Photograph courtesy of Dominica Harrison (2019)
Smells Like Butter
Performed by Gina Ricker and Aaron Markwell
Costumes by Rebecca Cartwright

Appropriate appropriation? - Westerners and the *Onnagata*, a moral minefield for the contemporary artist.

In 2014, I was lucky enough to attend a performance of the Nakamura-za (Kabuki company) at the Lincoln Centre in New York. There was a moment that challenged my preconceptions of Kabuki Theatre in contemporary contexts- the performers after the interval began to mop the stage and asked us to film them on our mobile devices and to share Kabuki with the world. I found this shocking - the art form is so traditional that the transition into our modern timeline was startling. Secondly, Kabuki had previously seemed (to me) as almost inaccessible outside of its parent culture, and here we were being asked to celebrate and share it online.

Assuming that a native of the Occident were to play roles (or those inspired by) of the *Onnagata*[1]- men playing female roles in Kabuki- (which I do), there is a labyrinth of 21st Century ideologies that the audience will traverse. Current views of cultural appropriation and contemporary feminism cast a somewhat unappealing eye over the appropriative artist, due to occidental colonial history and white and patriarchal privilege- and rightly so. On the other hand, there is a gold mine of performance techniques within Kabuki to explore and at risk of living up to my colonial heritage, I choose to utilize them.

The appropriative aspects of performing *Onnagata* roles as Westerners, I figure, are threefold:

1. **Appropriation of culture**
2. **Appropriation of gender**
3. **Appropriation of/into queer performance**

I'll outline this theory, take a peek at some other appropriative Western devils and see if I can finally come to a conclusion on whether or not my work is morally bankrupt.

1. Appropriation of Culture

Google's dictionary defines 'cultural appropriation' as: 'the unacknowledged or inappropriate adoption of the customs, practices, ideas, etc. of one people or society by members of another and typically more dominant people or society.' Herein, lies the issue: this definition and those by Oxford and Cambridge dictionaries all state something about the uninformed, or inappropriateness of the action, rather than recognising it as an act of legitimate creation. A fairly recent example of this would be a cultural capitalist move by Jamie Oliver and his Jerk rice faux pas. BBC Newsbeat says this is: 'because the product doesn't contain many of the ingredients traditionally used in a Jamaican Jerk marinade.' Understandably, this feeds directly into conversation around race relations, cultural insensitivity and (both post and present) colonial theory.

[1] Also known as "Oyama"

If we can however, make the assumption that both Britain and Japan are first world island nations that have never directly colonised the other and assume some form of loose vassalage under the USA; it would be reasonable to suggest a more open conversation can be held around the appropriation and sharing of culture between the two nations. For the appropriation of *Onnagata* performance work (certainly by British artists) there is a fortuitous nature to our countries' shared fascination with cultural preservation, exportation and pillaging.

A handful of case studies of fellow western artists that have appropriated kabuki aesthetics are discussed below- looking at a mixture of performance techniques and tropes and some of the critical discourse around these art works with a smattering of my own opinion.

Maurice Béjart

In 1985-86, choreographer Maurice Béjart was invited to create *The Kabuki* for The Tokyo Ballet by Director Sasaki Tadatsugu- an interesting earlier example of appropriation of Kabuki aesthetics into western art (in this case classical ballet). Contextually, *The Kabuki* is an adaptation of a traditional Kabuki and Bunraku play (*Kanadehon Chushingura*).

In his production note Béjart states that:

> 'There is no point in attempting a "mise en scène" of Kabuki ; it is sufficient in itself. It is neither necessary or desirable that a modern director should meddle with a perfect and living medium… However, it is possible to use the Kabuki as a foundation upon which to dream, to aspire and to create a contemporary work.' p6.

Béjart, does somewhat successfully create a Kabuki inspired work, but does fail to replicate any sense of traditional Kabuki technique from what I have observed. The female roles are played by women and contribute to the classical ballet pas de deux as would be expected, being lifted and spun by a male role. One of the females is somewhat unusual, showing elements of *Aragoto* movement patterning- women's roles in Kabuki are (almost exclusively) never perform with masculine, powerful movements of this kind.

Within the same production note is a bold statement from French writer François Weyergans. 'The Japanese consume European culture like children demanding sweets be bought at the school gates.' p41. This statement possesses the sensitivity of a sledgehammer, but it does raise an important argument for appropriative art. From photographs of the production it is noted that many famous Kabuki actors attended *The Kabuki*, including Nakamura Utaemon VI and Bandō Tamasaburō V, surely demonstrating openness for cultural dialogue between ballet choreographers and their Kabuki counterparts.

It would appear that there is a further cultural conversation to be had, which the traditional arts of the Orient and Occident are but a small topic. Weyergans

continues: 'The Japanese couldn't care less. They adored "*The Kabuki*"… "Undoubtedly," said one spectator, "this will influence Japanese fashion and even the strip-tease!"' Pg. 41-42. In a broader context as well, the work was followed and aided by fashion designer Issey Miyake. The costumes and set were designed by Portuguese designer Nuno Core-Real, the score by Mayuzumi Toshiro- was then played by both Kabuki musicians and Tokyo City Philharmonic Orchestra- resulting in a layering of appropriative practices and elements that assembled the work.

Béjart also created a short performance called *La Mort de Cordelia.* King Lear played by Béjart performs opposite Bandō Tamasaburō V as Cordelia, in which, characterisation was drawn from both traditional Shakespearean acting methods and *Onnagata* performance techniques. It would appear Béjart's penchant for the appropriated ran to both Britain and Japan, adding an additional ingredient to his appropriative soup. In *Shakespeare and Kabuki in Maurice Béjart: His King Lear: La Mort de Cordelia*, Yumiko Yamada muses 'with admiration that it could narrate no less of the tragedy; with so few characters, in such a short time, and virtually without words, yet through a transcendental mixture of East and West.'p171.

Lindsay Kemp

In 1991, Lindsay Kemp performed, what I believe to be a seminal work for appropriative performance aptly named *Onnagata.* This work was, quintessentially, an 83-minute solo by Kemp, with support from performers acting as stagehands for props and scenery- a typical example of Kabuki's *Kurogo* (also known as *Koken*)[2].
The kurogo aid in onstage costume changes, facilitate Kemp's
Kemp having researched *Onnagata* tradition and performance language (with tutelage from Sasae Onesuke) created a work, which appropriates aesthetic elements of Kabuki transvestism throughout.

The beginning section of the work sees Kemp fly into and around the stage, using a technique known as '*Chunori'*. This technique traditionally symbolizes (somewhat obviously) the supernatural powers of a given character. The arrival of Kemp in such a culturally 'queer' manner could, particularly when combined with kimono and kabuki wig, give the impression of a (magic) young woman. It is more likely though, that a 90s British audience would have interpreted this entrance as a flamboyant opening statement of Kemp's soaring homosexuality.

Unfortunately, on this piece alone, there is not a huge amount of critical writing to discuss. It is noted on the Lindsay Kemp Company website that *Onnagata (the work)* is, in fact: 'Orpheus in kimonos'. Interestingly this seemingly small statement, adds an additional complexity to the culturally appropriative puzzle that is Kemp's work. *Onnagata* revisits roles that Kemp played in his career- appropriating a variety of characters including the self. The layering of "traditional" Kabuki techniques over

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'Kurogo perform various tasks, but basically make it easy for actors to play their roles, mainly by handing over or putting away props ar by helping with costume changes.' http://www2.ntj.jac.go.jp/unesco/kabuki/en/4/4_04_07.html

the top of this does produce a confounding sense of cultural queerness and unfamiliarity- but also disguises Kemp's aging body and arguably lack-lustre virtuosity from a Western audience- who would be unfamiliar with the aesthetic of Kabuki performance. As a dance artist of advanced age, *Onnagata* would in many ways have allowed Kemp to remain relevant- and so there is an argument for appropriative performance making and the sustainability of one's career.

Lindsay Kemp in *Onnagata*
Available: https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/lindsay-kemp-dancer-and-david-bowie-collaborator-dead-at-80-715849/

Flowers (1974) employed several uses of *Onnagata* aesthetics to create characterisation, there are several moments of fan dances which within Kabuki repertoire can symbolise multiple objects. Kemp also utilizes the walking technique of the *Oiran* (used in the portrayal of Divine), an interesting choice due to the *Oiran* being a high-ranking courtesan and Divine arguably being a socially abhorrent pig in a wig. This is an interesting juxtaposition that highlights the appreciation Kemp has for Divine by developing their physicality using a technique, which is perceived as the pinnacle of beauty in Japan.

David Bowie

The acceptance of Bowie's appropriative nature of performance making in Japan is an example of a (potentially unique) view of culture being available for export, trade and appropriation, especially as credit is placed specifically on Japanese culture.

Ziggy Stardust was particularly leaning toward *onnagata* aesthetics learning application of Kabuki makeup from Bandō Tamasaburō V- who gifted him the white base makeup for this character. An earlier inspiration and reference for future

Kabuki influence was from his dance training with Lindsay Kemp in the mid 1960s. Helen Thian quoted in an interview to BBC Asia, *David Bowie's love affair with Japanese style*: "It wasn't trying to be literal interpretation, but rather inspired by its gender-bending androgyny. That's what makes it so powerful, it's more evocative."

From the same interview, Thian also says Bowie was '"absolutely the first" Western artist to employ the *hayagawari* - literally "quick change" - technique from Kabuki, with unseen stagehands ripping off the dramatic cape on stage to reveal another outfit.' Undoubtedly, there is an appropriative element to Bowie's performances, which is probably applicable, in some respect to all of his work. Whether that is appropriation of gender, other cultural music, instruments, fashions etc. In regards to Bowie's Japanophilia though, Thian argues that 'this was "a homage to Japanese culture and the Japanese loved it", she said, as Bowie challenged the tendency of Western fashion at the time to lump all Asian styles together as "Orientalism".'

In 1977, Bowie's perceived Japanophilia can be heard in his music. In the track *Moss Garden*, in collaboration with Brian Eno, we hear Bowie play a *koto* (a traditional Japanese instrument with 13 strings). Its meandering meditation of sliding scales is combined with Eno's synthesizer creating a conflict between Eastern and Western sounds; resembling that of aircraft passing overhead, a sobering reminder of World War II. The *koto* is a fascinating instrument of cross-cultural usage, as it can be tuned to classical music in both the Occident and the Orient.

Eonnagata

Perhaps the most important work of *Onnagata* appropriation would be Robert le Page, Russell Maliphant & Sylvie Guillem's collaboration in the making of *Eonnagata.*

Eonnagata is described by Robert Lepage's website Ex Machina as pitting:

> *'*the fan against the sword, the courtesan against the swordsman. But it also explores the embodying of one sex by the other in what is more an investigation of gender than sexuality. The work draws on onnagata, a Kabuki theatre technique that enables actors to represent women in a highly stylized fashion, shedding new light on the Chevalier d'Eon'.

This blending of Kabuki aesthetics with that of the French Chevalier is quite remarkable. The costuming, by Alexander McQueen, managed to expertly display elements of traditional Kabuki transvestism and the styling of 18th Century French dress. Choreographically, *Eonnagata* did blend oriental and western movement patterning, but whether the inspiration is clearly that of the shows namesake is not entirely apparent. Maliphant and Guillem- beautiful performers though they are- do not seem to emphatically embody the subtle nuance that is portrayed in the *Onnagata* technique. This highlights the necessity for accuracy within traditional and contemporary techniques during the creative process- allowing for a greater sophistication of choreographic language and embodiment in performance.

Robert Lepage in *Eonnagata*
Costume by Alexander McQueen
Avaialble:
https://www.danceviewtimes.com/2009/03/eonnagata.html

The extreme minimalism of the set design also lacked the effervescence of both Kabuki and 18th Century France. The startling lack of colour is important to note within this work, costumes and sets being beiges and white- with a hint at Orientalism in a giant red fan. Respected dance critic, Graham Watts, writes for London Dance: '*Eonnagata* never quite reaches the heights that we might expect from the sum total of its parts.' Intercultural theatre making should, to effectively communicate its inspiration, cite it effectively across the entire production, scenography, costuming, accompaniment etc. Not to state that different inspirations could not exist in the same work, but in order for them to be apparent to its audience there should be a consistency in visual, aural and guttural language.

The Mikado

What culturally appropriative discourse on Japan would be complete without a reference to the (in)famous opera by Gilbert & Sullivan, *The Mikado (1885)*? This *opera* has attracted a lot of attention in the USA over recent years, particularly in discourse around cultural appropriation. Undoubtedly, there are many aspects of this opera and its reincarnations that are problematic- from its racist character names (Yum Yum, Nanki Poo etc.) and the crude stereotyping of place names (Titipu). The libretto directly places the play within Japan, and so creates a representation for its Victorian audience of Japan specifically. This inaccuracy would maintain the belief as cited by the V&A that 'Both China and Japan were compared to the Middle Ages, but whereas with China it was the backwardness of that era that was envisaged, with Japan it was the romance of the past that appealed.' This was perpetuated through Gilbert & Sullivan's limited exposure to Japan, before writing *The Mikado*. Although they attended the Japanese Village in Knightsbridge (1885), this particular installation was lorded over by the Victorians as triumphant while Japanese critics at the time criticised it for a lack of authenticity. Surely, the famous duo would have been aware of their inaccuracies, were they conducting thorough research?

The 1966-67 performance of *The Mikado* by D'Oyly Carte Opera Company used a monochromatic backdrop inspired by *suiboku-ga* [3] (ink wash painting). This was complimented with very basic, graphic structures, which when actors were present in the performing space gave the impression of *ukiyo-e* [4] block prints. Frequently

[3] Monochromatic ink-was painting- usually black on warm coloured paper
[4] block print and painting technique usually used to depict famous actors, prostitutes, travel and landscape scenery, nature and erotica. 17th-19th Century

used to portray kabuki actors this art style was adopted by the theatres in Japan as a way of blocking for performance scenes. Thus this scenic development shows considerable competence and understanding of traditional Japanese form. Unfortunately, it is not complimented through the physical action of the performance, which shows relatively little traditional dance technique. This is exemplified during the iconic *'Three Little Maids'*. Valerie Masterson (Yum Yum) and her fellow maids progress through choreographic stereotyping of Japanese culture: particularly their walking style. This creates a disheveled misappropriation of Japanese performance technique for the audience. This same sentiment was then discussed in a blog by Leah Nanako Winkler who wrote about a 2015 revival of *The Mikado* by the New York Gilbert & Sullivan Players: 'actual subscribers will go to the NYU Skirball Center and watch a cast of white people (minus two) use Opera and expertise as an excuse to traipse around as Japanese caricatures'.

On a slightly more contemporary note, the English National Opera are reviving *The Mikado* this season (2019/20). Although it has been removed from its "exotic" context and planted somewhere far more Western, I can't help but feel that this removal of the context detracts from the work- an attempt to culturally correct Gilbert & Sullivan's ignorance would be a far better way of repurposing the opera.

Portland State University

Portland State University has created numerous Kabuki performances that can be studied online. *Kabuki Kool*, a Japanese TV series promoting Kabuki for international audiences has showcased a recreation of *Kanadehon Chushingura* (The 47 Loyal Samurai/ Ronin) (2016). This showcasing of American appropriation and restaging would seem to indicate that the Kabuki community are keen to continue discourse of the art form outside of its parent culture. However, this production is arguably performed in 'yellow-face', including exaggerated makeup around the performers' eyes. This showcases a modicum of insensitivity toward Japanese cultural heritage and race relations. Without casting too much judgment, I would argue that this is unsurprising of the Americans- who decided to perform the entirety of the play in English. Portland State University also staged a 'Kabuki Night' in 2017. Curiously, there were two *Onnagata* performances in this billing, both played by women. These roles not being played by men, in some ways negates the artistry of the *Onnagata* and therefore does not convey the traditions of the art form. I would argue that this viewpoint is supported by the performers failure to technically reproduce a *shuriashi* (sliding walk)- the basis of much of the Kabuki dance repertory and action.

Concluding Appropriation of Culture

One of the cultural problems that appear as a result of any Western appropriation of Kabuki is that this theatrical form has a training system that is passed down within actor families, in Japan. It is also rarely gifted outside of this 'inner circle'. Minoru Fujita in his essay: *Onnagata in Kabuki and The London Globe Theatre,*

states- 'only through the guiding principle of this passing down of the patterns and forms of performance and by strict practice, have Japanese *Onnagata* actors maintained the refinement and profundity of the expressiveness of the art in their own traditional stage space…' p158. Within the context of appropriative creation, this exclusionary viewpoint excludes the appropriator from creating work that would be considered genuine to the appropriated art form.

In order for an appropriative element to exist and be actively witnessed within its execution, surely the performance has to operate outside of the art forms traditional space? Therefore, is there not an argument for all appropriative art to be inherently intercultural? Surely we should simply rebrand all sloppy appropriation as purely exploitative? In *Inclining East, Kabuki and Interculturalism in Contemporary Theatre,* Elizabeth Jochum states,

> 'classical theatre forms have the potential to be appropriated and applied towards a more universal performance aesthetic that resonates across all cultures… This is not to be achieved through slavish reproduction or careless copying but rather through the careful study of how specific forms function theatrically, and how similar performance patterns and aesthetics can be used similarly in non-Asian of Other contexts. If such exploration is guided by an investigative spirit, rather than an exploitative search for the exotic, then it is possible to arrive at a meaningful production or performance technique.' P88.

Although this viewpoint takes into account investigative spirit, it does omit the option to use appropriation as critical engagement with the traditional art form. I would argue, that in order to successfully navigate the appropriative pathway outside an art forms parent culture; there has to be an investigative spirit in the search, consideration and review (or self-reflection) of the exoticism that led to the portrayal of culturally appropriative elements.

In relation to my own appropriative practice, the exoticism that I find quite so fascinating is around the philosophical nature of Japanese creative practices. Junichirō Tanizaki provides us a sparkling example of a cultural difference between Japan and the Occident in his essay- *In Praise of Shadows*:

> 'it turns out to be more hygienic and efficient to install modern sanitary facilities- tiles and a flush toilet-… There is no denying the cleanliness; every nook and corner is pure white... A beautiful woman, no matter how lovely her skin, would be considered indecent were she to show her bare buttocks or feet in the presence of others; and how very crude and tasteless to expose the toilet to such excessive illumination... In such places the distinction between the clean and the unclean is best left obscure, shrouded in a dusky haze.'p11.

2. Appropriation of Gender

There has been a long history of Anglicized gender-illusionist appropriators, which offers a striking familiarity within our performance culture to that of Japan's. Our joint cultural penchant to see men portray insubordinate or less capable female roles is undeniable. From Shakespearean usage of 'passable' transvestism to the introduction of the pantomime dame and our current popular culture obsession with drag performance, the UK's gender illusionists have undeniably impacted (positively and negatively) views of women in both heteronormative and queer cultural development. I'm going to attempt to discuss this across portrayals of women by male and non-binary artists in Japan and the UK specifically, and look at some of the links that these examples establish with gender performance and feminist theories.

In contemporary Western performance discourse, the gender performance of the *Onnagata* would be considered cross-gender performance. For the sake of argument, I would say that it locates itself away from drag as it currently exists in the early 21st Century. The drag paradigm has shifted remarkably from that of queer, small-scale performance, to international touring and its entry into popular fashion and music scenes. Perhaps this highly codified language is more akin to the pantomime dame- particularly in its heteronormative societal placement. The dame places itself within a Camp, theatrical framework, which allows for an over-exaggerated portrayal of women through a (arguably) burly masculinity. The Blackpool Grand enlightens its website visitors on the role of the dame: 'Panto dames are a study in female eccentricity, typically old, fairly common, and unattractive- although the Dame clearly believes the opposite.' Although this character archetype probably still exists in contemporary culture, surely its continued portrayal by men is damaging to 21st Century feminist discourse? Importantly, the dame and the *Onnagata* are both characters that are portrayed in a class based system- although frequently on opposite ends of the spectrum. With the dame representing the gaudy, 'common' and the *Onnagata* occupying the more resplendent, high-ranking side of the societal spectrums.

Britain's fascination with the Orient was at its zenith during the late 1800's. This not only included the birth of the Great Exhibition, Chinoiserie and the creation of *the Mikado* though. The V&A website shed some fascinating light on one particular character in a reproduction of *Aladdin* (originally performed in 1788) - 'Widow Twankay appeared in 1861 when H.J Byron introduced it. Twankay was the name of a popular green tea from China.' Although popular, this tea was also known for being made with poor quality leaves- signifying a woman past her prime. As an Eastern-inspired Western character – the Victorians must have deigned it important to reinforce the patriarchal system, even whilst having a female monarch at the head of the empire. This is perpetuated through shaming of this working-class, ethnically 'other' character through her name- let alone her occupation as a washerwoman. In 1909 at Drury Lane, this continued oppression of women is actively performed in *Aladdin*, the V&A continuing- 'On hearing a great noise

offstage, one character called out "They are only feeding a suffragette".' Contextually, the understanding is that this was appropriate to the time, but one can't help but wonder whether a rebranding is due? Particularly as famous actors, including Ian McKellen continue to play Widow Twankey into the 21st Century. What does this female character give to audiences of the West in regards to understanding of her heritage or discourse on roles of women? I would argue, not much.

Contemporary Shakespearean actor Mark Rylance expressed considerable interest in Kabuki theatre during the early 21st Century. He directed a production of *Anthony and Cleopatra* at the Globe, London. In this restaging he also played Cleopatra, reviving the historic practice of male actors playing female roles within Shakespearean theatre. At the time he was learning skills needed to accurately portray female characters some of which were from renowned *Onnagata*, Nakamura Gangiro III. This intercultural dialogue within gender appropriation is substantial but not extensively written about.

Minoru Fujita writes about Rylance's gender bending performance of Olivia in *Twelfth Night* (2003) at the Globe: 'The tiny short steps the white-faced and queenly-attired Mark Rylance was seen to take was certainly an *Onnagata*-like method of walking, which could be described as superbly feminine mincing.'p141. The influence of the *Onnagata* technique on this occasion would appear to be favorable to audience reception of Olivia, which marks a success in the combination of traditional Shakespearean and Kabuki techniques. Notably both art forms that, at the time of their creation, would have been for the lower classes' entertainment and have since been elevated to high status, particularly through their usage of gender impersonation. The term 'feminine mincing' does conjure (for me at least) a derogatory viewpoint for the reader. Google dictionary classes "mincing" as: 'of a man) affectedly dainty in manner or gait; effeminate.' This sense of artifice is (probably) inherent to the successful creation of gender illusions, but does however carry centuries of connotations around effeminacy being portrayed as meek, mild, inferior or weak.

It is notable to state that the establishment of *wakashū* kabuki and the final developments in Shakespeare's boy actors happened during a remarkably similar time period. Notably, the restoration of the British monarchy, and subsequently, also the theatre in 1660, led to a somewhat abrupt end of female impersonation within drama and plays. On the contrary, *Onnagata* artistry began to really develop after 1629- and so there is a shortage of information, which could lead to an adequate chronological comparison of these independent techniques. At this time, post-feudal Japan was isolationist and so there is no available prose in English to suggest that there was any portrayal of *Onnagata* influenced artistry outside of Japan at the time of its development.

Paul G. Schlaow states in his essay *Figures of Worship: Responses to Onnagata on the Kabuki stage in Seventeenth-century Japanese vernacular prose*:

> 'If the binary sex-gender system is an expression of the exercise of power dynamics, and the *Onnagata* is a site of resistance to that power, then it is allowed because it resists only partially. While contributing to temporary personal release, the *Onnagata* is not capable of facilitating permanent political release, and in fact could be viewed as contributing to the maintenance of current configurations of power.' p68.

Schlaow is, in my opinion, quite correct. *Onnagata* were not considered citizens of high social status within 17th-19th Century society- although epitomized by the general public, there were consistent challenges and limitations that were delivered onto Kabuki practitioners by the Tokugawa Shogunate. Therefore, even if the *Onnagata* had the power to challenge the status quo for the general public, the restrictions placed upon the development of Kabuki, it's storylines and character portrayal subdued them.

Maki Isaka in *Onnagata: A labyrinth of gendering in Kabuki theatre,* discusses the circulation of publications about Kabuki that became available in the late 17th Century. The ideas and techniques that allow imitation of various Kabuki artistries, being readily available in publication meant that women were able to adopt trends of their favourite actors. 'While these texts were explicitly binding on the primary preachee (*Onnagata*), they were perhaps far more implicitly and insidiously binding on the secondary preachee (women).' p74. The texts he refers to are akin to *The Words of Ayame* [5]*,* and *The Secret Transmissions of the Onnagata* [6]*.* These publications explained in detail the ideal physicality and temperament of men portraying women on the stage. Maki often quotes from Kikunojō's *The Secret Transmissions of the Onnagata,* which argues that an *Onnagata* 'must have many male admirers who wish, "If only there were a woman like this."' P70. This desire for male admirers and patronage within the formation of the technique, would undoubtedly influence how women were portrayed on the stage- the ideal of women being weak, mild etc. which undeniably invokes a very similar gender discourse to that of 17th Century Britain.

Maki also states that 'the term "*futanarihira*" (androgynous beauties) was used to compliment early *Onnagata* on their beauty, while, from the early 18th to late 19th centuries "suffering from gynecological disorders" (*chi no michi ga okorishi*) was the epithet for skillful *Onnagata'*. p15. This systematic mockery by Kabuki actors and critics, of the female body, served to portray the disparity in societal power between men and women. This is also visually perpetuated on the stage, where the highest-ranking actors use "*sandan*", a three-step staircase, while the top-ranking

[5] A treatise for onnagata artistry by famous 17th Century Onnagata, Yoshizawa Ayame I
[6] Another treatise by famous *Onnagata*, Segawa Kikunojō I. With Ayame they dedicated themselves to the faithful imitation of "real women".

Onnagata may only use "*nidan*"- which has only two steps. An obvious reminder of the lower social status of women: even when a man performs the woman.

Donald H. Shively addresses the reason why '*onna'* (women) roles cannot be played by biological women in a marginally problematic way, in his essay: *'The Social Environment of Tokugawa Kabuki:*

> 'The beauty of *Onnagata* acting lies in it's formalized grace. Women in these roles appear too natural, too realistic. Furthermore, since male roles are played in a strong, sometimes exaggerated manner, women lack the physical strength to project an equal stage presence. And again, women who do not exude the peculiar eroticism with its homosexual overtones which has become an inherent characteristic of kabuki. Actresses become plausible only when they play their parts, not by miming women'p40.

I will attest to the operation of Camp within Kabuki, and there were obvious homosexual tendencies within its development (I will touch on this in the section 3). However, Shively's argument presents a staggering misunderstanding of the mimesis of "ideal female" embodiment from circulation of kabuki publications. The vogue of dressing and behaving like *Onnagata* was a key part of the cyclical discourse in construction of femininity during the Edo period (1603-1868). Surely, the women of the Edo period, were already, to some extent performing as *Onnagata* in their daily lives- Shively touches on this too, but fails to make the connection of performance being also of the everyday: 'Styles in weaving and dyeing, in color and pattern of dress, in cosmetics, hairstyles, combs and bodkins, constantly passed between them.' P51.

The female roles in Kabuki are generally maidens, courtesans or princesses of coquettish, meek disposition. In many cases abandoned by their lovers, their enraged spirits (the assumption being that they died of heartbreak) return to the mortal plane in demonic/ serpentine/ animal form. This is exemplified in dance drama *Musume Dôjôji.* Kabuki practitioners developed this story from the ancient Noh play *Dojōji* [7]. Kabuki21.com gives a beautiful depiction of this dance-drama's epilogue:

> 'According to the legend the temple used to have a handsome priest named Anchin, with whom a young girl named Kiyo-hime fell in love. Since he was a priest, he tried to discourage her affection. But she could not forget him and continued to pursue him with great persistence. Finally after all these attempts had been thwarted, her passionate love for him turned into a deep hatred; and she turned into a fierce, fire-breathing serpent. The terrified priest ran to Dôjôji Temple and hid beneath its huge bell, which the abbot lowered over him. In frustration the serpent coiled itself around the bell and poured fire out from its mouth until the bell melted and the priest burned to death.'

[7] Important to note that Noh is a much older art form than Kabuki, so these gender portrayals have been perpetuated, rather than questioned by Kabuki development.

The version of this play included in my bibliography shows Nakamura Kanzaburō XVIII mimicking the maiden- finally revealing her demonic truth by destroying the temple bell a second time. Within feminist theory, this portrayal is problematic, at the very least- if not incredibly harmful. There is an undeniable relationship to Western historical tropes of women being either weak, temptresses or hysterical. This phenomenon of cultural similarity in the depiction of the hysterical woman is interesting, but unsurprising. Hysteria and demonization allow for maintenance of patriarchal power. These portrayals of women can be seen in a myriad of other Kabuki plays and dance dramas, including performances of *Sagi Musume* (where a maiden, heartbroken and lost without a man transforms into a permanently mourning, hell-inhabiting heron) and *Orochi* (an alcohol obsessed demon, so horrified by her serpentine appearance requires the frequent sacrifice of beautiful princesses to ensure her continued passivity). Other plays see women as spider-like witches, luring men into their traps and ghostly apparitions dragging their lovers to their graves. Kabuki from its redevelopment as an all-male theatre, has undoubtedly contributed to the maintenance of patriarchal values in Japanese society, both through its roots as immoral performances for the lower social classes and into a UNESCO protected art form of historical importance.

Contemporary Kabuki superstar Bandō Tamasaburō is undoubtedly the greatest *Onnagata* of the 20th and 21st centuries; his technical and performative elocution is second to none. This performance excellence has in some way reinforced patriarchal portrayals of women, however in 1982, a piece written about him by Steve Lohr in the New York Times sheds an opposing argument: 'Whether as seductress or lover possessed, the principal female character frequently gets what she wants or gets even. Indeed, the triumph of Woman, her chilling power, is one of the recurrent themes in Kabuki.' This 'empowering' of women has continued with his participation in makeup advertisement for women. Or perhaps portraying of the ideal woman as a man problematizes and reinforces patriarchal beauty standards for women in contemporary Japan.

Bandō Tamasaburō V in Sagi Musume
Available: http://segniesogni-prova.blogspot.com/2010/02/kabuki-sagi-musume-heron-maiden.html

Laurence Senelick describes Bandō Tamasaburō V as: 'elegant Tamasaburō, who embodies its (Kabuki's) physical grace and acting virtuosity'p97. Although this is an accurate description of his prowess as a performer, there remains a lack of sufficient critical debate around the roles that are played by contemporary *Onnagata*. Ann Thompson alludes to this in *Performing Gender: The Construction of Femininity in Shakespeare and Kabuki*. 'Are men performing as women for the gratification of other men? What is being said of women in such a case, and what is happening to or for the women in the audience?' p24. Within contemporary performance this is particularly appropriate. I believe that during the appropriation of gender, the appropriator should do one of two things:

1. Accurately portray women in an empowering way
2. Actively encourage their audience to see the injustice of the appropriation.

One specific role-type for female impersonators in Kabuki does attempt to bridge the gap in regards to Kabuki's portrayal of problematic gender performance. The *Onna-budo* is a characteristically interesting role for an *Onnagata* to play- showing the grace of *Onnagata* and when the need arises adapts to wield weaponry to defend herself or her home. Usually the *Onna-budo* is the wife of a samurai, or at least a woman of nobility. There are not many roles of this type, and so little has been written in English textbooks but we can read some notes on the performance of Nakamura Tomijūrō (1721-86) in Yoseharu Ozaki's essay *Shakespeare and Kabuki*:

> 'the third son of Ayamé, who was versatile in acting talent, was particularly skillful at *Onna-budo* (female martial arts), that is, performing the roles of women who are strong both in martial arts and in spirit, and even went so far as to play a role of *Aragoto* (rough business).'p.10-11.

Strength of spirit is an intriguing turn of phrase. Is the message about women from the viewpoint of Kabuki, that women are spirituous only when adopting the warrior like tendencies of *Aragoto* roles? A female character with the capability for 'virtuous' violence is apparently a good thing.

I can't help but feel that the portrayal of women within Kabuki, including the aforementioned *Onna-budo* create problematic portrayals of women that continue to reinforce pre-feminist patriarchal views of the world and the roles this system believe women should inhabit. Surely then, the appropriative Westerner should draw focus to this in their portrayal of the *Onnagata*. This allows the audience to see the inherent problems that exist within Kabuki's gendered power imbalance and, consequently, make up their own minds. Undeniably, the codified history of female impersonation in Kabuki has created a beautiful art form- to be appreciated- but that should not mean it is impervious to critique. If the Occident will insist on policing the world, we should as least do so in order to question and/or protect the portrayal of women also.

3. Appropriation of/into Queer Performance

Maki Isaka, at the beginning of *Onnagata: A Labyrinth of Gendering in Kabuki Theater*, raises the point that:

> 'the meaning of the word "*Kabuki*"- nominalized from a verb, *kabuku (*to lean; to act and/or dress in a peculiar fashion and queer manner)… Not only did it shift from a generic word (that which is eccentric, deviant, queer and the like) to a proper noun (this theatre), but its connotations also altered tremendously from something negative to something positive.'p5.

This shift from societal deviance to tradition/convention is very much reflected in Western popular culture, from punk, dandies, hipsters and modern day cross-gender performance practices. Heritage arguably, is made from the ability to overcome the conventions of the day, and Kabuki is an excellent example of the appropriation of eccentric behavior into popular culture.

Trans drag queen Gia Gunn's introduction of Kabuki virtuosity into popular/ contemporary drag culture creates discourse around trans performance and how this fits into the Kabuki discourse of women not being able to effectively portray women on stage. I have been unable to find any Kabuki commentators who have, passed a comment on this rather unusual (if not unique) circumstance. I would argue though, that from the viewpoint of the famous 17th Century *Onnagata,* Ayame; that for Gunn to live her life as a woman, allows her become as close to the ideal *Onnagata* as possible.

This re-queering of Kabuki, within its history is a relatively recent phenomenon, which has arisen in the wake of globalisation. The West, with its undeniable predisposition against homosexuality, has introduced ideas of homophobia into contemporary Japanese culture. The role of the *Onnagata* until the late 20th Century was seen as a heteronormative (even if somewhat unusual) role to play within Japanese society, the *Onnagata* would often lead 'normal' lives, having wives and children.

Of course, Japan also has its own history of same-sex, age- structured homosexuality, such as *wakashūdō*, but this was often exclusive for the samurai and religious classes, which were considered of greater ranking than that of the actor- particularly during the era of the Tokugawa Shogunate (1603-1867). The shogunate, in order to control prostitution within the Kabuki playhouses, firstly banned female performers (1629) and latterly the performance of the *wakashū* (young boys). Therefore maintaining *wakashūdō* principles for the elite classes and restricting

prostitution to the licensed areas.

Miyagawa Isshô, ca. 1750; Shunga hand scroll (kakemono-e); sumi, color and gofun on silk. Available: https://www.google.com/search?q=wakashudo&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiC5_PS7criAhXcURUIHbfWCgoQ_AUIECgB&biw=1256&bih=518#imgrc=t20Yn8N0ajcHsM:

Shunga: Sex and Pleasure in Japanese Art (2013-14) at the British Museum exhibited a most fascinating example of 17th and 18th Century Japanese sexual culture. This included Kabuki brochures with anatomically accurate paintings of its male actors genitals. These early example of queer prostitution demonstrate that there has been an element of queerness within the Kabuki theatre since this *wakashū* and *yarō* kabuki era. Particularly during the *wakashū* kabuki era, which saw young, epicene boys playing the roles of women- who blessed with beauty of youth were attractive morsels for the affluent, if not socially inferior merchant classes that frequented the Kabuki theatre.

Lindsay Kemp as queer artist and appropriator also had considerable influence over the re-queering of Kabuki, particularly to audiences in the UK and mainland Europe. Before his (somewhat inaccurate) portrayals of Kabuki, there would have been very little opportunity to see the art form outside of Japan and as such would have had a great deal of effect on the perceptions of the artistry of the *Onnagata* in the Western world in the 1990s. Kemp's queerness, undoubtedly would have cast a (not inappropriate) shadow of homosexuality over the work- whether knowingly or not, linking the artistry of the *Onnagata* back to its roots in male prostitution, male-love, patronage and the admiration of the epicene Japanese youth.

Pi the Mime performed at the *Cabaret and Burlesque Graduation* in 2015 at the Royal Vauxhall Tavern, London. The work they showed issued a somewhat

problematic interpretation of (what I assume is) a cherry blossom celebration dance. This is a fine example of the queer community's adaptation and camping of other cultures- although this is inherent in queer art practices, particularly for societal, political and cultural comment, there is a necessity for cultural accuracy to be displayed. This scene saw Pi dressed in a kimono, and having the audience blow cherry blossom (with a fan) around them. Although the performance was received well by the (predominantly white) audience of the RVT, it did lack any rudimentary techniques or choreographic practice of the Orient- least of all Japanese dance. Herein lies the issue: as a marginalised community ourselves, is it not important to convey a researched embodiment of our influences when we create art?

British Asian drag performer Sum Ting Wong has a tongue-in-cheek technique for dealing with racial stereotyping within her performances. She challenges Western portrayals of the Orient, introducing Vietnamese and Chinese vocal cadence, pitch and tone- particularly when mentioning her parents. This creating and destroying of preconceptions for Western audiences (who often find out that she is from Birmingham only after a few minutes of her act) is often disorientating. This relationship with her audience draws attention to the appropriative nature of accents and mockery in Western culture. This bears relation to the queer community, particularly in the creation of the ballroom scene- where heteronormative performance is classified as "passing" (being an acceptable appropriation of a group one does not belong to). Although Sum Ting Wong's work is not of kabuki origin, it does raise, through drag, issues of race relations between the East and West. This idea continues to feature heavily within British and American Asian performance art along with the concept of cultural integration- specifically first and second generation immigrants "passing" within Western communities. These similar values can be seen in the work of bio-queen[8] and cabaret performer Lilly SnatchDragon.

In *Notes on Camp*, Susan Sontag, makes several important statements and questions about Camp and it's inherent relationship to queer and non-binary performance.

> "11. Camp is the triumph of the epicene style. (The convertibility of 'man' and 'woman', 'person' and 'thing'.) But not all style, that is, artifice, is ultimately epicene. Life is not stylish. Neither is Nature.
> 12. The question isn't, 'Why travesty, impersonation, theatricality?' The question is, rather, 'When does travesty, impersonation, theatricality acquire the special flavour of Camp?'[p10.]

Fittingly, the 2019 Met Gala theme was Camp, and icons of popular culture embodying Camp were shown for the whole world to view. This was observed in the entrance performance of Lady Gaga, but more importantly two drag queens (for the first time ever at the Met Gala), Aquaria and Violet Chachki attended- flaunting their androgynous beauty and exemplifying Camp aesthetic. Ezra Miller portrayed

[8] Female artist that adopts characteristics and performance habits of drag queens within their own work.

an alternate reality through extreme makeup and a non-binary dress and suit combination overlaid with crystalline corsetry. This appropriation of artifice and convertibility of gender has never been more relevant within popular culture with the rise of social media (in itself becoming a Camp paradigm)- 'Camp is the glorification of character'[p21.] Sontag continues.

Both drag queens and *Onnagata* achieve hyper stylised gender performance through the execution of Camp techniques and frequently through the generosity afforded by their own epicene bodies- in turn allowing them to create a "mise en scène" of a (often) binary woman. This creation, although to be admired does fundamentally exclude the biological woman, particularly within American and Japanese gender illusionary performance practices. There is a focus for these performers to become more woman than women. I perceive (and hope) that the British queer performance scene is slightly more inclusive in its portrayal and acceptance of women. Hopefully this discourse will continue to facilitate more liberal and Camp gender (dis)illusion.

Conclusion

Not to stomp over old ground, but without finding a better quote, Junichirō Tanizaki mentions Kabuki a couple of times in *In Praise of Shadows:* 'But the Kabuki is ultimately a world of sham, having little to do with beauty in the natural state.'[p42.] This state of inherent artifice within Kabuki directly feeds into Sontag's theorization of Camp: 'One is drawn to Camp when one realizes that 'sincerity' is not enough.'[p26.] Perhaps Kabuki practitioners of the early 17th Century realised this before their Western counterparts. Assuredly, this inherent campness and observed fakeness that has led to an aesthetic hyper-stylisation is what has dragged my attention to Kabuki impersonation.

Bandō Tamasaburō in his interview with Mr Lohr from the New York Times said: 'most men would try to make their ideal woman into their wife. But I have made the ideal woman into my business.' This is a beautiful sentiment. It encapsulates what he feels he needs from a woman and rather than expecting another to fulfil this role, he capitalises on his natural talents and enthusiasm for the study of women. An enthusiasm most gender illusionists empathically share. My admiration for the women in my life and my skill set as a movement artist gift me a rare ability to portray this admiration through studied mimesis.

Diep Tran argues in a blog post, hilariously named *Keep your hands off my kimono, white people* for American Theatre that:

> 'Appropriation is not just outright stealing. It is relegating any trace of non-white ethnicity to set dressing, while not employing people of color as performers or on your creative team. It's putting white actors in kimonos or leather dresses so that white artists can have a conversation about white culture with white audiences.'

I can't say I entirely agree. Japan and Singapore have a long history of appropriating other cultures (specifically Chinese and Western), and so why should I keep my hands off *your* kimono? I quite like them, and lovingly look after them. Imagine returning to your parents' house as an adult and then defecating on their priceless rug- unthinkable surely. Appropriation art should be sensitive to its parent culture- and if it is well intentioned, well researched and (most importantly) well executed then I say: appropriation, shanté you stay.

Arguably, the portrayal of *onnagata* roles by westerners throws up some interesting topics for debate, but I believe the appropriation offers discourse to be discussed within its performance. The portrayal of research and understanding is critical in execution of appropriative art- **the audience should know that you too see the problems within your work**. Hopefully, they'll then be a touch more forgiving. If not, as Gary Lambert, a dear tutor used to say: 'It's only fuckin' dancin'.'

Gia Gunn in *RuPaul's Drag Race All Stars* Season 4- Episode 1
Available: https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2018/12/17/drag-race-all-stars-4-episode-1-review/

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