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# THE GRAND KABUKI



ONCE A DECADE the traditional Grand kabuki visits America. In this authentic National Theatre of Japan female roles are played by onnagata, female impersonators, sons of several generations of onnagata. The leading actor was Ichikawa Ennosuke III, considered Japan's most versatile actor, having performed the amazing feat of acting major roles in 18 plays over a two-day period in honor of his forebears, at kabuki-za in Tokyo in 1964. (A kabuki play can run 10 hours! The audience brings or buys bento lunches.)

The two selections performed at The Kennedy Center seemed to be especially chosen with me in mind, as they were both based on Supernatural themes. The fox figures widely in supernatural and folk lore in Japan, as do demons or oni.

The first act was a scene from the Fourth Act of the five-act play, YOSHITSUNE SENBON ZAKURA. The major role is that of Tadanobu, the fox who has taken the form of the warrior Tadanobu. The role involves a display of "keren" or ingenious stage tricks and special effects to emphasize the role's non-human characteristics. The fox leaps out of hidden trapdoors, his white fur kimono gleaming, all most effective.

In a tale of sibling rivalry and intrigue, Yoshitsune, younger brother of the shogun Yoritomo, has fled for shelter to the mountain mansion of an ally. He put his sweetheart under the protection of the warrior Tadanobu without knowing it was a false Tadanobu, the fox actually. At the same time he gave Shizuka a valuable "tsuzumi" drum called Hatsune. As the plot thickens, Shizuka is faced with the two Tadanobu, and she remembers that the Tadanobu who accompanied her not only disappeared strangely at times, but whenever she struck the drum, he immediately appears at her side, as if from nowhere. When challenged by Shizuka, the fox Tadanobu contritely tells his story. He is in reality a fox, and the drum, Hatsune, is made of the hide of his parent fox. Thus when the drum is struck, he hears in its note the voice of his father speaking to him, so he had been unable to leave its side. Yoshitsune, listening from the other room, comes out to comfort the grieving fox and then presents him with the precious drum. Joyfully the fox dances around with the drum, till it starts to sound without anyone striking it. The fox listens intently, and says that his parent is warning them that a group of evil priests is pushing into the mountains in pursuit of Yoshitsune. Saying that he will use his magic power to rout the enemy, the fox Tadanobu disappears into the air, after promising that he will always be on hand to help them in the future.

Even though you do not understand Japanese, you can follow that play from the much more extensive explanation given in the playbill. However, the KC provided translating earphones through which Faubion Bowers translated extemporaneously. Kabuki is a spectacle for the eyes and in this particular case, the unusually acrobatic acting required by the tricks of stagecraft drew one's close attention.

KUROZUKA, the second play-segment, enthralls with its formalized makeup (no masks) for the demon, and the Japanese ability to treat such a supernatural theme so seriously that one gasps with shock, even as the actors on stage do. Based on a Noh drama,

ADACHIGAHARA, the legend of the man-eating demon of Adachigahara which appears in the guise of a harmless old woman.

The priest Yukei and his companions are seeking a place to put up for the night. They come to a hut where a pleasant, white-haired old woman has been spinning and singing. She grants them a night's lodging in her comfortable hut. As she spins, Yukei speaks to her about Buddhist enlightenment and she listens with interest. She leaves to gather firewood for their warmth, but just before leaving she warns them not to look into the inner room under any circumstance whatsoever. The travelers agree, but the interest of Yukei's lackey has been aroused and driven by curiosity, Tarogo tiptoes to the door of the inner room and peeks in. Terrified, he informs Yukei that the room is full of human bones and bits of torn flesh. Yukei realizes that this must be the abode of the dreaded man-eating demon of Adachigahara.

Meanwhile, in the moonlight, the old woman Iwate is still under the spell of Yukei's sermon, and seems to have attained a certain degree of enlightenment and peace of soul. She performs a tranquil dance portraying her newly gained spiritual serenity. But now the terror-stricken lackey comes dashing by, breaking into her reverie. The woman realizes he has looked into the forbidden room, and this betrayal of her trust turns her once again into a demon filled with fury against deceitful mankind. With a grimace of malice, she disappears into the tall grass.

Presently the demon, ferocious of mien and bearing no resemblance to the gentle old woman, comes stamping to the site. It tries to attack the men, but Yukei fearlessly continues to intone his prayers. The demon finds Yukei's spiritual defense invulnerable, and eventually disappears in defeat.

Needless to say, it would have been worth the entire evening just to see the demon in its traditional makeup, which thrills and chills in a way that Western rubber masks can never do. The costumes of stiffened silk brocades are priceless, not tawdry, and always the stagecraft plays on the deep feelings of the human soul.

#### YOSHITSUNE

was first performed as a puppet play in 1747. Japanese puppets are not worked by strings but by manipulators dressed completely in black, even masks. (Once I saw the National Living Treasure, a blind puppeteer, perform in his 90's, and for that performance the mask was left off so the audience could see him manipulate for the last time.) The costumes and stagecraft psychology for puppet plays (BUNRAKU) are as superior as the other two forms of intellectual theater.

#### KUROZUKA

was adapted from the Noh in 1916, but the current version is dated 1939, very modern, but since it was adapted faithfully from the Noh, it gradually develops from a quiet Noh-like atmosphere into a fierce and furious dance foreign to Noh, and in fact, influenced in this one play by the Russian Ballet.

The logo on the cover, taken from a T-shirt souvenir, is a stylization of the stylized makeup of the demon, topped by a fright wig of frightful proportions. The more sophisticated you are, the more blasé, even cynical, the more you will be captivated and held enthralled by the intensity, facial expressions, postures, acrobatics, costumes and scenery.

The history of Kabuki itself is fascinating. Just as Japan itself was a matriarchy till the Ninth Century, so Kabuki started with a woman in man's clothing, in 1603. The tour groups became composed of prostitutes so that the Tokugawa shogunate issued an edict in 1629 strictly prohibiting women from the stage.

My life, till I was 21, was lived mostly in books. My mother would not allow me to go to any place but to my Great-Aunt. My dad, therefore, opened the doors of the world for me through books..his classics, and gifts..and Richard Halliburton. My cousins, a generation older than I, did not laugh at the 14-year-old who told them she was going to follow in Halliburton's steps. She would swim in the Blue Grotto (I did): she would climb Mount Fuji (I lived in its shadow for 13 years!); I would see "The Magic Stones of Angkor"... So this summer, in the words of my childhood hero, who died too young on a storm-tossed Chinese junk sailing the Pacific to America:

### "I SWIM THE HELLESPONT

"WE ALL have our dreams. Otherwise what a dark and stagnant world this would be. .... I've dreamed of swimming the most dramatic river in the world--the Hellespont. Lord Byron wrote that he would rather have swum the Hellespont than written all his poetry. So would I! ....

"One loved fiercely in legendary Greece. Hero, priestess of a temple though she was and consequently sentenced to a loveless life, was no more human than her lay-sisters. She craved love as they, and when, on the occasion of the popular Sestos Temple festival, her eyes caught the concentrated glance of a graceful and sturdy youth, she did not run away. The moment he guardedly spoke to Hero, her vows, her veil, quite properly, lost their power. She learned that his name was Leander and that he had sailed across the straits in his boat from his home in Abydos to attend the festival. They must not be seen together, since she was a priestess, prohibited by the gods from the society of man--by day. But that night, might he come in the moonlight, to the temple garden? Find me the girl of ancient Greece, or modern Greece, or any other land, who would have said no.

"And so they met in secret, high on the Sestos cliffs... All went well until one of the temple orderlies saw the lovers together and betrayed them to his superiors.

"In a rage the head priest seized the unfortunate girl. He dragged her down the cliff-path to the very edge of the Hellespont, and then up to the top of a tower where the wretched maiden was left in solitary imprisonment, safe from the approach of any more sacrilegious lovers.

"From his homeward-bound boat Leander, in the moonlight, had witnessed the figures entering the tower-prison that rose above the wave-lapped rocks, and in his heart he rejoiced. They were casting her into his very arms--for he was the strongest swimmer in Abydos."

Though only three miles away, "Sestos lay sharply up-stream, and the tideless current, squeezing through the narrowing channel, raced past at such a rate that no swimmer, save a god, could have swum against it. From above, though it would require four miles or more of furious swimming to reach Hero's tower and not be carried past, he might hope to succeed.

"Strange and desperate things are done in the name of love. Shortly after nightfall, Leander, ready to face any obstacle for one caress of his mistress, plunged into the Hellespont. He had hoped Hero would guide him by means of a light from her tower window--nor was he disappointed. ... Tearing the cover of her couch into strips she made a rope by which on the hidden off-shore side he could pull himself up to her apartment! And

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then, what an eager reunion! ....

"But high on Olympus the fates were spinning to an end the immortal lovers' thread of destiny. They saw the storms and the winds that were churning the Hellespont as winter seized the land; they saw the madness for Hero that burned increasingly in Leander's heart, driving him recklessly into the face of any danger. ....

"The usual hour of Leander's arrival had come and long since gone; and dawn, shrill and ominous and glowering, found Hero still at her heart-breaking vigil. And then she saw that Leander had come at last. There on the seething rocks below her window, the strong white body of her lover lay, tossed at her feet by some pitying water god. A flame swept through Hero's heart. In despair she cried out Leander's name, and plunged from her window into the swirling waters."

--THE GLORIOUS ADVENTURE By Richard Halliburton

PERHAPS it is an anti-climax, the way I "swam" the Hellespont, but it is a tribute to the man who set an adolescent girl on THE FLYING CARPET along THE ROYAL ROAD TO ROMANCE. (Coincidentally, Halliburton graduated Princeton U, but it is my daughter who followed in his footsteps there: Pam, Princeton '76.)

Sheldon and Sarah would be in Istanbul on Sunday. They wanted to take the boat to Buyukada, an island paradise where one steps back a hundred years and into a Surrey with the Fringe on Top--no automobiles. I proposed that as long as we would be by the water's edge, they allow me to take my swim, photograph it, and still have time for the boat to Buyukada.

All came off as planned. Being thoroughly respectful of the current since Halliburton had been accompanied by a boat, I informed my elder son that he was not to risk his life for mine--what a romantic way for me to go if go I must! Since he is both disobedient and a strong swimmer, I told him at least throw a shirt so I couldn't drag him down. Then, my mind at ease, we set off. To Leander's Lighthouse!

Turks are everywhere, and a Bosphorus beach is no exception, I found. Not only were the kids splashing merrily in the water, but to get Leander's Lighthouse in the background of the photo, it was necessary that I "swim" in about 18" of water!

The Turks are a happy-go-lucky, friendly people. If I wish to emerge from the water in a swimcap and a chic polyester pant suit dripping, that's my business. The pant suit dried within 10 minutes, as planned, but as we waited for the ferry back, I noticed blood oozing onto my black shoe. A Turkish woman noticed it at the same time and, horrified, delved into her pocketbook for a wad of clean cotton, which she apparently carried for such emergencies as a crazy foreigner swimming around Leander's Lighthouse all dressed up! My foot had been cut badly on the rocks, my blood to mingle with Hero's down through the centuries.

Now, I still have to dive down the well at Chichen-Itza.

Helen

