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THEATER REVIEW | 'HOKAIBO'

Guilty Pleasures of Comic Kabuki

By [CHARLES ISHERWOOD](#)

Four centuries of theatrical history sit with disarming ease on the solid shoulders of Nakamura Kanzaburo XVIII, the master Kabuki artist and heir to a distinguished dynastic name who is also the artistic director of the Heisei Nakamura-za company from Tokyo.

You might expect that a man trailing an imposing string of Roman numerals behind him would behave with a strict sense of decorum. A little self-importance would not be out of place, in fact. At the very least you might prepare to find yourself in the edifying presence of the formality, exoticism and stylistic grandeur that most of us associate with the revered art of Kabuki.

You'd be wrong.

In "Hokaibo," the rollicking sex comedy from 1784 (!) that the company is presenting at Avery Fisher Hall, Mr. Kanzaburo is cutting up with an audience-seducing brio that invites comparison to any great stage comic you could name, from [Jimmy Durante](#) to Bert Lahr to [Nathan Lane](#). Playing a predatory rogue masquerading as a priest, he mugs, pratfalls, wisecracks and generally makes sport of the proceedings in this dizzyingly convoluted comedy, which revolves around a long-lost scroll precious to a family of aristocrats, the young samurai in search of it, the two women vying for his attentions, and the many lechers lusting after them.

"Hokaibo," one of the few comedies in the repertory of this ancient form, should be required viewing for students of theater and aficionados of the international arts smorgasbord that is the [Lincoln Center Festival](#). But admirers of the more enjoyably vulgar forms of humor who happen to stray into Avery Fisher Hall — fans of Restoration comedy, or "The 40-Year-Old Virgin," say — may find themselves surprised into wakefulness, even outright delight, by the antic ribaldry on view. Who knew that fancy old Kabuki could also be a guilty pleasure?

"Hokaibo" is performed in Japanese, with simultaneous English translation available on headsets. But Mr. Kanzaburo regularly breaks into the local tongue himself, in asides that sometimes poke fun at some of the very traditions he is supposedly charged with maintaining. (And which indeed he does maintain, with commanding authority, as was displayed by the company's captivating performance of "Renjishi," a more stylized dance-drama about a lion and his cubs that was given just one performance, on Monday, the first night of the company's tenure at the festival this year.)

Rolling his eyes at the high-pitched, slowly cadenced vocal delivery and liquid gestures of Nakamura Shichinosuke (one of Mr. Kanzaburo's sons), who plays the role of a princess, Mr. Kanzaburo cracks, "Why is she always so damn slow?" At another point he upbraids a character for showing up late and not knowing the plot and exhorts viewers in the cheaper seats to spend a little more, shouting "Next time, upgrade please!" to those in the top balcony. During a scene set in a graveyard he plays miniature golf with a human skull (Yorick, he jokes), exulting in his hole in one.

As the Falstaffian ne'er-do-well Hokaibo, capering in and out of the action like a wicked imp, Mr. Kanzaburo

is so endearing that it comes as a bit of queasy shock when, in the play's second of three acts (note that the intermission comes late, after the second), our hitherto lovable antihero dispatches two of the main characters, blithely chopping off the arms of an old man and making equally quick work of that unfortunate princess. Dear old Hokaibo is a cutup in more than one sense.

But the bracing impact of this episode is a not-unpleasant reminder of the radical strangeness of Kabuki to Western audiences. Mr. Kanzaburo and his director, Kushida Kazuyoshi, have obviously taken steps to bridge the cultural gap between contemporary American sensibilities and the aesthetics of an art form steeped in firm adherence to performing tradition. Their stated goals, achieved with happy finesse in "Hokaibo," are to return Kabuki to its populist roots and to infuse it with new energy by opening it up to new influences. (The presence of a director is in itself a departure; most Kabuki productions do not employ one.) Quite a bit of comedy is universal, in any case: A buffoonish old man chasing a lovely young maiden is likely to get laughs in most cultures, I expect.

But the startling shift in tone is emblematic of an entertainment created to be all encompassing, mixing dance and drama, comedy and mystery, song and spoken word. Despite its self-consciously assumed irreverence toward traditional practices, "Hokaibo" incorporates all the essential elements of classic Kabuki: the all-male company of actors, exaggerated makeup, the stomping dances, the arresting, cross-eyed poses at moments of high drama that are recognized and applauded. The colorful sets, mostly painted flats, evoke period and place with a pleasing simplicity.

These stylistic conventions of the genre assert themselves more strongly as shadows gather and the story moves to a spiritual plane. In one marvelously eerie image the ghost of the princess rises from a grave, her back toward us, and as she turns, we see that her spirit and that of the also-dead Hokaibo have merged into a single being fired with a lust for vengeance. And in the play's ceremonial final act, taking place amid a riot of cherry blossoms, Mr. Kanzaburo returns as this ravaging ghost for a final smackdown with Jinzaburo (Nakamura Hashinosuke), the hero who dispatched him to the spirit world.

The transformation showcases Mr. Kanzaburo's versatility as a performer to breathtaking effect. At first the ghost impersonates the young heroine, Okumi (Nakamura Senjaku), and Mr. Kanzaburo is all but unrecognizable in his kimono, female makeup and wig, his lyrical dancing imbued with the merest hint of wickedness. Then the comic's mask evaporates entirely, to be replaced by a grave, scary scowl.

As the ghost of Hokaibo writhes and fights and flails, ultimately to be vanquished, Mr. Kanzaburo thrills us with the precision and ferocity of his dancing. He embodies a spirit of terrible force as powerfully as he did a man of comically fleshly appetites, a feat of the actor's art that ultimately does inspire something close to awe.

HOKAIBO

Directed by Kushida Kazuyoshi; choreography by Fujima Kanjuro; in Japanese, with English dialogue produced and translated by Linda Hoaglund, read by Paul Lazar and available via headsets; technical director, Kanai Yuichiro; costumes by Arai Kumiko, Hiruta Noritaka and Kurosaki Atsuhiro; lighting by Saito Shigeo; stage manager, Takeshiba Tokutaro; produced by Aramaki Daishiro, Seki Ichiro, Nakano Masao and Hashimoto Yoshitaka. Presented by Heisei Nakamura-za, as part of the [Lincoln Center Festival 2007](#), Nigel Redden, director. At Avery Fisher Hall [Lincoln Center](#); (212) 721-6500. Through Sunday. Running time: 2 hours 45 minutes. WITH: Nakamura Kanzaburo (Hokaibo), Nakamura Senjaku (Okumi), Nakamura Hashinosuke (Jinzaburo), Bando Yajuro (Gonzaemon), Nakamura Kantaro (Yosuke), Nakamura Shichinosuke (Nowake-hime), Kataoka Kamezo (Shohachi) and Sasano Takashi (Kanjuro).

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