

Class 2 : Asian Arts

A. Theater Outside Time

1. Class title 1 (Two Lion still)

I chose this title slide because of its energy and color. It is a moment in the traditional Japanese dance-drama form known as **Kabuki**; the figures represent two lions. We can watch it in context in a slightly longer clip.

2. Kabuki Two-Lion clip

3. Kabuki and Noh compared

Kabuki is the younger of the two main Japanese theatrical disciplines, **Kabuki** and **Noh**. It is more popular in nature, more flamboyant, less obviously concerned with religious or moral themes. I will get back to it in the second half of the hour.

4. Roger perplexed

However, I have to say that I am no means addressing this subject as an expert. Most of what I say about ancient Japanese culture are things that I picked up in preparing this class; I am quite capable of making egregious mistakes. What I do know about is the modern *Western* theater. I am doing this class mainly to introduce you to an aesthetic that is *different* from our own. But I also know that Japanese styles have become part of the Western director's tool box—I have done a couple of Kabuki-style opera productions myself—and that its disciplines have been incorporated into the training of the American actor.

5. Section title A (Theater Outside Time)

I call Noh "Theater Outside Time" because its salient characteristic for me is the way it dissolves normal expectations of dramatic propulsion, because it has no claim to provide a gripping theatrical experience in the here and now, so much as a journey into the past achieved in a trancelike state. Perhaps the beginning of this video by the actor **Michishige Udaka** will give you some ideas.

6. The Sprit of Noh (Michishige Udaka documentary), opening

7. A Noh play (later 1800s)

What did you find in that clip that is different from theater as we mostly know it? One of the problems with the timelessness of Noh dramas is the fact that I can't illustrate it properly without giving up the time to get us all into a trancelike state. Instead, I'll show you two scenes from the Noh play *Tomoe* (the name of its principal character) by **Mikata Shizuka**: the first four minutes to show the pace, and then as close as it gets to an action climax. In the opening, note the simple nature and function of the music, the

very slow entrance of the first character, and at the end, the way he introduces himself. Almost all the storytelling in Noh is handled by narrative, whether by the characters themselves, or by the chorus; often the same story is told several times, from different voices. Anyway, don't expect anything significant to happen; just give in to what you hear and see,

8. Mikata Shizuka: *Tomoe*, opening

Several other characters will enter to give a little more of the story. Eventually, the protagonist enters: Tomoe, a female warrior dressed as a samurai. We learn that her husband, also a samurai, has been defeated and must commit seppuku; but she is a woman and must go off and hide. We do not see the husband's ritual suicide; we do not even see *him*. But we do see Tomoe weep, then rise to her feet in a determination to disobey her husband's command but stand and fight.

9. Mikata Shizuka: *Tomoe*, battle

If this had been Kabuki, you would not have had anything like so restrained a battle. Indeed, it is possible that earlier forms of Noh might just have been content with the straightforward narration.

10. Britten, Plomer, *Curlew River*

In 1956, the English composer **Benjamin Britten** (1913–76) made a trip to Japan. While there, he saw the Noh play *Sumidagawa*, which dates back to around 1400. Some years later, having written several conventional large-scale operas and three chamber ones, he was looking for a change of direction, and asked the South-African writer **William Plomer** (1903–73) to write a version of it designed for church performance and set in the fenlands of East Anglia. The story concerns a Madwoman looking for her son who had been kidnapped a year before. The denouement comes when the Ferryman tells the story of a boy who had fallen sick and died, and whose grave was supposed to be holy. All present join in a prayer (a Christian one, in this context), and eventually the Boy's voice is heard calling from the other world (though we won't get that far). The original production used masks and formal Noh gestures for all the characters; this one from Aix-en-Provence is more naturalistic, although it still keeps to the spare Noh aesthetic—the **Madwoman**, for instance, is sung by a tenor, making no attempt to conceal his gender. Musically, the Noh elements are the very small orchestra of 7 players, the frequent use of tone clusters rather than distinct notes, and an unmetred texture in which different singers and instruments often sing or play much the same thing, but at their own pace.

11. Britten: *Curlew River*, the prayer

B. Theater of the Bizarre

12. Section title B (60 Minutes clip)

That brief clip from *60 Minutes* launched our Kabuki section with a sufficient bang, I think. I can probably move straight on to a description of an actual play. But one small thing first. The pose you see the actor striking here, and at several other moments in the video, is called a *Mie*, and it has become a characteristic feature of the art form. Here is a short video explaining how *mie* is executed.

13. Executing the *Mie*

14. Kabuki theater with *hanamichi*

You should also know that Kabuki theaters are not constructed exactly like Western ones. You will recall the first actor we saw in that Noh drama making a slow entrance down a passageway to the left of the main stage (from the audience's point of view). In Kabuki, this entrance is rotated by 90 degrees, so that it now comes through the audience; it is called a *hanamichi* or "flower path." So far from being merely an entrance, it is used as a major acting area; the leading character in the clip I am about to show you remains on the *hanamichi* for some time before he sets foot on the main stage.

15. *Shibaraku*, title

This clip is about 6 minutes long. The first four minutes are a summary of the play, *Shibaraku*; the last two minutes are an explanation of some things you have just seen. Note that while the sound-track is continuous, it seldom if ever lines up with the words the characters are speaking. The play, which dates from 1697, is the epitome of the *aragoto* or "wild warrior" style of acting, involving vigorous movements and exaggerated expressions. It was created by **Ichikawa Danjuro I**, whose choreography is still preserved in performances. In all the three-and-a-quarter centuries of its existence, the play has only been presented by members of the Danjuro family, or a very few others adopted into the clan.

16. The *Aragoto* masterpiece explained: *Shibaraku*

17. Andrei Serban's production of Puccini's *Turandot*

Kabuki has been a great gift to Western directors, especially when faced with Asian subjects. As I said, I myself have done two Kabuki-style productions. But the most magnificent one I know is the Andrei Serban staging of *Turandot*, the Chinese opera by **Giacomo Puccini** (1858–1924), first seen I believe in Covent Garden, London. Here is the end of Act I, in which the tenor hero Prince Calaf, strikes the gong indicating his willingness to tackle Turandot's three riddles, even though all the suitors before him have failed and had their heads cut off. And you will see it ends in a perfectly executed *mie* pose!

18. Puccini: *Turandot* (Serban, Royal Opera House), end of Act I

What is it that particularly attracts you about Kabuki?

C. Not Your Usual Puppet Show

19. Section title C (Bunraku header)

I have one more opera clip to show. But before I do, I have to say a tiny bit about the third major form of Japanese drama: puppet theater or **Bunraku**. These are not marionettes operated by strings, but half-life-sized figures operated by three craftsmen, one of whom is visible, the other two not. It is an obvious extension of the exaggerated movements of *kabuki*, and the puppets are costumed in much the same style. Musically, though, it is simpler, with only one instrumentalist—the **shamisen** player—and one vocalist, the **tayo**, telling the story and doing all the voices, in a manner that is half speech, half song. This video will explain.

20. The components of *Bunraku*

21. Alexander Golovin design for 1918 production of Stravinsky's *Nightingale*

One of the *kabuki*-style productions I have done was of the 1914 opera, *The Nightingale*, by **Igor Stravinsky** (1882–1971). It is based on a Chinese fairytale, and I am sure he chose the subject for much the same reason as he chose *The Firebird*, to allow him to use the rich palette of orchestral colors that had become his specialty. I cannot imagine any production that would not take advantage of that. But I am especially struck by this 2010 production at Aix-en-Provence by **Robert Lepage** (director of Thomas Adès' *Tempest* at the Met that we saw last week). You will see that he not only uses *kabuki*-style décor, but also doubles each of the singers with a *bunraku* miniature version of their character. In this scene, the **Cook**, the **Chamberlain**, and the **Fisherman** are discussing the **Nightingale**, which they have heard but not seen. Each of them must sing *and* work the puppet, while immersed up to their waists in water!

22. Stravinsky: *The Nightingale*, excerpt from Act I

23. Class title 2

D. A Gamut of Gamelan

24. Section title D (A Gamut of Gamelan)

We have moved to Indonesia—specifically to **Bali**, although some later examples may come from Java. Balinese theater may tell similar stories to Kabuki—for example, of gods and other mythological figures—but the presentation is by no means so strictly formalized, with one exception: the dance. And the music, rather than being performed by a handful of instrumentalists, is the work of quite large orchestras, consisting mainly of tuned percussion, called **gamelans**. You will see one such gamelan orchestra at the beginning of this clip of short excerpts. We are going to consider two questions: what do you think is the nature of the dancing, and what principles lie behind the music?

25. Legong dances at Ubud Palace

26. Balinese dancer

It is clear that there are at least two different styles of dancing: for the men and for the women. The men are enveloped in elaborate costumes and masks, and seem to convey strong feelings. The women are made up but not masked—although they might as well be, for apart from moving their eyes, they do not alter their facial expression at all. Their costumes show more of the natural shape of their bodies—but does that make their movements sexual? In Western parodies, it often is, but here I think not. For one thing, the dancers are very young: early teens or pre-teen, before they lose the flexibility. For another, the origin of this dancing is religious, taking place in Hindu shrines. All the gestures are tabulated, with dozens of names for the movements of the arms and legs, and even more variations for the head and hands. What they are doing is speaking a language, which is addressed to the gods, but the audience of course understands.

27. Balinese gamelan instruments and orchestra

Could you make anything of the orchestra? It produces a glittering shimmer of rapid notes, tuned to a limited set, rather like the black notes on the piano (5 of the 12 notes possible). Indeed, quite early in the last century, this became the go-to device for Western composers wanting to evoke the world of South-East Asia. So **Maurice Ravel** (1875–1937) has a movement in his 1908 suite for piano duet, *Ma mère l'oye* (Mother Goose), called “The Empress of the Pagodas,” in which the top player comes in with a cascade of notes all on the black keys. Here is the opening section, played by **Martha Argerich** and **Lang Lang**. It is really fun to play, as you can see on her face.

28. Ravel: *Mother Goose Suite, Empress of the Pagodas*

29. Father and daughter playing the above.

Here is a photo of a father and daughter playing the piece; I have no idea who they are; I just like the photo! In Bali, though, the instruments are not all tuned precisely to the black notes (or their equivalent). Pairs of similar instruments in a gamelan are deliberately tuned a small distance apart, to create a buzz between the simultaneous sounding of almost-identical notes; they refer to this as the

difference between the **inhalation** and **exhalation** of the breath. The slight fuzziness that results is an important element in gamelan, as is the fact that the players are not reading from music, but playing given patterns more or less together, but in their own time. Unlike the precise synchronization of a Western symphony orchestra, the gamelan unites the spontaneity of numerous individual players, making it a community experience. Even a small village will have its own group of 30 or 40 players, and many will have more than one.

30. Film title: *Colin McPhee: the Lure of Asian Music*

You may notice that I am switching my focus. In the first hour, I looked at ancient Japanese music and theater in its own terms, following each topic with a modern Western example of Japanese influence. In this second hour, though, the Western derivatives—such as that Ravel—will be the main point, with just enough examples of non-European performance to set them up. In particular, I want to devote time to excerpts from a film about a Canadian composer (and incidentally a Peabody graduate) whom you have probably never heard of, **Colin McPhee** (1900–64), who became the world expert on gamelan music. He was by no means as great a composer as Ravel, or Britten, or many other composers enamored with the gamelan, but this 1985 film by **Michael Blackwood** really explores how one culture can penetrate another. I'll play the opening and one longer excerpt. The text at the beginning is McPhee's own.

31. Film: *Colin McPhee: the Lure of Asian Music, opening*

32. McPhee: *A House in Bali, cover*

McPhee did not stay long on this occasion. He returned to New York and thence to Paris. But he felt the music scene there claustrophobic and constricting. So he eventually fled back to Bali, built a house there, settled into an intensive study of the gamelan, and wrote several works of his own that attempted a synthesis of Balinese music and Western implements. You will hear one of them in the next clip, his 1936 concert piece *Tabuh-Tabuhan* in a rehearsal conducted by **Dennis Russell Davies**.

33. Film: *Colin McPhee: the Lure of Asian Music, gamelan and Tabuh-Tabuhan*

34. Balinese Shadow Puppets

There is one more art-form I want to mention before we leave Bali, and that is shadow puppet theater. Here is an interview with one shadow puppet master, or ***dalang***, **Wayan Wija**.

35. Balinese shadow puppetry

E. Out of Africa

36. Section title E (African mask and Kaouli dance)

Despite my title, “Asian Arts,” I’m now going to nip over to Africa, because several of the characteristics we have noted in Asia appear to have African equivalents. But here I abandon all pretense at scholarship. We know quite a bit about the history of the Japanese theater and the Balinese gamelan. But in picking videos of African masks and dancing, I know only that they *purport* to be traditional. How much they have been altered in recent years, I don’t know, nor if this or the three other dance clips I am about to show are genuine tribal celebrations or something put on for tourists. I chose the most *seemingly-authentic* ones I could find. So it should really be “Out of Africa—More or Less.”

37. Three African dances

38. Riley, Taymor, Kentridge

All this is to prepare for the three very different modernish works with which I am going to end. One is a concert piece, one is pure Broadway, and the other is *sui generis*, a performance piece repeated on an endless loop in an art gallery. All three have some obvious connection to Africa, and you might say that all owe a debt to Asian traditions as well. That it what you are going to help me figure out.

39. Terry Riley: *In C*, record cover

In 1964, American composer **Terry Riley** (1935–) basically launched minimalist music with a piece called *In C*. It consists of a set of 53 musical phrases to be played by an unspecified number of musicians on whatever instrument they happen to play; the various entrances are staggered over the course of several minutes. The phrases are played in order, each repeating until that musician chooses to move on to the next, so although the process is logical, there is an unpredictable combination of sounds at any moment. There is an obvious influence of gamelan music, which also consists of short repeated phrases, not precisely aligned. The version I am going to play, however, was commissioned by the Tate Gallery for the 50th anniversary of the piece. Now called *In C Mali*, it includes a number of African musicians, and I think a modified set of materials closer to African performance practices. Here’s how it begins.

40. Terry Riley: *In C Mali*, opening (3:13, but could go to 6:40)

41. Terry Riley: *In C*, record cover (repeat)

If I’m ahead of time (which I doubt I will be), I’ll take this on for longer than the 3¼ minutes I had planned, so you can hear that singer in the African dress join in. Anyway, what did you think?

42. William Kentridge: scene from *More Sweetly Play the Dance* (2015)

That was not really *Music on Stage*, I will admit, although any live performance becomes visually fascinating too. The next one, *More Sweetly Play the Dance* (2015) is certainly a kind of performance. Its creator, South African artist **William Kentridge** (1955–) has directed several operas, including Alban Berg’s *Wozzeck* and *Lulu* at the Met. But this is on video, designed to be projected on eight screens

lining three walls of a room in an art gallery. I caught it in Cape Town and was utterly mesmerized, remaining through three iterations of its 15-minute cycle. The makeshift set-up, the instability of the background, and the dirtiness of the sound-track are all deliberate; this is not meant to come over as a polished work of art. See what you think of the first four minutes or so?

- 43. Kentridge: *More Sweetly Play the Dance*, opening
- 44. — still from the above (repeat)

What do you think that was about, and what traditions go into making it? It is a kind of *danse macabre*, I would say. It is obviously about the African identity, expressed through music and dance, though not so much tribal traditions as the tragic history of the continent continuing into the present. Kentridge has obviously been influenced by shadow theater, though not necessarily that of Asia. And the broad scope of the concept, its expansive handling of time, and the moral thought behind it has at least some family kinship with Noh.

- 45. Characters from *The Lion King* (1997, directed by Julie Taymor)

Of all the directors currently practising, the one most obviously influenced by the theater of other continents is the American **Julie Taymor** (1952–), who worked in Japan and Indonesia for two years on a fellowship early in her career; I will be showing part of her Kabuki version of a Greek tragedy next week. This is her 1997 Broadway version of the Disney movie *The Lion King*, which must surely have made her a millionaire many times over. Anyway, the debts to both Japanese and African traditions are so numerous and clear that I won't belabor them, but leave this for you to enjoy. The music, incidentally, is by **Elton John** (1947–).

- 46. Taymor: *The Lion King*, promo clip
- 47. Class title 3 (World Theater)