, addresses the audience. A successful actor uses a variety of names in the course of his career. He takes his first stage name when he debuts; then as his proficiency develops, he may succeed to names held by his father, elder brother, or master. One of the great modern *onnagata*, Nakamura Utaemon VI, for example, was born in 1917 as the second son of Utaemon V. He made his debut as Nakamura Kotarō III in 1922 and became Nakamura Fukusuke VI in 1933, Shikan VI in 1941, and Utaemon VI in 1951. Utaemon is the family's highest-ranking name.

Kabuki actors appear onstage elaborately costumed and heavily made up (figure 3.5). The usual makeup for all types of characters, from the beautiful Shizuka in *Yoshitsune* to the thieves in *Benten the Thief*, is a dead white, the color that showed up most effectively before electric lighting. Darker makeup is used for peasant types or for contrast. In the kabuki version of *Shunkan*, for example, Yasuyori, who is more gentle and of higher status than his fellow exiles, wears whiter makeup. (The same distinction is made in the *noh* version of this play through costuming and in the puppet theater version by using different types of heads.) The most dramatic makeup in kabuki is that used for bold-style acting (*aragoto*). In this highly stylized and elaborately codified style (*kumadori*), the veins, sinews, and muscles of the face (and sometimes other parts of the body) are outlined in red, black, or blue. The patterns vary with the nature of the character (compare figures 1.32 and 3.13). If the nature of a single character changes in the course of a play, the actor's makeup is redone: the actor playing Saint Narukami changes his makeup as he transforms



FIGURE 3.5. The kabuki actor Ichikawa Danjūrō IV is costumed as a *yamabushi* for the role of Benkei in *Kanjinchō*. A pair of light-colored *ōkuchi* are tied over a plaid *noshime*. This is covered by a *mizugoromo* with the shoulders stitched together to shorten the sleeves and overlaid with a *sasake* with pompoms. The actor in the *kamishimo* will be an onstage attendant (*kōken*) during the performance. His costume bears the crest (*mon*) of the Ichikawa Danjūrō line because *Kanjinchō* belongs to that family's famous collection of plays the *Kabuki jūhachiban*. (Photos by Aoki Shinji.)



FIGURE 3.6. The actor Nakamura Tomijūrō V redoes his makeup to aragoto style as he changes character from Saint Narukami to the thunder god. A white cap covers the actor's natural hairline. For before and after pictures, see figure 1.32. (Photo by Aoki Shinji.)

from a saint to an avenging thunder god (figure 3.6). But no matter what type of makeup they wear, the actors, especially those in secondary roles, keep their faces expressionless and remain motionless most of the time they are onstage. Consequently, an actor performs before a frieze of statuelike figures, and any change of expression is highly magnified.

The actors maintain a space around themselves that is seldom violated by other actors. Physical contact is rare, the breast-rubbing scene in *Saint Narukami* being an exception. Usually a brief reaching out to touch hands is a sufficient expression of physical attraction. Actors often speak important lines facing the audience and ignore the characters they are supposed to be addressing. This is done even in relatively “realistic” plays such as *Benten the Thief* (see figure 3.89). As a result, the downstage area is the most powerful, and upstaging an actor is impossible. Character tends to be presented in a series of unrelated, detached moments. The brief glimpses of various types of women in the dance play *The Maiden at Dōjōji* are extreme examples. Action revolves around fixed poses, either of an individual in the grip of a strong emotion or of a group of performers. Group tableaux often end an act (see figures 3.14 and 3.101). Ensemble acting is a highly developed technique in that a group of players may perform lines and actions either si-

multaneously or sequentially. For instance, the fourteen priests in *The Maiden at Dōjōji*, identically clad and beautifully choreographed, contrast visually and psychologically with the lone female figure.

Kabuki and bunraku share a large number of scripts, although the borrowing has been largely unilateral. The kabuki repertoire of slightly more than three hundred plays consists of an almost equal number of dance pieces (*shosa goto*), plays derived from the puppet theater, and plays originally written for kabuki. The great majority of plays in the bunraku repertoire, however, were written originally for the dolls. All the puppet plays in this anthology have kabuki versions, many of them important pieces in that repertoire. *Yotsuya Ghost Stories* and *The Maiden at Dōjōji* have puppet versions, but they are not highly valued.

Plays other than dance pieces are broadly divided into two categories: period pieces (*jidai mono*) and domestic pieces (*sewa mono*). The former presents aristocrats and warriors, and the latter, townspeople and lowlifes. *Coxinga*, the most successful of Chikamatsu Monzaemon's period pieces and the only one still regularly performed in both theaters, dramatizes the life of a seventeenth-century man of mixed Chinese

