

Immersive



Interior of the Kanamaruza, Kyu-Konpira O-shibai (旧金毘羅大芝居) in Kotohira, Kagawa. | Courtesy of Naoko Skala.

Kabuki

Using a virtual walk-through to help students to maximize their experiential learning of the traditional Japanese art form

BY NAOKO SKALA

With its extraordinary costumes, distinguished hair and makeup, stylized acting and movement, and remarkable stage, Kabuki theatre is a significant traditional Japanese art form and the first Japanese commercial theatre. Created and developed in the Edo period (from the 17th to the 19th century), Kabuki theatre has transcended borders and is performed and appreciated globally. This global appreciation underscores the universal appeal and significance of Kabuki theatre. For students and scholars who cannot visit the traditional theatres or see a tour, virtual 3D technology provides an opportunity to experience the Kabuki space.

While watching a Kabuki performance in April 2024 at Kanamaruza (金丸座), the oldest remaining Japanese theatre, I understood why Kabuki must be watched live instead of through recorded video or remote stream. The live performance of Kabuki significantly enhances engagement with the audience more than other Japanese traditional theatres and performing arts. A special path, called Hanamichi (花道), for the Kabuki stages, usually passes through from the back of the house left to the downstage-right stage edge, and is used for the important entrance or exit scenes. Seated in one of the closest seats to the Hanamichi path, I felt the air and floors vibrate whenever the performers were on the path. I could also clearly see the details of the costumes, hair and makeup, and performers' facial expressions. After the experience,

I was surprised how the story remained in my mind and heart stronger than other live performances. My perspective on the Kabuki performance changed dramatically because of the immersive experience and my proximity to the stage and performers, and I hope this article and VR project files provide the opportunity to experience the Kabukiza Theatre in Tokyo virtually, without the cost and travel visiting there, and to expand readers' knowledge and appreciation with an immersive experience of theatre architecture.

Origin Story

Because Kabuki is the first Japanese commercial art form, it's important to understand Japanese politics and economics around the time Kabuki was born. During the



The current Kabukiza theatre in Tokyo, Japan. | Courtesy of Naoko Skala.

late 16th century, Toyotomi Hideyoshi was a leader and ruler in Japan, governing peacefully after a century of civil war (Berry 1982, 1). (Toyotomi is his family name, and Hideyoshi is his first name. For this article, the Japanese traditional format is used because of its historical significance and the Japanese inheritance culture of authority through the family at the time.) Hideyoshi was able to reduce constant territorial wars and create a trade system in the nation, increasing the number of merchants who came to Osaka and Kyoto areas on the west side of Japan, where trade was more vibrant than in other cities. After Hideyoshi passed, Tokugawa Ieyasu and his supporters began showing their power, taking over the Japanese governance system, and the country became more politically stable than before.

Benito Ortolani explains in *The Japanese Theatre* that “Peace resulted from the successful leadership of three generals (Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, and Tokugawa Ieyasu) who

managed to bring the divided country under a unified, iron-handed, military rule. Ieyasu is the creator of the system that succeeded in maintaining peace and stability for two and a half centuries and, at the same time, determined the parameters of development of the unique Tokugawa society, thoroughly isolated from the rest of the world and extraordinarily punctilious in its control of a hierarchical organization of each aspect of public and private life” (Ortolani 1995, 163). Although Hideyoshi built the foundation of peacetime, Ieyasu and his family remained in it for about three centuries.

Thus, the provincial war ceased in the late 16th century, replaced by a powerful government; this stability allowed for increased trade and the development of new performing arts. In the Kabuki chapter from *A History of Japanese Theatre*, Julie A. Iezzi observes that “Kabuki, which emerged alongside Ningyo Joruri (also known as Bunraku Puppetry), was largely nurtured by the

commoner class, blossoming despite strict government regulation throughout the Tokugawa (Edo) period (1603–1868)” (Iezzi 2017, 102). Benito Ortolani agrees, noting that, “All authors agree that Kabuki and Joruri are the typical theatrical expressions of the Tokugawa culture as it developed in the urban milieu, where the merchants played the main role in their fluctuating and ambiguous position of energetic economic leadership in the face of socio-political oppression” (Ortolani 1995, 162).

The popularity of new art forms like the Fuyu-odori, where people in costumes danced in a circle, led to the development of types of Kabuki. At the beginning of the Edo period (in the early 17th century), Okuni, a self-described female priest of Izumo Taisha Shrine in Shimane prefecture, started dancing in the Kabuki-odori style in Kyoto, the capital of Japan at the time. She then developed the stylized movements and costumes of Kabuki-mono, which tells a story of romantic relationships among

ordinary people by singing and dancing with cross-gendered casting. Other female performers started imitating Okuni's Kabuki-odori by incorporating the Shamisen, a new stringed musical instrument at the time, and people started calling it 'Onna-Kabuki' (Female Kabuki). It became incredibly popular, spreading from Kyoto to Osaka and Edo (Tokyo, east side of Japan) (Japan Arts Council "Beginning" 2019).

Despite this widespread popularity, concerns about content and audience behavior meant performing the Female Kabuki was eventually banned. Information about Kabuki performances of Okuni's time can be found in the words used to describe the art form. Iezzi observes, "The term 'Kabuki' was originally written in the phonetic syllabary (hiragana), referencing the 'deviant' or 'leaning' kabukimono. The term was later written with three kanji characters, ka (歌 song), bu (舞 dance), and ki (伎 [skill])" (Iezzi 2017, 111). The audience included both ordinary people and those of higher status who came to see the performance and enjoyed it. However, conflicts between the fans became difficult for the authorities to control (Japan Arts Council "Beginning" 2019).

Thus, unruly crowds and sexualized content led to the ban on Female Kabuki, and later Kabuki groups faced similar government restrictions. For example, another performing group, "Wakashu-Kabuki" (Young Boys Kabuki), became popular after the ban on the Female Kabuki. The group included acrobatic programs and comical characters, but this form also focused on physical appearance and romantic stories with cross-gender casting, so it, too, was restricted and banned (Japan Arts Council "Beginning" 2019).

Performers were desperate to find a way to perform, however, and Yarou-Kabuki (Adult Male Kabuki) was formed. The word "Yarou" came from a male hairstyle of shaved forelocks, which indicated their symbol of adulthood. The performances had multiple scenes with well-structured plots, and their performance techniques were high quality. While the Onna-gata (Female character), a cross-gender character, was developed in the Young Boys Kabuki, it continued to be used in the Adult Male Kabuki. The form also extensively developed a variety

of female characters, good and evil male characters, and comical characters. The development of these characteristics of theatre arts helped the expansion of Kabuki as a performing art instead of the form being viewed as entertainment only (Japan Arts Council "Beginning" 2019).

Kabukiza Theatre

The architectural history of the Kabukiza Theatre deepens our understanding of Kabuki history and offers a perspective on its economic and cultural impact. Ortolani discusses the role of the large theatres as a valued cultural space after the end of the Tokugawa (Edo) period (1603–1868). "The large theatres supplied the townspeople with the only places for regular gatherings where 'their' world could be collectively celebrated—a showplace for their economic success, their licentious fantasies, and daring fashions, as well as for the venting of their veiled criticism of forbidden topics and of their masked aspirations for social recognition. When the Tokugawa world collapsed, Kabuki and Joruri kept memory and nostalgia for the era alive. They become a frozen monument to the

tastes and moods of the Tokugawa merchant middle-class" (Ortolani 1995, 162–163). The Kabukiza Theatre was built in this era, and while Iezzi observes that "today, the Theatre Division of entertainment conglomerate Shōchiku Company controls all permanent kabuki venues, except the National Theatre, and manages all kabuki actor contracts" (Iezzi 2017, 102), the Kabukiza Theatre, one of the Shochiku's venues, has a long history of supporting the Kabuki industry, both before and after it was under Shochiku's management.

The first Kabukiza Theatre was built in 1889. Its exterior embraced the Western style, while the interior was traditional Japanese style, using the Japanese cypress for luxury architecture and temples. It had three stories, the capacity was 1,824 people, and the proscenium arch opening was about 77'-6" (23.63 meters). Within two years after it was built, the Kabukiza required renovating because the building was too frail. The Toho Company (Shochiku's competitor) also built the Imperial Theatre around the same time, indicating the performing arts were a popular art form



Okuni's statue. | Courtesy of Naoko Skala.



View from the Sajiki seating area in Kanamaruza, Kyu-Konpira O-shibai (旧金毘羅大芝居) in Kotohira, Kagawa. | Courtesy of Naoko Skala.



View from the Hanamichi seating area at Kanamaruza, Kyu-Konpira O-shibai (旧金毘羅大芝居) in Kotohira, Kagawa. | Courtesy of Naoko Skala.

at the turn of the century.

The second Kabukiza Theatre was built in 1911, with the same foundation and structure as the first Kabukiza Theatre. Both the exterior and interior are more in the traditional Japanese castle style. In 1913, Shochiku performed their production at the Kabukiza Theatre for the first time and began involving themselves in the management. However, the Kabukiza was lost in 1921 due to an electrical fire.

During the construction of the third Kabukiza, a great earthquake occurred in a large area of the Kanto region (east side of Japan around Tokyo), prompting builders, in 1924, to use steel structure with concrete for anti-seismic building. The architecture incorporated a luxurious style combining elements from the Nara and Azuchi-Momoyama period and included all western-style chairs, a proscenium arch opening of about 89'-5" (27 meters), and turntable 59 feet (18 meters) in diameter. It was the largest theatre in Japan at the time, but it was destroyed by a fire in 1945 during World War II (Shochiku and Kabuki-za.)

Most other Kabuki theatres were destroyed during WWII, and many performers had passed. After the war, many Kabuki plays were banned from performing because their themes advocated the old Japanese military system or social hierarchy. The new authorities thought those Kabuki plays encouraged the backlash against the new authorities. Eventually, in 1949, the Kabukiza company was established. They rebuilt the theatre for the fourth time, using the foundation and design of the previous Kabukiza Theatre, which reopened in 1950, and the success of a production of *The Tale of Genji*, a classic romantic story, was the beginning of the post-war regrowth of Kabuki.

The opening of the proscenium arch and its diameter were similar to those of the previous one, but it also had four trap doors of multiple sizes on the floor. Although it was registered as a National Tangible Cultural Property in 2002, because of the building's infirmity, renovations began in 2010 (Shochiku and Kabukiza.)

The current Kabukiza Theatre is the fifth version of the building, which opened in 2013. The total capacity is 1,808 (excluding 96 Makumi-seating



Interior of the Aioiza in Mizunami, Gifu. | Courtesy of Naoko Skala.

tickets for individual acts). Most of the current-version stage structures and sizes are the same or similar to the third and fourth Kabukiza, but one large trap door for scene change has been added on stage, and escalators and elevators have been added as well (Shochiku and Kabukiza). The theatre produces a variety of plays in Kabuki theatre, including collaborations with contemporary playwrights and directors, or plays based on Japanese comic books or animation films to extend its performing arts and attract a more diverse audience (Japan Arts Council “Classical” 2019).

Rural Theatres Remain

While the Kabukiza Theatre, as well as many others, had to be rebuilt after being destroyed during WWII, several theatres in rural areas remained standing. Two Kabuki theatres, Kanamaruza in Kotohira, Kagawa, and Aioiza in Mizunami, Gifu, are two traditional theatres that remain. These rural stages utilize Kabuki theatre as community building throughout the generations and are symbols of the local community, which reflects the people’s passion and kindness there. The surviving building architecture also tells us about the development of the art form.

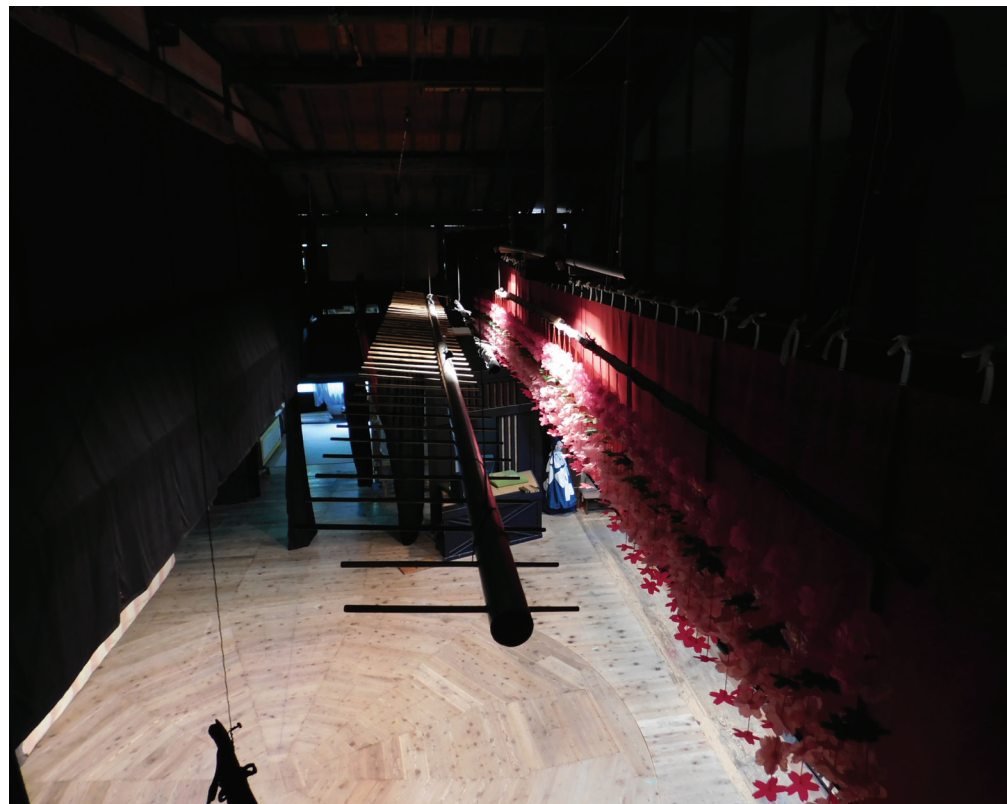
The oldest existing Kabuki theatre, Kanamaruza, built in 1835 (Inoshita 2009, 27), has significant characteristics

that are different from the contemporary Kabuki theatres. (Kyu-Konpira O-shibai (旧金毘羅大芝居) is the official name and Kanamaruza (金丸座) is the common name. In this article, Kanamaruza is used.) Perhaps most notable is the

audience seating area, which is divided by wooden bars called Masu-seki. Tatami mats are on the floor, and the audience would sit on a cushion with a back supporting board. Although some seats in the back have a wooden bench, they are limited. Most seating areas are lower than the stage level, and audience seating areas are raked.

The floor lights are imitations of the candle lamps of the 17th century, and many paper lanterns with actors’ and sponsors’ names or logos hang from the ceiling. The grid above is made of bamboo, and some boards run over it. These are used as a catwalk so the crew can drop snow or flower petals on the Hanamichi path and audience seats during the performance. The boards above the Hanamichi path include the machinery to hang and fly actors. Another sub-path on the right side of the house allows for audience members’ entrance to their seats, but they are also used by actors several times to create unique performances.

In April 2024, I watched two performances of two different programs in one day and sat in two distinct seating areas. For the first performance, I sat in



View of the stage from the catwalk, during a tour at Aioiza in Mizunami, Gifu. | Courtesy of Naoko Skala.



View of the interior, before the performance, at Aioiza in Mizunami, Gifu. | Courtesy of Naoko Skala.



Aioiza under the Suppon with Mr. Tomio Otsuka. | Courtesy of Naoko Skala.



Kanamaruza under the turn table 旧金毘羅大芝居 (金丸座) | Courtesy of Naoko Skala.

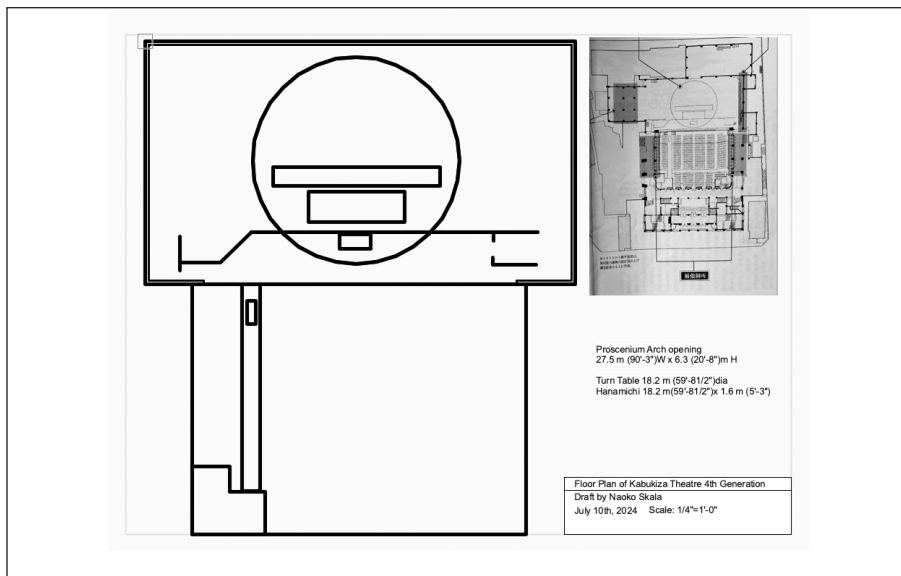
the Sajiki seating area, which is on the same level as the stage and located on the left side of the house. It includes a railing across the seating area like a balcony because other audience members sit in front of us but at a lower level than the stage level. The Sajiki seating area is also divided by wooden bars, and four people could sit together, two in front on a Tatami mat with a cushion with a

chairback and two in the back on the chairs. The space was extremely tight, and sitting there for long hours was difficult. However, I forgot my discomfort once the performance began because of the nearness of the performers and the high production quality. Performers seemed relaxed and enjoyed performing at the National Important Cultural Property as well. They came to perform

at the Kanamaruza for the first time after the pandemic, and their energy and passion were obvious.

For the second performance, I sat in the seating area next to the Hanamichi path. The wooden bars also divided my area, but five people could sit there because there were no chairs. I was sitting right next to the Hanamichi, and it was an unforgettable experience. Although you can watch the performance very closely at Kabukiza Theatre or National Theatre when you sit next to the Hanamichi path, there is an aisle between the chair and the Hanamichi. On the other hand, there was zero space between where I sat and the Hanamichi at Kanamaruza. The performers' facial expressions and the patterns of the costumes' fabric remain in my mind profoundly and deepen my understanding of the story. Watching the performance at Kanamaruza was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. I could clearly imagine how the audience interacted with performers to create the Kabuki theatre in the 17th century.

The other rural theatre is Aioiza, located in Mizunami, Gifu. The original theatre was built in 1894 in Gero, Gifu, and moved to its current location in 1976. Gifu prefecture has the most existing Kabuki stages because the location, a region called Minou, was beneficial for the Edo feudal government, and they treated the people in the area better than others. Their Ji-Kabuki became one of



A floor plan of Kabukiza Theatre 4th generation and converted floor plan. |Courtesy of Naoko Skala.

the three major Ji-Kabuki (Oguri 1999, 15).

Japanese traditional theatres performed by non-professional actors and/or local people are called Ji-Shibai, and Kabuki theatre is called Ji-Kabuki or No-Son Kabuki (Farmers' Village Kabuki) (Oguri 1999, 10). These theatres have spread throughout the country. Some perform as a part of their regional and/or religious festival program. Their performances have a community-bonding role, and the theatres are also a gathering place. Some areas were isolated from other communities because of the mountains or other geographical reasons, so they developed their own localized style of performing arts.

Since 1972, the Minou Kabuki Preservation Society has performed annually in the summer and late fall (Minou Kabuki Preservation Society 2022, 136).

Since 2005, the Shochiku production company has toured the rural area theatres, and Aioiza is one of the venues (Kabukibito 2024).

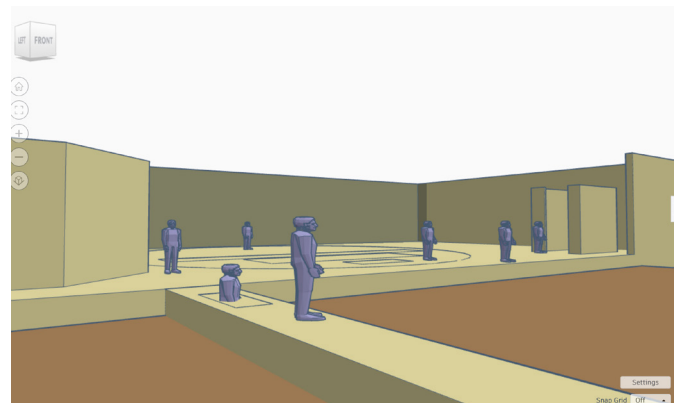
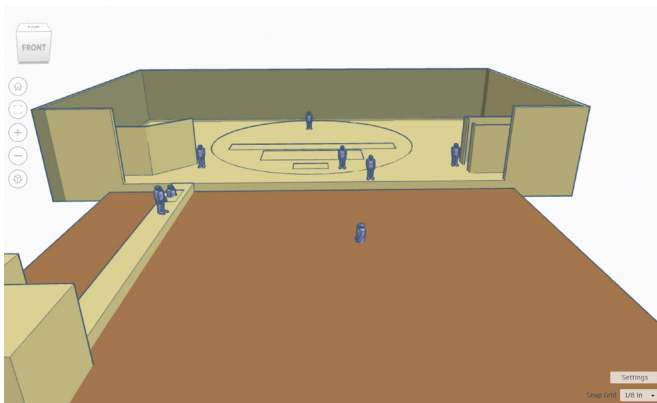
When the Aioiza has no performances, it operates as a Kabuki museum. When I visited the theatre in June 2023 for the first time, the staff were extremely warm and kind. I was given a tour of the theatre, which tourists usually are not allowed. Afterwards, I visited the Museum Nakasendo, which includes several exhibits, as well as the administrative office of Aioiza where I met the owner, her family, and other managers.

I asked them why they treated me so well, and they all said, "We understand how serious you are and importance of researching Aioiza and Minou Kabuki for you. If you can promote our culture and history of Aioiza in your publication, we would be happy to help." One of

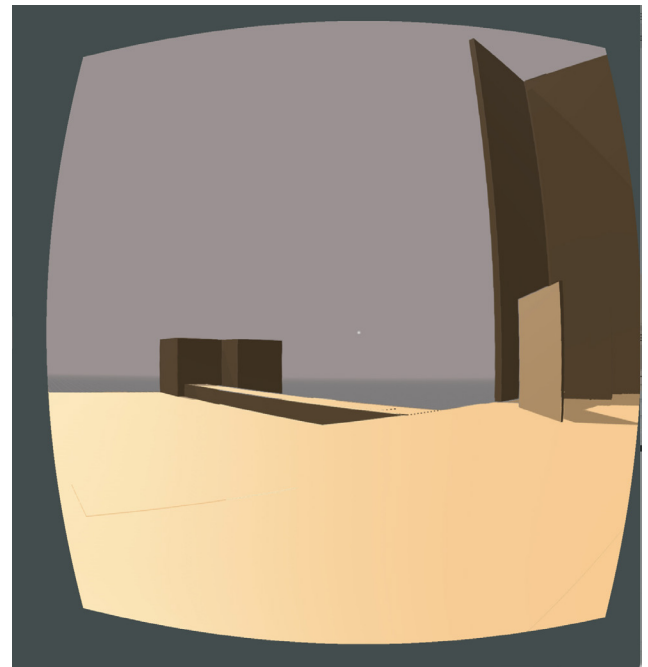
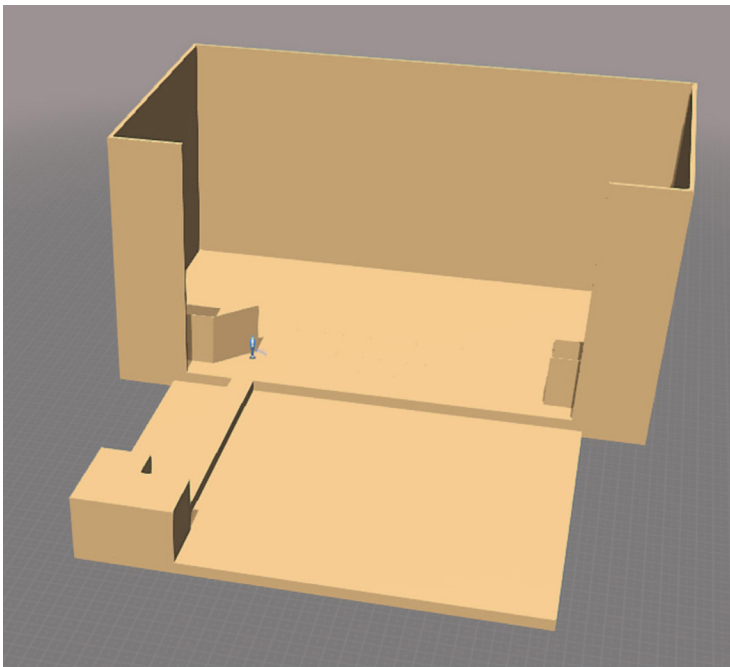
the significant characteristics of Minou Kabuki is its originality in its performance. The performance style and choreography follow the old styles from the 17th century and include more interactions between performers and audience members, allowing them to create the production together. This works because the performers are local friends and family, and the audience is familiar with the play and the story. Performers and the production team appreciate the audience more deeply and always prioritize them. Some Ji-Kabuki theatres imitate Shochiku's Kabuki, which is polished, has a more extensive scale, and includes less interaction between performers and audience members; but, it cannot survive like Aioiza because Shochiku's Kabuki is merchandised and has more resources than any Ji-Kabuki productions. That is why they cannot produce sustainably like Aioiza (Oguri 1999, 26).

I watched a performance of Shochiku's Kabuki at Aioiza in April 2024, and I had a similar experience of creating the production together as an audience. The leading actor, who plays the primary male role and also the head of the touring troupe, got sick, and his brother, who usually plays female characters, performed as the main male character of the play on the day. Before that performance, I had a chance to see the original casting performance at Gomouza, another theatre in a rural area of Gifu, and I knew it was a critical change for the performance. The leading actor's dynamic performance was one of the essential components to tell the story effectively.

However, the performance offered me an unrepeatable opportunity to watch the female role performer play the



Left: A virtual 3D Kabuki Theatre file on TinkerCAD. Right: A view of a virtual Kabuki Theatre from Sajiki seating on TinkerCAD. | Courtesy of Naoko Skala.



Top: The virtual Kabukiza Theatre file on Sketchfab. Bottom: A view of the Hanamichi from the stage on Sketchfab. | Courtesy of Naoko Skala.

male role. Because of the unique circumstances, the actor explained the situation before the performance and shared his nervousness about performing a male role because he has not performed any male role in his professional career. He asked the audience to watch with low expectations and kind minds. It brought the audience together because most of the audience felt we had a role and responsibility in supporting the actor for the production's success. The loud applause and cheering for his first entrance as a male character proved that. At the curtain call, I cannot forget the actor's facial expression of accomplishment. The whole house's standing ovation and long applause made my eyes wet. I felt I was a part of creating the production, although it happened accidentally.

Building the Virtual 3D Model

As a theatre educator, I believe that experiential learning is the most significant component of compelling theatre pedagogy, and using virtual 3D technology to "experience" walking through the Kabuki theatre would be an effective way to learn theatre architecture in a foreign country when visiting it proves impossible.

As mentioned earlier, Shochiku owns permanent theatres, including Kabukiza in Tokyo, which performs

Kabuki throughout the year. The fourth version of the Kabukiza Theatre is very similar to those of the third and fifth (current) versions. For those reasons, I decided to create a virtual 3D file with the floor plan of the fourth version.

Kabuki theatre stages require special stage machinery to distinguish the stage from other art forms: Hanamichi path (花道), a large turn table, several sizes of scenic lifts/trap doors, and also a small lift for humans on the Hanamichi, called Suppon (すっぽん). Images on page 30 show the turn table under the stage of Kanamaruza and a Suppon under the stage of Aioiza show how the stage machinery works. Their productions and the theatres in the 17th century operated the stage machinery with human hands instead of electronics. The Kabukiza Theatre uses electronic power to operate the stage machinery, but the mechanism of the machinery is the same as the others.

For this project, I used Vectorworks to recreate the floorplan from the book *Takumi no Waza: Making Kabukiza* (Otsuki 2014) and converted/exported the file to STL file format, which is the general file format for 3D printing and is also easy to transfer to the virtual reality environment. Because the primary purpose of this project is to provide the ability to go through the space without

physically visiting the site, I created the VR file with the very basic structures, but as a theatre practitioner/educator, I prioritized using a similar process for the ground plan and 3D model file to print for my other theatre productions.

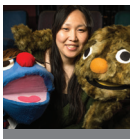
Because the stage machinery is used for the specific scene, entrance/exit, or shifting the scenery, the Hanamichi path is the only significant theatre structure that can be walked around with VR. In a public theatre tour, people usually walk around the empty stage and staff move the turntable and fly in a backdrop or two. So, for a virtual walkthrough, this experience can be fulfilled with this VR environment.

Throughout my research on Kabuki Theatre and the creation of the 3D model of Kabukiza Theatre, I was encouraged to design scenery for a Kabuki play and participate in its production. The permanent turntable, the multiple trap doors, and the Hanamichi path for the entrance and exit excited me as a designer and a Kabuki fan. If I could expand the VR project, I would like to create a separate virtual space under the stage and add some virtual scenery I designed for a Kabuki play on stage; would walk through the space and observe the scenic changing devices closely. I would also like to create a virtual Ji-Kabuki theatre in the future to provide an opportunity to compare virtual experiences.

Although VR allows us to experience the space without visiting it virtually, the most exciting aspect of Kabuki is engaging with the performers and creating the performance as an audience. That experience is one of a kind, and it is challenging to create it remotely or virtually. Using VR to understand the space and architecture and analyze the beautiful stories of Kabuki plays with historical and cultural background before visiting a Kabuki Theatre would be helpful to enhance someone's experience.

It requires preparation to appreciate the Kabuki, but that is the most significant difference between performing art and entertainment. The preparation is worth it when you "experience" it because it will remain in your mind and heart for a long time.

Using virtual 3D technology to "experience" the Kabuki theatre would be an effective way to learn theatre architecture when visiting its country of origin is impossible. I hope this project provides the opportunity to experience the Kabukiza Theatre in Tokyo virtually, without the cost and travel visiting there, to expand readers' knowledge and appreciation with an immersive perspective of theatre design and technology.



Naoko Skala is a scenic designer, scenic artist, props artisan, and educator who was raised in Japan. She joined The College of Wooster

as an Assistant Professor of Scenic Design in Fall 2020. Formerly, Naoko worked as an Assistant Professor of Practice in Scenic and Properties Design and Technology at Northern Arizona University and as a properties coordinator at Arizona Opera. She also taught a Scene Painting class at Arizona State University as a faculty associate. She worked as a freelance scene designer/ scenic artist/ props artisan in Mankato, MN, Hilton Head, SC, and Phoenix, AZ. Naoko received her Master of Fine Arts degree in Scene Design from Minnesota State University, Mankato. She also received her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in Theatre from Emporia State University, KS, and her Bachelor of Arts degree in Japanese Literature from Sagami Women's University, Japan. Portfolio Website: naokoskala.com

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