



Edo Kabuki in Transition: From the Worlds of the Samurai to the Vengeful Female Ghost

By Satoko Shimazaki

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Satoko Shimazaki revisits three centuries of kabuki theater and its dynamic representations of medieval Japanese tales and tradition, boldly reframing Edo kabuki as a key player in the formation of an early modern urban identity. Challenging the common understanding of kabuki as a subversive entertainment and a threat to shogunal authority, Shimazaki argues that kabuki actually instilled a sense of shared history in Edo's inhabitants, regardless of their class. It did this, she shows, by constantly invoking "worlds," or sekai, largely derived from medieval military chronicles, and overlaying them onto the present. Shimazaki explores the process by which, as the early modern period drew to a close, nineteenth-century playwrights began dismantling the Edo tradition of "presenting the past" by abandoning their long-standing reliance on the sekai. She then reveals how, in the 1920s, a new generation of kabuki playwrights, critics, and scholars reinvented the form yet again, "textualizing" kabuki so that it could be pressed into service as a guarantor of national identity, in keeping with the role that the West assigned to theater. Shimazaki's vivid and engaging reinterpretation of kabuki history centers on the popular and widely celebrated ghost play Tokaido Yotsuya kaidan (Ghost Stories at Yotsuya, 1825) by Tsuruya Nanboku. Along the way, she sheds fresh light on the emergence and development of the ubiquitous trope of the vengeful female ghost, linking it to the need to explore new themes at a time when the old samurai worlds were rapidly losing their relevance.

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Editorial Review

Review

A sophisticated, entertaining, and well-written contribution to nineteenth-century kabuki studies that both challenges the conventional wisdom of early modern theater scholarship and illuminates the splendid, ghastly world of Japanese horror. (Keller Kimbrough, author of *Wondrous Brutal Fictions: Eight Buddhist Tales from the Early Japanese Puppet Theater*)

Satoko Shimazaki's fascinating study of early modern kabuki performance reveals a new kabuki theater to us, not a cultural practice with a relatively stable body of texts at its center but a major site of social and cultural negotiation whose central feature and strength lies in its remarkable variety and adaptability. (Marvin Carlson, author of *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine*)

Edo Kabuki in Transition is an extraordinary contribution to the field of kabuki studies, in both the West and Japan. Its unconventional yet comprehensive view of Edo kabuki's evolution, especially its playwriting practices, filtered through the lens of Tsuruya Nanboku IV's 1825 coproduction of his revolutionary ghost play *Yotsuya kaidan* and the popular history play *Chushingura*, is original and searching. Satoko Shimazaki's highly readable, marvelously researched study gives us both a penetrating understanding of the fluidity of Edo dramaturgy and an exceptionally thorough examination of the ghost play genre. (Samuel L. Leiter, author of *The Art of Kabuki: Five Famous Plays*)

This fascinating book is a bold revisioning of the development of kabuki theater in Edo (present-day Tokyo).... Highly recommended. (*Choice*)

About the Author

Satoko Shimazaki is assistant professor of Japanese literature and theater at the University of Southern California. Her research focuses on early modern Japanese theater and popular literature; the modern history of kabuki; gender representation on the kabuki stage; and the interaction of performance, print, and text.

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