I did not plan to write this book. It forced its presence on me while I was doing research on the censorship that kabuki endured during the American Occupation that followed Japan’s defeat in World War II. As I read descriptions of kabuki that were written in the immediate postwar years, I was struck by the insistence of both Japanese and American writers that the kabuki plays being submitted to American Occupation censors between 1945 and 1949 were wholly classical works, having no connection to Japanese society of the mid-1940s. And yet as everyone knows, throughout the history of kabuki, actors in every generation acted in new plays. Indeed premieres constituted the lifeblood of kabuki from Okuni’s first performances in the early 1600s through the Tokugawa period (1603–1868). In January 2000, Samuel L. Leiter and I were in Tokyo selecting play scripts to be translated in the four-volume series Kabuki Plays On Stage. Our central theme was that every generation of kabuki artists created new plays that reflected contemporary life in Japan.

I was faced with a nagging question: if the plays performed by kabuki actors were wholly traditional in September 1945 when the occupation of Japan began, when had the fossilization of the kabuki repertory occurred? When had playwrights ceased to write contemporary plays for kabuki theaters, and when did kabuki actors stop performing them? I was shamefaced. I didn’t know. Nearly fifty years ago, Professor Kawatake Shigetoshi suggested in his magisterial Complete History of Japanese Theater (Nihon engeki zenshi, 1959) that new plays stopped being performed in kabuki theaters after 1894–1895 (see Chapter 1). What then of the half century between 1895 and 1945, and especially the fifteen years 1931–1945? I had encountered almost nothing about wartime kabuki in my readings up until this time.

I thought that a direct way to confirm the “classic” nature of kabuki drama in the decades preceding 1945 would be to scan the standard chronological listings of kabuki productions published by the Shōchiku Theatrical Corporation (Nagayama Takeomi, ed., Kabuki-za hyakunen shi and Shōchiku hyakunen shi) and the National Theater of Japan (Kokuritsu Gekijō Kindai Nenpyō Hensan-shitsu, ed., Kindai kabuki nenpyō, see Sources). To my amazement I found scores of plays whose titles indicated contemporary subject matter: Riding the Famous Hot-Air Balloon (1891), Festival of the Founding of the Manchurian Na-
tion (1932), and *Ten Thousand Cheers for the South Seas* (1944), among many others. When I focused on the period of Japan’s “Fifteen-Year War” (1931–1945), title after title indicated a war play set in the present time: *Three Heroic Human Bombs* (1932), *Secret Agent of a Nation at War* (1938), *Tank Commander Nishizumi* (1940), *Submarine No. 6* (1941), and *Pearl Harbor* (1942), to name a few titles of plays staged at kabuki theaters. In time, sources yielded some 160 kabuki plays about the war with China, and later America and Britain, or that used historical subject matter to comment on the current war.

This book is the result of eight years of research that followed on my simple question: when did current subject matter leave the kabuki stage? And the completely unexpected answer that emerged was: not until the war was over. In the following chapters, I quote extensively from Japanese sources of the time — books, newspaper stories, magazine articles, war reports, speeches, performance reviews, play scripts, and diaries — to convey the way Japanese perceived kabuki during the war’s cataclysmic course (rather than in later, perhaps rosystinged, memory). We see that the institution of kabuki actively participated in Japan’s wartime adventures between 1931 and 1945. Indeed, kabuki war plays were the subject of illustrated postcards printed, sold, and mailed everywhere in Japan during the war years (for example, Figs. 11.5–11.8).

I devote considerable space to setting the actions of kabuki managers, playwrights, producers, and actors within the broad parabola of political and military events during the war: kabuki’s star rose with the expansion of the new Japanese Empire into China and the Pacific (1931–1942), and kabuki was nearly destroyed when Japan’s empire was bloodily dismembered in the final war years (1943–1945). The records show that contemporary events were dramatized on the kabuki stage until early 1945. The kabuki repertory became “classic” only after the war was lost and partly in response to the arrival of the American occupiers (and Occupation theater censors).

The fifteen-year period of Japan’s “Sacred War” was a crucial time in the nation’s cultural history. We find perceptive accounts in English — by authors such as Shea (1964), Keene (1971, 1976), Rubin (1984), Goodman (1991), Ranson (1998), Mayo and Rimer (2001), Atkins (2001), Powell (2002), High (2003), Victoria (2006), and Kushner (2006) (see Sources) — of how Japanese film, modern drama, literature, journalism, painting, jazz, and Zen Buddhism were co-opted into the war. But no specific study has been made, either within or outside Japan, of kabuki during the war. In most histories of kabuki written by Japanese, the war years are simply erased. Let me cite two typical examples. Theater critic Toita Yasuji has written in some detail about kabuki after the war in his reminiscences, *Wartime and Postwar Recollections* (*Kaisō no senchū*
Toita treats wartime kabuki in half a dozen pages, mostly concerned with American bombing, and he does not mention a single war play. *Kabuki* (2003) is an excellent general introduction to kabuki written by Kawatake Toshio for a foreign, English-reading public. A short chapter on post-Meiji kabuki moves directly from the Great Kantō Earthquake in 1923 to American Occupation censorship in 1945. The intervening years, including the entire war, are elided. There are important exceptions.

Ōzasa Yoshio’s massive eight-volume compilation of theater data, *History of Contemporary Theater in Japan* (*Nihon gendai engeki shi*), includes three volumes devoted to the war years (volume 3 contains kabuki records, newspaper and magazine excerpts, conferences, theater regulations, and performance data). Okamoto Shirō includes a useful summary account of wartime kabuki in one chapter of *Kabuki o sukutta otoko* (translated and adapted by Samuel L. Leiter as *The Man Who Saved Kabuki*). Brian Powell discusses twentieth-century kabuki in *Japan’s Modern Theatre*, and Samuel L. Leiter (in *The Man Who Saved Kabuki*) and Kodama Ryūichi have published useful chronologies of kabuki events during the war years (see Sources). Some Japanese scholars, writing immediately after the surrender, touched on the “distortions” of theater during the war years. Perhaps most important, the Shōchiku Theatrical Corporation, the major producer of kabuki, has preserved scripts and performance data from the war period in great detail. Unfortunately, Shōchiku’s internal records that would cast light on company policies during the war were either destroyed by American bombs or are not available. For the most part, kabuki’s role in the Fifteen-Year War has been almost completely ignored for the past sixty years. This book is an attempt to remember some of the more important aspects of kabuki’s forgotten war from 1931 to 1945.

This is not a complete history of kabuki during the war. I do not trace actors’ careers, as is often done in Japanese histories, nor do I describe the complete repertory. I introduce some one hundred new plays that relate directly or indirectly to the war and quote from a number of them. Even so, my analysis is cursory at best. Half a dozen government ministries and agencies attempted to guide and control kabuki during the war. I describe police censorship, the Citizens’ Drama Movement, which tended to be hostile to kabuki, propaganda guidance emanating from the Bureau of Information, and noncommercial performances sponsored by the League of Touring Theaters. These and other government programs strongly affected kabuki during the war years. I also occasionally consider nō, *bunraku*, *shinpa*, and modern drama (*shingeki*) because the government generally treated these theater forms differently from kabuki.

I consider a new play “kabuki” when it was written for kabuki performance,
acted by kabuki actors, and advertised to the public as part a kabuki program. The performance may or may not have used traditional music and acting techniques. But what should be done if a new play was performed by kabuki and non-kabuki actors working together in a composite troupe? When kabuki actors temporarily worked with performers from other theater genres, I have omitted new plays they staged; when a troupe arrangement was ongoing and lasted for several years, I have included new plays staged by that group (for example the Vanguard Troupe that for decades has had kabuki and shingeki members).

It is now nearly half a century since the first lavish postwar “Grand Kabuki” (ō-kabuki) tours of Europe, America, and Asia gained the worshipful adulation of foreign audiences and critics. These tours, sponsored by the Shōchiku Theatrical Corporation and supported by the Japanese government, were a part of Japan’s “cultural diplomacy” offensive, designed to erase memories of wartime horrors. Today, throughout the world, kabuki is an acknowledged artistic treasure. In hindsight it is easy to assume that kabuki’s postwar ascent to international superstardom was inevitable. But this research makes clear that kabuki’s survival in the 1940s was not assured by any means. It may surprise us, but commercial kabuki endured harsh and unremitting criticism through the war years. And in the early years of the war, when Japanese suffered through the Great Depression, the number of kabuki productions fell alarmingly. As the war grew in intensity, the question was increasingly asked: why should an extravagant art like kabuki be allowed to continue?

Further, important officials in the Home Ministry, Education Ministry, and Bureau of Information believed that kabuki was immoral and therefore an impediment to winning the war. Unsympathetic critics mocked kabuki’s claim to be a high art. In 1944 and 1945, when Japan’s Imperial Armed Forces were being annihilated and Japanese cities were burning, kabuki troupes were hard put to mount public performances. Kabuki was close to death in August 1945, when the war ended. That kabuki did not die under the American occupation that followed the war is a fascinating and complex story. In Chapter 12, as an addendum, I briefly touch on how kabuki continued its war with America for another two years after Emperor Hirohito’s surrender. In the end kabuki prevailed, but not in the form that either wartime Japanese governments or the postwar American Occupation hoped for.

I have been shaken and depressed more times than I wish to remember reading sixty- and seventy-year-old accounts of the massacre of many tens of thousands of Chinese civilians in Nanking and Singapore; of thirty thousand Japanese and American soldiers mutually slaughtering each other on Iwo Jima; of hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children burning to death in
American “terrorist” fire bombings of Japanese cities; and of lone Japanese pilots killing hundreds of American sailors each in kamikaze crashes off Okinawa. So many unspeakable horrors were committed in the name of Japan’s Sacred War and in the Allies’ counterattack. One may reasonably hold a range of opinions regarding the rightness and wrongness of many aspects of the war. But one thing is certain: the kabuki world participated wholeheartedly in the national war effort, especially through the constant creation of new kabuki plays about contemporary Japan-at-war, thus putting a lie to the claim that kabuki in the 1930s and early 1940s was a dusty museum of classic drama.

I use English terms as much as possible in the text. An index of play titles gives English and Japanese play titles. Most kabuki actors graduate to higher-ranking names during their careers. To avoid using several names for one person, I use the name by which an actor is best known: other names used during the war period can be found in an index of actors’ names. Since my aim is to describe events primarily from a Japanese perspective, dates are given in Japan time, that is, one day later than in the United States. For example, the bombing of Pearl Harbor occurred on December 8. I follow the Japanese system of giving a person’s family name first followed by the given name. Place-names appear as they were known in Japan during the war; pinyin spellings of Chinese proper names follow in parentheses.