



Yuichi Kinoshita

Tokaido Yotsuya Kaidan

(Nov. 21 - 24, 2014 at Owlspot Theater, Ikebukuro, Tokyo)

Director: Kunio Sugihara

Photos: Aki Tanaka



Tokaido Yotsuya Kaidan

Premiered 1825. The play is a representative work of Namboku Tsuruya IV. It was written as a side story for the play *Kanadehon Chushingura*, a story about a group of retainers who win the praise of the people for taking revenge against their former lord's enemy. Iemon Tamiya, a samurai who had become a ronin after his master's estate was abolished, is discontent about his wife Oiwa, who is in poor health after giving birth. At the same time, the granddaughter of Kihei Ito, a vassal of Iemon's former master's foe, has fallen in love with Iemon. After her death, Oiwa learns of Iemon's marriage to the granddaughter and returns as a ghost to haunt him.

Artist Interview

アーティスト・インタビュー

Jun. 4, 2014



The strategy of Yuichi Kinoshita, taking Kabuki into the future

歌舞伎の未来に挑む
木ノ下裕一の戦略

The Kinoshita-Kabuki company began activities in 2006, based in Kyoto. Its leader is Yuichi Kinoshita (born 1985), an emerging figure in the theater world who graduated from Kyoto University of Art & Design and now doing doctorate research on “Takechi Kabuki Theory – Concerning new Kabuki directing in the modern era.” His early encounter with Japanese *Rakugo* (monologue comedy) as a 3rd grader in elementary school led to a growing interest in Japanese traditional performing arts. After that his encounters spread to Bunraku, Kabuki and Noh-Kyogen. Then, at university he studied the art of Tetsuji Takechi and contemporary avant-garde theater and started the Kinoshita Kabuki company with the aim of creating contemporary adaptations of works from the traditional repertoire. He has created his own contemporary adaptations of traditional classics such as *Sanbaso*, *Musume Dojoji*, *Kanjincho*, *Yoshitsune Senbon Zakura*, *Kurozuka* and *Tokaido Yotsuya Kaidan*. Of particular note is a collaboration with Kinoshita's directing partner Kunio Sugihara to present at the 2014 Festival/Tokyo (F/T) a full performance of all parts of *Tokaido Yotsuya Kaidan*, thus reviving the often cut parts of this long Kabuki play that is usually only performed in portions in recent years. This interview seeks to reveal the ideas and methodology of Yuichi Kinoshita, an artist who often describes himself as a dramaturge with decision-making rights.

Interviewer: Kazumi Narabe, journalist

In Japan, the traditional arts are mostly handed down within families from parent to child, but you are from a family with no connection to the traditional arts. Nonetheless, while still in your twenties you have become passionately involved in the creation of contemporary adaptations of Kabuki plays. How did you become interested in Kabuki?

I was born in Wakayama City (Wakayama Pref.) and, indeed, into a family that had almost no interest in the traditional performing arts. My first interest in the traditional arts was not in Kabuki but in *Rakugo* (traditional monologue comedy) at the age of ten, when I was a 3rd grader in elementary school. My town was still rather rural (not urbanized), and like many rural towns the local residents association was still quite active in organizing cultural events. One of these was an event for the elderly held on the Respect-for-the-Aged national holiday. Since I had nothing else to do, and since I like older people, I stopped by on a whim to see what it was like. It happened to be a performance by a professional *rakugo* artist. And, what I saw and heard really im-

Artist Interview

The strategy of Yuichi Kinoshita,
taking Kabuki into the future

歌舞伎の未来に挑む
木ノ下裕一の戦略

pressed me.

Entertainment for young people of my generation tends to be largely visual, like television and *manga* (comic books). So, it was very surprising for me to see a stage performance like rakugo that consisted of nothing more than one man sitting on the stage telling funny stories. I felt like it was one of the most interesting and fun things I had ever seen!

Since children of that age are quick to memorize things, I could usually memorize a rakugo story after hearing it just once or twice. That same day I heard rakugo for the first time. On that same day I heard rakugo for the first time, I did a little performance for my family that evening imitating the story and the performer's delivery style, and it really made them laugh. Once I got that taste of success, I really got into rakugo quickly. At the time, of course, there was no real Internet and cell phones weren't popular yet, so if you wanted to get information about something that interested you, you had to go out and track it down yourself. I worked hard to find all the information I could about rakugo organizations and clubs, and I searched for programs on TV and the like. My parents said they would give me the money to buy one rakugo CD a month, deciding which one to buy became a really intense decision-making process for me at that age. At the time there weren't racks of rakugo CDs in the stores like there are today, and no PCs or Internet to do searches on. So, I would get the clerks at the CD shop to show me their CD catalogs, which were about as thick as telephone books, and then I would search through them with only a few titles or performers names to go by. Since I didn't have much information, it was mostly a matter of "hunter's instinct" you might say, something like gambling. After much agonizing deliberation, I would choose one and place my order, and two weeks later it would arrive in the mail. It was really inconvenient by today's standards. But, that made it all the more fruitful as a learning experience. If I had been able to simply watch all the performance I wanted on YouTube like we can today, I probably never have gotten into it as deeply as I did.

As you got into it, it probably wasn't long before listening to those CDs wasn't enough, was it?

Of course, I also went to see live rakugo performances, but on an elementary school kid's allowance, I couldn't go very often. Also, my parents couldn't always take the time to take me to the performances, so I had to think very hard to find ways to get to see performances. First of all, I would get permission to leave school early on the days when there were rakugo performances. Of course, that meant getting my parents to write a proper request to the school to let me out after the fourth period of the school day. At that time, I was doing rakugo performances at school myself almost every day at lunch hour, so my homeroom teacher knew there was little to be said or done about my obsession. So, they would just let me out of school early, saying, "Take care along the way." Then, I would get to the place of the rakugo performance about two or three hours before it started and join in with the women volunteers helping out by preparing the hand-out leaflets and the like until the performance began. It might sound good to say that because I didn't have any money I was paying for the cost of admission by working, but in fact it was more a case of me making myself a member of the staff without being asked (laughs). That is how I often got to see performances for free.

Artist Interview

The strategy of Yuichi Kinoshita,
taking Kabuki into the future

歌舞伎の未来に挑む
木ノ下裕一の戦略

Rakugo is the most recent of the traditional Japanese performing arts to appear. For that reason it contains parodies from the other traditional arts. And that in turn made me naturally want to learn more about the other traditional arts. But, there is a limit to the amount of money available to an elementary school student to explore those arts. So, around the end of the third grade, I made a plan. You could call it a design for the future (laughs). In elementary school I would concentrate on rakugo, then in middle school I planned to watch Kabuki. In high school I would watch Bunraku, and at university I would watch Noh and Kyogen. That meant I would be going back in history from the newest to the oldest of Japan's traditional performing arts. And, eventually that was roughly what I was able to do.

That doesn't sound much like an elementary school student (laughs). Did you choose to Kyoto University of Art & Design in order to pursue study of the traditional arts?

Through high school I had been studying painting. But, painting is a solo endeavor. When I was thinking about what direction I wanted to pursue after high school, I thought that such a solo pursuit would not be enough for me. I had loved the traditional arts since childhood and I had also wanted to do something together with other people, but I wanted to do fine arts, too. So, I thought that an area where I could do all three of these things at the same time might be stage art. That gave me the idea that I could major in theater at university! Looking back now, it seems like pretty simple reasoning (laughs). At the time, the Kabuki actor Ennosuke Ichikawa III (now En'ō Ichikawa II) was vice president of Kyoto University of Art & Design, and the school also had a Kabuki style theater named the Shunju-za and the Noh master Hideo Kanze was also on the faculty. That made me choose it as a university that would be strong in the traditional performing arts.

However, when I actually started going there I found that, at the time (2004), the head of the department of film and performing arts was the [stage] director Shogo Ota and the courses focused mainly on avant-garde performing arts (laughs). So, I ended up studying modes of contemporary performing arts expression that were completely different in context from the traditional performing arts. The university had gathered a faculty that included a good number of interesting artists, including the Butoh artist and Sankai Juku member Toru Iwashita, the dance artist and choreographer Setsuko Yamada, the director and playwright Akio Miyazawa, the contemporary [visual] artist Tadasu Takamine and from abroad the director John Jesurun. Amid this encounter with the cutting edge of avant-garde artistic expression, I found myself discovering the connections or things in common with the traditional arts. I would find something here that was similar with Kabuki technique and something there that shared a common aesthetic with Noh for example. I found it fascinating to think about connections between the avant-garde and the traditional performing arts, and from that time I believe I began thinking about the possibilities of creating contemporary theater that made use of the traditional performing arts.

Would you tell us about your initial encounter with Kabuki?

The first time I went to see a Kabuki performance was in middle school, and it was a performance of the "Sushiya" (sushi shop) scene [from *Yoshitsune Senbon Zakura*] that came to Wakayama on one of the regular Kabuki regional tours.

Artist Interview

The strategy of Yuichi Kinoshita,
taking Kabuki into the future

歌舞伎の未来に挑む
木ノ下裕一の戦略

Yoshitsune Senbon Zakura - Act Four

(Jul. 7 - 8, 2012 at Kyoto Performing Arts
Center - Shunju-za)

General Director: Junnosuke Tada

Director: Momoko Shiraga, Kunio Sugihara

Photo: Toshihiro Shimizu



Beicho Katsura

Beicho was a rakugo artist born in 1925.

He studied under the Osaka rakugo master Yonedanji Katsura IV. Working for the recovery of the Osaka-based "Kamigata Rakugo" that had gone into decline during World War II, Beicho became known as "Father of the Rejuvenation of Kamigata Rakugo." He revived many old rakugo stories thought to be valuable heritage of the past and added new interpretations. At the same time he nurtured many apprentices. He was subsequently designated a Living National Treasure by the government.

The "Sushiya" scene of Act III of *Yoshitsune Senbon Zakura* is one of the least flamboyant and most difficult scenes to fully appreciate and understand, isn't it? It is the story about ruffian named Igami no Gonda who has been disowned by his father but nonetheless proceeds to sacrifice the wellbeing of his own wife and children in order to help his father, who is trying to do a favor for a man he is indebted to by hiding his son from pursuers.

And to add to it all, the lead was performed by Gatoh Kataoka! (Laughs) But, it was truly a wonderful performance. "Sushiya" is a very strange story in some ways. To begin with, we have no idea when or how the main character, Igami no Gonda, has had his change of heart. In modern drama that would be the central focus of the story, but in this play it is completely absent. However, due to the presence of the Kabuki conventions and the unique aspects of the traditional staging/direction, it doesn't feel strange at all. That is really fascinating.

It was also around the time I began watching Kabuki that Kanzaburo Nakamura (at the time Kankuro, before inheriting the Kanzaburo name) began his "Heisei Nakamura-za" Kabuki productions in temporary theater facilities [such as tent structures]. I was in high school when the first Heisei Nakamura-za productions of *Natsu Matsuri Naniwa Kagami* and *Hokaibo* at the same time in Osaka, and of course I went to see it. The performances [and the event] were tremendously exciting for me.

At the time, there were other new movements in Kabuki including En'o Ichikawa's (then Ennosuke) "Super Kabuki" and the "Cocoon Kabuki" [series at the Cocoon theater in Tokyo] directed by the contemporary theater director Kazuyoshi Kushida. So, it was an environment where we could see both traditional Kabuki and contemporary style Kabuki.

Lately, I have been thinking that, having entered the traditional performing arts from rakugo, in which I especially loved the art of the great master Beicho Katsura, and having entered the world of the traditional Japanese performing arts via Beicho's rakugo, has had a very important influence on me as I am today. A good amount of what we believe today to be the true classics of Kamigata Rakugo (the rakugo art primarily of the Osaka and Kyoto area that has been evolving since the Edo Period) are actually works that master Beicho either made additions to, modernized or revived as part of the present repertoire. There are some parts of the traditional classics that people today feel they can't understand, but if someone [like Beicho] makes some adaptations to those parts, it works can become communicable and understandable to the contemporary audience. In other words, I believe that by listening to master Beicho's rakugo, I learned before realizing it that the traditional classics can be made contemporary.

So, I became able to watch "Sushiya," for example, as traditional Kabuki but, at the same time, I could think as I watched about the possibility of finding a way to make it contemporary. Having seen the application of master Beicho's "textology" (application of text linguistics to traditional rakugo texts) was a very important experience for me. His application of textology transformed works of the solo performance art of rakugo into works that could be communicated and handed down to anyone. I have great respect for the methodology master Beicho created for modernizing [traditional] works.

Artist Interview

The strategy of Yuichi Kinoshita,
taking Kabuki into the future

歌舞伎の未来に挑む
木ノ下裕一の戦略

In the traditional classics there are contents from a world quite different from contemporary life, and despite the fact that many people tends to reject works that are difficult to understand for that reason, you found out from your encounters with rakugo and Kabuki at a young and impressionable age that there were ways to modernize the classics, didn't you?

It seems to me that there is an especially strong tendency recently for people to reject the things that don't make sense to them. It seems like a preference for things that anyone can easily enjoy. On television programs now they are adding subtitles that explain everything. But, since the traditional classics are based on the worldview or views of human nature and ideals that people had hundreds of years ago, a certain distance from the contemporary world naturally exists. It is by no means a world that can be easily understood by people today. And, that is one of the interesting things about the classics. It is difficult for the traditional arts to stay alive in the contemporary world. On the other hand, people talk often about the universality of the traditional arts, but I don't like that expression at all. For example, people say things like, "The pain of a mother losing a child is the same in any era." But, in fact, there is no way that the feeling could be the same now as it was back in times when the death rate among children was much, much higher. People also say that [romantic] love is a universal feeling, but I am certain that there are definite differences between love today and love as it was in olden times.

In times before the development of modern medicine, many children died before reaching adulthood, and in the Edo Period when Kabuki became a form of popular entertainment for the public, the very thought of freely loving the person of your choice was considered scandalous. Most marriages were arranged by the parents based on the needs for a family's preservation and prosperity or for the need to secure labor. So, it was quite different from the sense of love today, wasn't it?

And that difference is what makes it so interesting! There is always a distance between what is written in contemporary works and the old classics, and there are creative methods to bridge that distance. And, it is because that distance exists that we can discover elements of the contemporary in the classics at times. So, it is meaningless if you don't take that distance as a granted when modernizing a work. For example, if you made a [contemporary] melodrama based on one of Monzaemon Chikamatsu's classic Kabuki love suicide stories, I don't think it would be very interesting, would it? Because, there is a good chance it would turn out to be no more than a process of forcing the Chikamatsu story to fit into the template of a modern love story. I think it would be meaningless if you the result ended up stripping it of Chikamatsu's worldview and the distance it has from today's world. I feel that the important thing is to respect the old classics as such and to think about what the substance of its distance from today's world consists of.

Did the development of that kind of approach eventually lead you to your founding of the Kinoshita Kabuki company?

It was the result of pushes from people around me. When I was in my first year at the university, I used to tell fellow students about the Kabuki performances I had seen and make comments about how interesting it could be if certain parts of the staging were changed. Then I would demonstrate by imitating the Kabuki actors, until they said, "If you are so intent about it, why don't you actually try doing it? I had wanted to

Artist Interview

The strategy of Yuichi Kinoshita,
taking Kabuki into the future

歌舞伎の未来に挑む
木ノ下裕一の戦略

be a stage art design, so I never thought that I would be taking the lead of a theater group. Another important thing leading to the decision to start a group was that I had just read Tetsuji Takechi's book *Takechi Kabuki* (Bungeishunju Publishing). It is a book published in 1955 and I was shocked to find that what Takechi describes as the state of crisis threatening the future of Kabuki was exactly the same as it remains today.

Takechi was a director who was presenting modern versions of the traditional classics from early in the Showa Period (actually from the early 1940s). He worked on experimental productions of Noh, Bunraku and Kabuki with actors like Tojuro Sakata in Kabuki and Sennojo Shigeyama in Kyogen who shared his interest in how to keep the traditional arts alive and developing in the contemporary world rather than simply preserving them in the traditional forms. In the process, he squandered his large inheritance as the eldest son of a rich family in his lifetime. Although he did progressive and innovative work, for a while he would become a forgotten figure.

That book of his was in a way a study in practical, on-the-scene working theory, and it surprised me to learn that there was a person like him who actually directed Kabuki as theater [drama].

So, you discovered from it that the traditional performing arts could actually be “directed” [by a director in the usual theater sense]?

Yes. I learned quite a lot from it. In the future, I hope to be able to work with Kabuki actors and make theater together, and I conceived of Kinoshita Kabuki to begin the first step of that process, which is to first of all create Kabuki texts (scripts) that could be given to contemporary theater directors to direct contemporary Kabuki.

The Japanese traditional performing arts have a unique positioning. The reason is that we feel that the works of Shakespeare are much more major than the plays of Hanji Chikamatsu; even though [the works of] foreign playwrights should naturally feel more distant to us. Isn't it true that overseas, especially in Europe, it is popular to attempt new [more contemporary] staging of the works of the opera classics or new interpretations of the ancient Greek tragedies? So why are the traditional performing arts of Japan treated in the same way? It is because they are tied closely to their own unique *kata* (conventions such as methods of acting that make use of unique traditional forms of movement and symbolic poses and unique vocalization, etc.). The Japanese traditional classics are not defined by their texts alone because the so-called *kata* involved in the way the actor performs a role still exists as an integral part of the art. And, the texts (scripts of the plays) are dependent on the traditional stage sets, props and mechanisms and the musical [and sound] accompaniment. These are elements of the performance that cannot be separated from the text. So, in the case of the Japanese traditional performing arts, it is imperative that we think about what to do with these [traditional] elements of the staging [directing] when we try to create a contemporary method for staging them. It was my feeling that it would be great if young theater people of my generation could undertake this task that led me to start Kinoshita Kabuki.

There have been [contemporary] theater companies that have done productions of works from the traditional performing arts repertoire. One example is Tadashi Suzuki's SCOT company, and their staging has involved a solid “Suzuki method.” Of

Artist Interview

The strategy of Yuichi Kinoshita,
taking Kabuki into the future

歌舞伎の未来に挑む
木ノ下裕一の戦略

Kurozuka

(May. 24 - Jun. 2, 2013 at Izayoi Yoshidama-
chi Studio, Yokohama)

Director, Stage Art Designer: Kunio Sugihara

Photos: Ryuichiro Suzuki



course, due to the fact that unique physical movement is an integral part of Kabuki or Noh, there is definitely an aspect that demands a physical method of some kind. I well understand the importance of a physical method, but if you apply a particular method too thoroughly, it becomes impossible to have the work performed by different companies. That in itself may not be too bad, but in the end I want to create an environment that enables anyone to stage these Japanese traditional classics. That is why, with our Kinoshita Kabuki works, rather than employing a physical methodology, I decided to try to develop a “thought method” that makes them works that can more or less be given to any director to stage.

So, for example, I think about the different possible approaches for doing a contemporary-language translation of the original Kabuki script. Considering the fact that there are basically two types of language (style of speech) used in Kabuki plays, the language used in the “*Sewa-mono*” plays using realistic depiction of the lives of the common people of Edo (the capital of Japan in the Edo Period (1603 – 1868) that was today’s Tokyo), and the *Ohjidai-mono* telling stories of the court and heroes of the Heian Period (794 – 1185), I can propose methodologies for making contemporary-language translations of those two different styles of speech. There is one approach that simply attempts to make contemporary-language translations that are easy for people today to understand, but I think there is a danger in that kind of lack of consciousness and discrimination regarding the scripts. The nuances and the historical backgrounds behind the contemporary language of today and the language of Kabuki are completely different. For this reason, it is meaningless to do a contemporary translation without efforts to restore the inherent dramatic aspect. When we did a production of *Kurozuka*, I set a basic framework by which the old woman who is the main character speaks in the original language of the Kabuki play with the traditional Kabuki vocal delivery style, while the monks speak in contemporary language, and depending on the emotional state of the main character(s) in the different scenes I selected between one of three styles: (1) traditional Kabuki style for both language and vocal delivery, (2) contemporary language but Kabuki style vocalization and (3) completely contemporary language and delivery. By creating this type of “thought method” and contemporary-language translation method that produces works that can be given to a variety of directors for staging, I believe that Kabuki can be presented to a wider range of audiences.

Is this related to the fact that you don’t direct (stage works) yourself?

Directing plays is of course an interesting endeavor. And early on, I used to do about half of the directing myself. But, lately I have found that it is more interesting to have other people do the directing. Because, the process of working together with a director to make theater is also a process that completely shatters the image I had of one of the classics. It is a great feeling when this process leads to ideas that I never could have possibly conceived of myself or reveals new approaches I hadn’t thought of before. But, the biggest reason of all is that I want to nurture directors who can direct [new productions of] Kabuki plays.

In other words, you feel that bringing Kabuki plays to life as “contemporary Kabuki” is something that cannot be done by one person alone.

Artist Interview

The strategy of Yuichi Kinoshita,
taking Kabuki into the future

歌舞伎の未来に挑む
木ノ下裕一の戦略

Natsu Matsuri Naniwa Kagami

Premiered in 1745. It is a story of duty and overcoming cowardice involving a man named Danshichi, who is trying to protect the son of a man he is indebted to, and Sabu and Issuntokube, who come to his aid. When Danshichi's father-in-law Giheiji interferes out of monetary greed and Danshichi accidentally kills him in the "Nagaya-ura" scene, the dark stage is lit only by the red with the glow of the lanterns of the summer festival (*natsu matsuri*) with the sound of the flutes and drums of the festival music to complete the tragic and gruesome scene.

(Dec. 8 - 11, 2011 at Atelier Gekken ,Kyoto)

Director: Momoko Shiraga

Photos: Toshihiro Shimizu



That's right. What I want to do is to create a new trend. That is why I am not really intent on maintaining the Kinoshita Kabuki group itself, and when it fulfills its present role, I may dissolve the group. The more important thing for me is to create a sort of salon that will nurture new talent in this area—a sort of seminar.

What is the actual process you follow in making a production for the stage?

The process begins from the selection of the play to stage. There are generally two patterns: the first is having a director in mind that I particularly want to work with and then choosing a play that I feel will fit that director, and the second is having a play that I want to do and then deciding what director would be best to do it. In both cases I am thinking about the social issues that individual directors are focused on and how it fits the contemporary aspects of the play involved. But, it won't be interesting if the fit is so perfect that the staging can all be done within the director's head without any real struggle to achieve something new. It is important that there be a slight offset. There should be aspects in the play that can't be handled by the techniques already within the director's repertoire. The result won't be interesting unless there are aspects that will be challenging for the director.

For example, the person I had directing *Natsu Matsuri Naniwa Kagami* was Momoko Shiraga, who is a contemporary dancer and choreographer, and this was her first time directing theater. That was a challenge in itself, and in talking with her we decided to cast the play with only one male actor and women filling all the other roles. That decision was made on the belief that it wouldn't be interesting unless we overturned the existing convention of Kabuki as an all-male performing art and the strongly masculine orientation of the "summer festival" (*natsu matsuri*). Finding an original and fresh approach to the staging of this play would naturally be a big challenge for the director, but I consider the choosing this kind of unique director-play combination an important job of mine as the leader of Kinoshita Kabuki. After this decision is made, I then enter the task of the *texte regie* (creating a contemporary script).

How do you go about writing the text? For example, what was your process in preparing the text for the often-performed Kabuki play *Tokaido Yotsuya Kaidan*?

It is a very tough and exhausting process (laughs). For example, in the case of *Tokaido Yotsuya Kaidan* I begin by completely re-examining the history of the play from era of its author Namboku Tsuruya and the play's premiere in 1825 until the present, looking at how the interpretation has changed over the decades, the history of the play [composition and performances] and the history of how it has been received. And, I gather as many of the old variations of the script as I can. I also gather information about the various unique *kata* (performance styles, costume, makeup, poses, etc.) that famous Kabuki actors have developed individually over the years, the texts (scripts) that remain, artistic commentaries, performance reviews and even academic studies; anything that I think is important, I gather as much as I can. At times I also use photographs and Ukiyo-e prints as reference. Because, there are things that Ukiyo-e prints and photographs can tell us that written materials can't.

In Kabuki, so many actors have developed their own unique *kata* involving costume and makeup and movement and definitive poses over the years that it must be very

Artist Interview

The strategy of Yuichi Kinoshita,
taking Kabuki into the future

歌舞伎の未来に挑む
木ノ下裕一の戦略

difficult to try to get a grasp of them all.

The variety is so vast that it is impossible to know all of it, but I always try to do enough research to satisfy myself that I have gathered as much information as I can. I go to libraries and search the old-book shops. Then I read all the material I have been able to gather and put together my own history of the play. In the process of this research I find guiding principles for thinking about what could be done in a contemporary production of the play. It is a difficult and exhausting process that I devote a full year to for each study.

What I found of interest in my study of the materials I assembled about *Tokaido Yotsuya Kaidan* was that there were two periods of revived interest in the works of Tsuruya Namboku, one in the Taisho Period (1912-26) and another in the Showa Period (1926-89). The first “Namboku boom” came two years after the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923. And I felt that this synchronized with the time when we were working to mount our production of *Yotsuya Kaidan* last year, because it was two years after the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami. The second boom came in the 1970s at a time when the citizen opposition and student protest movement against the renewal of the national defense pact with the United States had died out and a revival of Namboku appeared once again, permeating even the underground theater movement that emerged amidst that sense of defeat at that time. In other words, I found that a revived appreciation of Namboku had emerged at times when people had lost faith in the things they had believed in until then and were searching for new values to live by. That convinced me that it was a good time to focus on a production of *Yotsuya Kaidan*.

As for the text (stage script), I gathered a number of variations and compared them and then made a script that was a kind of collage of interpretations that I thought would be good and compromises between some areas of different texts.

In the autumn of 2013, you revived some parts of *Yotsuya Kaidan* that have been cut from performances in recent years and did a full 6-hour performance of it.

We had done *Yotsuya Kaidan* for the inaugural performances of Kinoshita Kabuki, and at that time we had performed it with some parts cut. The director that time was Kunio Sugihara, who happens to be an upperclassman of mine from Kyoto University of Art & Design. For that production we had staged it without changing the original text at all, so it was virtually just as Namboku had originally written it. From that time Sugihara-san and I had been saying that we wanted to stage the entire play someday. Since Kabuki as it is being performed today is in a form where a lot of the original parts are deleted, I thought that performing the full play as it was originally written could be a way to present an alternative *Yotsuya Kaidan*.

When we did our inaugural performances of *Yotsuya Kaidan* it was in a very small performance space where there was very little space to have the actors move around in. We hung a curtain near the back of the stage and set up the audience seating so it came right up to within about 1.8 meters of that curtain. We put the characters appearing in each scene on a wheeled platform so we could wheel them out as soon as the curtain was opened and then end the scene by quickly closing the curtain. In that way we were able to present the play with the actors facing directly at the entire audience. All of the props were handed to the actors by a single *kuroko* (the black-

Artist Interview

The strategy of Yuichi Kinoshita,
taking Kabuki into the future

歌舞伎の未来に挑む
木ノ下裕一の戦略

dressed and hooded stagehand used in Kabuki and Bunraku to bring out props and help with costume changes onstage). The physical [movement] aspect of the actors' performance was mostly eliminated and the focus placed on the delivery of the lines only. Because it was a small space, the audience was able to concentrate on listening to the actors' lines. So, in that way we were able to present a viable play entirely with the original script.

Do you feel it was a success?

I think it was a success to a degree. I feel it was the best we had done until then. I feel that the staging it with the actors not moving and only the *kuroko* moving could express what one might consider fate, or the state of the human being faced with the power of the society Namboku was writing about, in which the individual could be swallowed up in events and rendered helpless to oppose the social forces that be. For that performance all the characters were dressed in today's clothing and contemporary sound effects like the sound of helicopters or sirens were used to create the atmosphere of a crime in progress and the like. So, in the end it became a rather scary *Yotsuya Kaidan*, I think. I believe the directing that Kunio Sugihara did was quite skilled and well done. Since it was our first production of a Kabuki play and we didn't know left from right, I think it was a good decision to concentrate this time on Namboku's own "words" and the play as he wrote it.

Also, I decided to bring all of the supporting roles that tend to be cut from Kabuki today back on to center-stage. It was staged so that all of the characters were lined up in a single line from stage left to stage right so that all of the main characters and the characters in supporting roles were all seen equally. I felt that, in the end, this is a play about a group of characters [as opposed to a play about a single main character].

Was your decision to show the supporting characters equally with the main characters a form of antithetical challenge to the obsession with stars in today's Kabuki world?

Absolutely. Because of the current star system there are things that you can do and other things that you can't do, and mine was a statement of bring the drama orientation back into Kabuki plays.

How do you go about creating the directorial plan? Which bear stronger weight, the suggestions of your director or your own suggestions?

It depends on the case. There are some cases where I tell the director from the beginning, "This is the interpretation I want you to follow." And, there are also cases where we start with an idea for a particular interpretation and then discuss it together from there to work out a final plan. I lay down some basic policies from the beginning, such as, "I want the supporting roles and the main characters to be treated equally," or, "I have an image that I want this scene to be staged as a dance scene." But, the essential thing is that I always talk things out thoroughly with the director. And, I am in the studio the whole time when the staging is being worked out, and I am there together with the director onsite throughout the production work. It must be a real pain for a director, having me there all the time (laughs). The director takes the ideas that

Artist Interview

The strategy of Yuichi Kinoshita,
taking Kabuki into the future

歌舞伎の未来に挑む
木ノ下裕一の戦略

we talked out together and then puts it into actually staging with the methods he or she has in their drawer of experience. But it is also my job to make judgments along the way, saying, “This is great direction,” or, “It’s interesting but from the perspective of Kabuki it lacks relevance, so I think it is better not to use this.”

Which case usually leads to staging and plays that you are satisfied with?

Both. If it is only based on my own ideas, it is not going to be very interesting for me. If I tell the director that I want a particular [fight] scene to be done like a *pas de deux* dance duet from *Swan Lake*, they will do it, but since it is in fact an imposition for the director, they will always think of something extra to add. And, when the thing they add turns out to be really interesting, that makes me very happy.

Is that why you confine yourself to a supplementary or supervisory role [rather than directing by yourself]?

Yes, it is. As an aside, I would say that the job of the dramaturge is the focus of much attention in Japan today, but I remain skeptical about this trend. Because the environment here in Japan is different, we can’t simply import methods from overseas and expect them to work well here. I believe that the bad thing about dramaturges in Japan is that they have no responsibility for the final result. If the directing of a production is bad, the director will be criticized. If the acting is bad, the actor will be criticized. If the stage art is bad, the stage artist will be criticized. If a play doesn’t attract an audience, the producer is to blame. But, when a dramaturge makes a mistake, the blame never falls on him or her. That means that no one really knows what the dramaturge is doing, or what their responsibility is. Of course, there are some benefits in having someone that is not in a position of responsibility like that on the scene, I believe. Because, such a person can bring an objective viewpoint to the scene. This is what makes it a complex issue. But, I feel that sometimes there is the temptation to use the dramaturge as little more than a person for the director to bounce his/her ideas off. That seems to be a role that the assistant director or the producer could perform on the side. Overseas, there are cases where theaters will have a resident dramaturge who is responsible for the theater’s overall programming. In that case the dramaturge is a visible presence. In Japan today the situation is not like that, and we also have to consider whether it is even necessary to have it that way. I believe that there is a need to create a Japan-specific role for the dramaturge.

I call the job I am doing a “dramaturge with decision-making rights.” It may sound a little haughty, but I use this term intentionally because it makes it easier to explain. In short, I am a dramaturge in the sense that I work together with the director and discuss things together, but I am also the leader of the company, so in an extreme case, I can say for example, “This production is simply not up to par, so we are not going to perform it.” However, at the same time, it means that if we do put on the show the final responsibility rests on my shoulders. Since I am asking a contemporary theater director to direct a Kabuki text (play script), that in itself is a tremendous burden for the director, I believe. So, I have a responsibility to give that director all the support I can in order to prevent them from ending up in an embarrassing position. It is my responsibility to think about the theory behind my interpretation of the play so that even a Kabuki specialist will not look at the play and say that some particular part of the interpretation is invalid from a Kabuki perspective. I have to be prepared with a

Artist Interview

The strategy of Yuichi Kinoshita,
taking Kabuki into the future

歌舞伎の未来に挑む
木ノ下裕一の戦略

theoretically sound argument for each part so that I don't end up causing a stain on the director's career. I have to be prepared to take responsibility when the work is criticized. That is the stance I want to take throughout it all. That is why I call myself a "dramaturge with decision-making rights."

Once the text for a play is finalized and the director is chosen, the next step would be choosing the actors.

I am always thinking about the areas and ways in which our casting should differ from that of the existing Kabuki performances today. The casting is of course done in close consultation with the director, but at times there will be slight differences in the images the director and I have for specific roles. When that happens we discuss it thoroughly. If neither of us is willing to compromise, I leave the final decision up to the director. Because, even the best actor will not do well if the director isn't convinced he or she is right for the role. So, I believe that with casting the director must have the final say.

I have heard that you begin the work in the studio by having the actors do complete imitations of the Kabuki traditional performances. What does that involve specifically?

We do this when Kunio Sugihara is the director, and what we do is watch a DVD of a standard Kabuki performance of the given play and have the actors do imitations of the Kabuki actors' delivery of their spoken lines and their movements. Of course, the aim is not to have the actors [fully] acquire the conventions (*kata*) of Kabuki actors, and I don't believe that is possible for contemporary theater actors and theater makers like us, but there are two reasons why we go through this process at the beginning. The first is to give these contemporary theater actors some understanding of what Kabuki is, and to acquire a shared foundation of consciousness and understanding of it by watching the DVDs thoroughly. Also, we do it to give the actors a physical awareness that no matter how hard they might try, they will never be Kabuki actors. Sugihara-san calls it "time to lose hope" [for matching a Kabuki actor]. In light of this, it is time that is spent to make the actors understand without a doubt that we have to develop and show the audience different methods from the Kabuki actors. If we have three months for rehearsals before a performance, about half of that time, a month and a half, will be used for this imitating process with the DVDs. After that comes the process of breaking down and adapting what we have seen.

Another thing we do is that the director and I will insert notes as we are watching the DVDs, so the actors will see how the director and the company leader [Kinoshita] are seeing the Kabuki. Here we show them things like the reason the actor in a given role turns around at a particular point. We get the actors to understand how to read what appear to be the conventions of Kabuki and how it could be translated into the acting language of contemporary theater people.

Is it effective?

I think it is. We began using this complete imitation process about three years ago with the play *Kanjincho*. In terms of dramatic development it is a very simple story, so in thinking about what is there of interest in *Kanjincho*, we decided the interest must lie in the Kabuki conventions. That is what made us decide to try once doing an exact

Kanjincho

Premiered in the Genroku Period (1688 - 1704). The play is presently performed in a form proposed in 1840 by Ichikawa Danjuro VII based on the Noh play *Ataka*. It is one of the most popular and often-performed plays of the Kabuki repertoire. Minamoto no Yoshitsune, who has fallen out of grace with his older brother, the lord Minamoto no Yoritomo, is stopped by the keeper of the Gate of Ataka, Togashi Saemon, while fleeing to the northern capital of Hiraizumi in Oshu with his retainer Benkei and a few family members. Impressed by the bravery and loyalty of Benkei, however, Togashi decides to let them pass on to the north.

Artist Interview

The strategy of Yuichi Kinoshita,
taking Kabuki into the future

歌舞伎の未来に挑む
木ノ下裕一の戦略

imitation of the conventional Kabuki performance. And, when we tried it, the process rendered a number of results. But, in the case of *Yotsuya Kaidan*, the entire play takes six hours to perform uncut, and there are numerous acts for which there are no remaining recorded performances available on DVD, so we had decided not to do the imitation process. But, when we handed out the scripts and started doing reading rehearsals, things didn't go well. Since we didn't have that shared working base that the imitation process had provided before, it was taking a tremendous amount of time for everyone to get a shared consciousness of what we wanted to do. The rehearsals weren't progressing as we hoped, and after about a week we decided that we should change course and go back to the imitation process.

How was the response?

When the actors begin to see the issues that needed to be dealt with, the rehearsals begin to move forward. It is quite interesting to see how, when we first show the DVDs of the Kabuki performances to the actors for the first time, it tends to be rather boring for them; some even fall asleep (laughs). But, the second time they watch it, we have everyone write down the actors' lines and we make a script that is an exact copy of what they have heard. We stop the DVD about once every three seconds and ask the, "OK, what did the actor just say?" We then have them write down what they have heard, not just their own roles, but everything. For *Yotsuya Kaidan*

it took a full five days to write it all down. When we have them listen to the DVDs in this way, they can't understand at first what the actors have said, but gradually they become able to hear and understand the words. Once a copying session has ended, we have them watch the DVD one more time, and then they begins to say things like, "That actor is really good," or "Sushiya really is great." (Laughs)

After the copying sessions are over, do you leave things up to the director after that?

During the copying sessions I am working together with the director, and I will be giving pointers to. At times we use two studios and work separately, with one of us working in one of the two. After that process is over we begin the process of breaking down and revising what we have copied, and at that stage I hand over the lead to the director. Before and after the rehearsals the director and I spend about two hours working together, but during the actual rehearsal, I make it a rule not to interfere and say anything directly to the actors.

Do you have a special concern about the size of the stages you use for performances? The stage of the Kabuki-za Theater in Tokyo is very large at 27.6 meters in width, but you stage your performances in small theaters. Originally, Kabuki theaters were based on the Noh stage, which is 5.5 meters square, and the stages in the Edo period were quite small.

One of the points of focus when adapting the traditional classics to the contemporary [theater] context is how to overturn the existing Kabuki stage art used today, or the performance space itself, so, one of the things we want to do is use more stage depth and build different levels (heights) into the stage [that aren't used in the usual Kabuki performances]. No matter how you think about it, the stage that Namboku was writing for must have been a small one, and the lines the actors spoke must have been

Artist Interview

The strategy of Yuichi Kinoshita,
taking Kabuki into the future

歌舞伎の未来に挑む
木ノ下裕一の戦略

written for those smaller spaces. When you go to the big Kabuki-za Theater to see a performance of *Yotsuya Kaidan* the house in the set is so large that it feels strange.

Considering that it is supposed to be the house of a poor family (laughs).

If the family is so poor, they could just sell that big house and be well off (laughs). It is OK I guess if you want to make a production for a big stage from the beginning, but creating a play for a smaller place also has many interesting aspects. There are many things about Namboku's plays that don't fit a large performance space. I wanted to use a small stage and staging that brings out the intensity of the characters.

So, in your Kinoshita Kabuki you are intending to propose things that can make Kabuki more interesting, aren't you?

Yes. I have a feeling that, for Kabuki today, more time should be spent on trying to develop each production. I'm not saying that every production should have a director [which traditional Kabuki does not have], but I do think it would be good if each production were to be based on new review and consideration of how the play will be presented.

The Kabuki that is being performed today can be divided largely into pure traditional classics, slightly different new plays and the performances directed by contemporary theater directors (Hideki Noda, Kazuyoshi Kushida, Yukio Ninagawa). Regarding the productions directed by contemporary theater directors, I think this is something that needs to continue and something that will be important because from now on many audiences will be encountering Kabuki for the first time. However, just bringing in a talented director all of a sudden will not guarantee that the result will be interesting. To get an interesting result will require an interpreter, in other words a dramaturge. It requires someone to connect the academic side with the working theory side. In the case of Noda-san and Kushida-san, I believe it was Kanzaburo Nakamura who filled that role. In addition to being a good actor, Kanzaburo was also a very talented producer and interpreter. At the same time, he took full responsibility for the productions he was involved in. If that were not true, the directors would be used up quickly in one-shot productions.

Regarding the pure traditional classics, a good example was the production of *Ichinotani Futaba-gunki* – Kumagai Jinya by Kichiemon Nakamura with an all-star cast including Tomijuro Nakamura and Tojuro Sakata performed at the Kabuki-za in April of 2010. It was a great production that truly touched the hearts of contemporary audiences, and I felt it was a wonderful example of successful contemporary adaptation. The way it avoided any arbitrary changes and presented the classic in solid form but still succeeded in striking a resonant cord with the contemporary audience, means that Kichiemon and the others of the Kabuki-za community went to great lengths to find many detailed connections to the present in creating that stage, I believe. That involves an exhaustive process of re-reading and interpreting the classic. I believe that kind of achievement requires the presence of people who can identify those points; in other words interpreters who can connect Kabuki to the general public and who have the ability to speak out and say what needs to be done. It also requires the publication of things that serve as an introductory guide for people coming to Kabuki. If we don't have this kind of an environment, I don't think Kabuki will be interesting in the

Artist Interview

The strategy of Yuichi Kinoshita,
taking Kabuki into the future

歌舞伎の未来に挑む
木ノ下裕一の戦略

future. In short, I don't think people will connect to Kabuki unless we have these two kinds of interpreters: interpreters for the production of works and interpreters who can introduce people to Kabuki. If possible, despite my shortcomings, I want to become one of those people.

Are there any other things that you want to do so that in the future you will be able to work with Kabuki actors?

One thing I want to do most outside of theater productions is to publish a magazine about the traditional performing arts. Communicating things through theater and communicating things through the printed word are different tasks. I believe that both of them are necessary in order to create a movement to modernize Kabuki. It is important to leave a record of the theatrical experiments that have been done. While researching Takechi Kabuki I have come to feel that it is quite difficult for meaningful records of achievements in theater to survive and be preserved. Because Takechi himself left a lot of stage notes, studying Takechi Kabuki has been easier than in many other cases, but there is also a danger in simply taking the words of a director as a sole source for transmitting knowledge to future generations. My impression has been that there is a decisive lack of objective commentaries. The fact is that very few records remain about even such important historical movements as the experimental Noh theater activities of the "Mei no Kai" led by the three brothers Hisao, Hideo and Shizuo Kanze. Even if you want to learn about such movements, there is really very little information to be found. Without that information, we can't build on those achievements. That is why I want to create a magazine to preserve these records. But, that alone would not be interesting enough for readers, so I want to make a magazine that would have lots of feature articles that would offer a satisfying reading experience and would function as an introductory guide to the performing arts.

In theater, the year 2016 will be the 10th anniversary of the start of Kinoshita Kabuki, and I would like to that that as an opportunity to do a "Kinoshita "Grand" Kabuki" event. I want to do re-workings of the stages we have done over these ten years in the form of revival performances. I would be very happy if we were able to have an event with multiple performances going on at once in the same venue. I want to create ongoing working relationships with the directors I have worked with until so that our work will continue to deepen and not end as one-time endeavors. This may sound presumptuous but I want to help nurture directors that know Kabuki. And, by around the age of 40 I want to have learned enough so that I could work with people of the Kabuki world.

I would also like to do performances overseas. And, rather than simply making overseas tours of productions created here in Japan, I would also like to study the present status of traditional theatrical arts in other countries. I think it would also be interesting to do things like working with overseas dancers on a production of *Sagi Musume*, for example. Because, that is a work that I think could be successful in a ballet-like adaptation. The position of the traditional arts is probably completed different from those of Japan to begin with, and I would like to learn about those differences while working together on productions like that. While working on productions overseas I would also like study about the roles dramaturges perform in different countries. Actually, I would like to go on a study exchange to Germany, but it is difficult to take that much time away from my work here