Kabuki theatre began sometime between 1600 and 1603 when an itinerant Shinto shrine priestess-dancer named Okuni performed with a small troupe of actors and actresses in the environs of temples and shrines and on the dry Kamo River bed in Kyoto. Okuni’s scandalous modern songs and, especially, a sensuous dance in which she cross-dressed as a samurai were called kabuki, meaning “slanted” or deviant. Copying Okuni, scores of female troupes toured from city to city, making kabuki an instant national style. The very popularity of these variety shows led government authorities first to ban women from public stages in 1629 and then ban troupes of attractive young boys in 1652. Thereafter only adult males were allowed to perform kabuki, with some actors in each troupe designated as female-role specialists (onna-gata). Government suppression of these early erotic shows resulted in kabuki’s rapid maturation. The complex dramatic pieces and sophisticated acting styles that characterize kabuki today began in the late 1600s. By the early eighteenth century, kabuki was firmly established as the most important and vital theatre art of the Tokugawa feudal era (1603–1868).

The plays of early kabuki open a door into the world of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Japan in a way unrivaled by other forms of art or literature. They let us see in startling color their characters’ grandiose dreams and let us feel their powerful emotions. They introduce us to the proud words and brilliant posturing of figures who present themselves with larger-than-life bravado and panache.

By the 1660s, kabuki’s star actors were creating new plays in the crucible of rehearsal, ad-libbing complex dialogue based on synopses they may have written for themselves. For example, in the city of Edo (Tokyo after 1868) the famous actor Ichikawa Danjûrò I (1660–1704) starred in and is credited with the authorship of Just a Minute! (1697). By the end of the seventeenth century, all theatres employed specialist playwrights whose task was to provide on a regular basis scripts of four to six acts containing scenes suitable for the stars of their acting company. Most later kabuki and puppet plays were written by a team of house playwrights, each writer composing acts assigned by the chief playwright. Five playwrights had a hand in writing Japan’s Twenty-Four Paragons of Filial Piety (1766), while Summer Festival: Mirror of Osaka (1745) was written by a trio of playwrights: Namiki Sósuke (1695–1751),

1 In time the word came to be written with the characters for song (ka), dance (bu), and prostitute (ki). In the Meiji period the final character was replaced by that for “skill,” reflecting the reform nature of the era.
Miyoshi Shôraku (1696–1772), and Takeda Koizumo (1691–1756) (who would later became famous for such masterpieces as *The Treasury of Loyal Retainers* [*Kanadehon Chûshingura*, 1748]).

Kabuki plays written between 1697 and 1766 underwent two principal stages of development in two urban areas. The earliest plays were written in Edo. These are “pure” kabuki plays, created within and for kabuki performance. Edo was a new, raw city built after 1603 by the Tokugawa shoguns as the site of their administration, and it was filled with thousands of rough country samurai. *Just a Minute!* is a quintessential Edo-style history play (*jidaimono*) whose fantastic story strongly reflects the rude, martial spirit of the nation’s new capital. The hero, who boasts superhuman strength, is performed in a youthful, bravura acting style (*aragoto*).

A later group of plays was written in Osaka, a city almost as new as Edo but controlled by merchants and where money was king. *Summer Festival* is set in Osaka and exhibits the concerns of that city’s merchant class. It is a domestic play (*sewamono*) staged with attention to realistic detail—water and mud abound—and the main male figures are commoners who are not afraid to ridicule samurai pretensions. *Summer Festival* was not written for kabuki (and so is not a “pure” kabuki play), but for commercial puppet performance (generally called *bunraku* today). Puppet theatre was a powerful rival and stimulus to kabuki writing and performance. The best plays from Osaka’s puppet theatres, which flourished side-by-side with kabuki, were quickly adapted to the live theatre. The kabuki versions of *The Stone-Cutting Feat of Kajiwara* and *Japan’s Twenty-Four Paragons* were also adaptations of highly successful puppet plays. The latter two are Osaka history plays seen through merchants’ eyes. They dramatize the agonies of samurai characters who must sacrifice family members for the sake of their feudal masters. Characters are conflicted between duty (*giri*) to a samurai lord and human sympathy (*ninjô*) for the victim. One can see that these and many other Osaka puppet history plays actually show samurai in critical family, or domestic, circumstances, which accounts for much of their exceptional emotional power.

Puppet plays were usually published in full and underwent little alteration in subsequent performances. On the other hand, kabuki plays appeared only in illustrated synopses, rather like comic books, and the scripts were constantly rewritten.
and altered for later performances. Both genres of plays were written as all-day, multiact pieces, but in revivals less interesting scenes were dropped, and thus over time most traditional kabuki plays consisted of only their most popular scenes.

Kabuki actors in the early eighteenth century played on relatively unadorned thrust stages covered with a gabled roof, based in the beginning on the arrangements of the no stage. By the 1720s theatres were roofed, eventually becoming completely enclosed structures. By the 1730s, actors were able to approach the stage or exit from it via a runway (hanamichi) that went through the left side of the auditorium to the rear of the theatre. This encouraged a tremendous sense of intimacy between players and spectators. Audiences sat on the floor in the pit, in two tiers of boxes on either side of the auditorium, in a rear gallery, and, for low prices, in a cramped place on stage right, facing the actors’ backs. Special teahouses adjoining each theatre sold refreshments and other amenities.

Performances were given during daylight hours only, with natural lighting regulated by opening and closing window shutters high over the auditorium. Additional general lighting was provided by a row of candles placed along the front stage and the hanamichi. In order to highlight an actor’s facial expression, one or more stage assistants (kōken) would hold a lighted candle, fixed to the end of a pole, close to the actor’s face.

Most plays in the kabuki repertory were created in a small number of major theatres licensed by the government. Four kabuki theatres were allowed in Edo until 1714. In that year the Yamamura-za was torn down when an affair between an actor from that theatre and a lady in the shogun’s court became a national scandal. Thereafter, until the end of the Tokugawa period (1603–1868) Edo’s three licensed theatres were the Nakamura-za, the Ichimura-za, and the Morita-za, while in Osaka the Naka no Shibai and the Kado no Shibai were the main supporters of new play scripts. Kabuki was also performed in minor theatres set up in busy commercial districts and in shrine and temple grounds, but their scripts have not survived.

From the beginning of kabuki, great actors have dominated the theatre form, with most plays written to suit the talents of specific stars. Actors established their reputations by specialization, some in dance and some in spoken dramatic roles. A good voice was crucial, for as the saying had it, “first the voice, then the face, then
the body.” In playwriting, newness and innovation were almost always prized, but in acting, actors in the second or third generation were expected to master conventional forms, or kata, created by their family founders. Family acting styles (ie no gei) became the basis of acting, passed on from father to son, generation by generation. Ichikawa Danjûrò I created the powerful aragoto style of acting bravura heroes, and by the time of Danjûrò II (1688–1758), it had become the Ichikawa family’s specialty, although other actors eventually performed it as well. Dramatic poses (mie) are punctuated by the sound of wooden clappers, costuming is oversize, and faces are painted in boldly colored patterns (kumadori) to create an almost godlike image. Thrilling scenes of stylized combat pit a great hero against scores of hapless opponents.

In contrast, the gentle, comic style (wagoto, literally soft business) of relatively realistic acting was created largely for feckless, romantic leading roles by the Kyoto-based Sakata Tôjûrò I (1647–1709). This style is carried on today by Tôjûrò’s artistic, if not lineal, descendents, including especially Nakamura Ganjirô III (b. 1931), who is unmatched playing the gentle role of Chûbei in A Message of Love from Yamato (1796), and Kataoka Nizaemon XV (b. 1944). Further, a great actor passes on to his successor(s) a specific role’s gestures and vocal inflections, thus assuring that this role will remain the property of the family in future generations. (Such an attitude is quite alien to the modern Western concept of originality in acting.) For example, Danjûrò I’s way of playing Kagemasa in Just a Minute! is, in general, known and followed more than three centuries later by his twelfth-generation descendant, Danjûrò XII (b. 1946).

Star actors, despised by samurai officials, were public idols whose faces adorned thousands of woodblock prints. Actors’ names were a matter of great interest to the audience, and actors marked their artistic progress by assuming new, and higher, acting names through a name-taking ceremony that was part of performance. Thus Kataoka Nizaemon II (dates unknown) began his acting career as Kataoka Sanpei and took the name Kataoka Chôdayû in 1713, changing to Nizaemon II in 1716 or 1717.

To provide musical accompaniment for performances, kabuki artists created a new style of music, nagauta (which is still performed only for kabuki). A nagauta ensemble of singers, shamisen players, drummers, and flutist, sitting offstage right,
provides background music for dialogue and action in all plays. Offstage gongs, bells, a large drum, and other instruments are added to create atmospheric effects. When kabuki took over puppet plays, the musical team of chanter and one shamisen player that accompanied puppet action was also taken into kabuki. This music, called takemoto in kabuki, can be heard alternating with offstage nagauta in Summer Festival, The Stone-Cutting Feat, Japan’s Twenty-Four Paragons, and other plays adapted from the puppets.

Kabuki plays, while secular, reflect the basic Shinto and Buddhist beliefs of eighteenth-century Japanese. Shinto deities can be protective, while characters may seek Buddha’s mercy in sickness and death. The ethic of loyalty to one’s superior, which undergirds conflicts between duty and human feelings, derives from Confucianism. Finally, drawing on folk religion and superstition, playwrights thrilled audiences with eerie scenes of magic. In Japan’s Twenty-Four Paragons, a magical fox appears and an heirloom helmet levitates to lead Princess Yaegaki safely on her journey.

Early playwrights expressed strongly didactic themes through scenes that, in their outlines, became standard: parents are forced to kill or be separated from a beloved child, a samurai is trapped by divided loyalties to two lords, a samurai retainer endures any sacrifice to recover a clan’s lost heirloom, a character assumes a secret identity that is finally revealed, a chivalrous street knight challenges an opponent in public. Playwrights and actors created verbal techniques that became unique to kabuki performance: the braggadocio self-introduction of a hero (nanori), rapid back-and-forth questioning rising to a crescendo (kuriage), dialogue passed back and forth between two characters (warizerifu), and thoughts continued by several people in sequence (watarizerifu). An important rhetorical convention taken from the puppet theatre was the long, narrative description of a past event (monogatari), as in The Stone-Cutting Feat. A unique source of humor, even in serious scenes, is the metatheatrical device whereby a “character” comments on an “actor” in the scene, as in Summer Festival.

Basic to the playwright’s craft was the ability to ring plot changes while keeping within well-known “worlds” (sekai) of characters and events, such as the world of Heike and Genji warfare in The Stone-Cutting Feat, the world of the Takeda and
Uesugi clans’ rivalry in *Japan’s Twenty-Four Paragons*, and the world of commoner Danshichi Kurōbei in *Summer Festival*.

**1773–1799**

The last quarter of the eighteenth century was a golden age for kabuki as a theatre art. Scores of new plays were written each year for the major licensed theatres—three in Edo, nine in Osaka, and four in Kyoto. Those plays that gained fame through later, repeated revivals were chiefly the work of Osaka playwrights Nagawa Kamesuke (?–1790), Namiki Shōzō II (1730–1773), Chikamatsu Yanagi (dates unknown), and others. *The Precious Incense and Autumn Flowers of Sendai* (1777), *The Revenge at Tengajaya* (1781), *A Message of Love from Yamato* (1796), and *The Picture Book of the Taikō* (1799) are all Osaka plays, sharing the “rational,” relatively realistic point of view of the Osaka merchant audience (magical events occur only in the final scene of *Precious Incense*).

Late eighteenth-century kabuki theatres tried to outdo their competition by providing ever more luxurious spectacles. Staging became extremely lavish, and actors were handsomely paid in order to lure the largest number of ticket-buying customers. Innovative staging devices were invented. A secondary *hanamichi* was installed that ran through the right side of the auditorium. A full-width revolving stage became a part of every major kabuki theatre by 1793, long before its use in European theatres. Audiences loved to see a new set come slowly into view as the stage revolved, as in *Picture Book*. The revolving stage eliminated tedious breaks for scene changes in all-day, multiscene plays like *Revenge at Tengajaya*. Powerful, manually operated stage elevators were devised that could raise and lower entire stage settings, and small traps were built into them and on the *hanamichi* that allowed a character to suddenly, and excitingly, appear or disappear, as Nikki Danjō does in *Precious Incense*. The first slow-motion pantomime scene (*danmari*) was created in 1776. On a darkened stage, several characters search for a precious object and pass it from hand to hand, striking an elegant tableau at the end of each movement sequence.

Theatres were now huge commercial enterprises. Each supported an artistic company of forty to sixty actors, musicians, and playwrights plus a staff of over a
hundred. A theatre opened at dawn and closed at dusk, providing its audience with
ten to twelve hours of performance. Five or six new programs were typically mounted
during the year, beginning in the eleventh lunar month (around mid-December),
when the new theatre company was introduced. New programs were staged at two-
month intervals: New Year, spring, late spring, summer, and autumn. A program
averaged thirty or forty days, with the occasional hit continuing for several additional
months. At the pinnacle of the kabuki world stood the star actor, around whom all
else revolved. A devoted fan could buy for pennies a woodblock print of Danjûrô IV
(1711–1778) or V (1741–1806), onnagata Segawa Kikunojô II (1741–1773), or Onoe
Kikugorô I (1717–1783) in a favorite role. Kabuki devotees learned famous speeches
in order to mimic their favorite actors at parties. Publications in the three large cities
provided rankings and personal information about every important actor, like TV
or film fan magazines of today. Paradoxically, actors who were adulated by a vast
public continued to be classed as nonhumans (hinin) by the shogunal government.

Major theatres were capitalized by outside backers, who hoped to earn a profit.
They rarely did, however, for as audience expectations rose, expenses rose as well,
outstripping box-office income. Between 1784 and 1799, the three licensed pro-
ducers in Edo declared bankruptcy. Their theatres, renamed the Kiri-za, Miyako-za,
and Kawarasaki-za (or Kawarazaki-za, where Picture Book premiered), continued to
be run, but by alternate producers. When the national economy declined in the late
1780s, authorities promulgated austerity measures that, among other things, pro-
hibited luxury in kabuki staging and set a cap on actor salaries. These measures were,
as one might imagine, hardly effective and were soon abandoned.

Plays of this period clearly reflect, if unconsciously, contradictions that were
becoming evident in feudal society. Feudal ethics required obedience to a superior.
Nurse Masaoka and her attendant Onoe in Precious Incense and the young warrior
Jûjirô in Picture Book follow the samurai ideal: they are steadfast unto death in ful-
filling their duty. But what if a character fails in that duty, or worse, what if one’s
superior is evil? That dilemma gave birth to superlatively evil characters in these
plays. Lady Yashio in Precious Incense is one of kabuki’s most notorious female
villains. She exults in thrusting her dagger into the throat of an innocent child,
Senmatsu, and then slowly twisting the dagger to kill him. And she enjoys even
more the suffering of Masaoka, Senmatsu’s mother, who is forced by feudal loyalties to watch her child die without intervening. Mitsuhide, who is one of the greatest traitors to feudal honor in Japanese history, is responsible for the agonizing death of his mother and son. Motoemon in Revenge at Tengajaya is a samurai of low rank; nonetheless, he is obligated to his master, Iori. Far from honoring Iori, Motoemon sadistically kills him inch by inch out of an implacable desire for revenge. Revenge—killing a person who has slighted your honor—is a cardinal virtue in feudal morality. Revenge at Tengajaya weaves together three separate vendettas—against Iori, Tòma, and Motoemon. Such scenes constitute kabuki’s exceptional “aesthetic of cruelty” (zankoku no bi), in which violence and pain are made beautiful through abstraction. Murder and torture are staged in stylized, dance-like patterns of movement supported by atmospheric shamisen melodies and rhythmic drum music. Although characters’ villainous actions may seem excessive, with minor exceptions they are based on known historical worlds.

1804–1864

The overwhelming tone of kabuki plays during the nineteenth century’s first seven decades was one of darkness and sexual desire. Social and economic disruption, including famine and peasant revolts, threatened the nation’s feudal system and isolationist policies, culminating in 1853 when American gunboats under Commodore Perry entered Japanese waters, which eventuated in the 1868 overthrow of the Tokugawa government. This atmosphere of unrest influenced kabuki artists so deeply that their plays became preoccupied with grotesquerie, fantasy and the supernatural, ruthlessness, aggressive women, crime, greed, and lust. Nevertheless, the pall of decadence and sexuality that hangs over many of the period’s plays produced a number of indisputable masterpieces.

The period witnessed the work of two great playwrights, Tsuruya Nanboku IV (1755–1829) and Kawatake Mokuami (1816–1893), and lesser lights such as Sakurada Jisuke III (1802–1877) and Segawa Jokô III (1806–1881). All were attached to Edo theatres and wrote for Edo actors. Edo had replaced Osaka as the center of all important writing and production. Plays began to borrow heavily from various
genres of popular literature and from storytelling, which were in turn powerfully influenced by kabuki.

When Osaka playwright Namiki Gohei I (1747–1808) moved to Edo in 1794, he brought with him the Osaka convention of writing a program of two independent plays. Prior to this, Edo playwrights had written a single all-day play containing related history and domestic sections. Moving between these two formats, Nanboku wrote extremely complex plots in which he intermingled unrelated dramatic worlds in astounding ways. He delighted in mixing grand, historical characters from the past with struggling commoners of the present. Mokuami, on the other hand, tended to make each play’s world self-contained.

Nanboku, Jokô, and Mokuami created new, startlingly modern “raw” or “pure” domestic dramas (kizewamono) that compellingly and starkly reflect the decaying underside of late-Tokugawa feudalism. Kasane (1823) and The Three Kichisas and the New Year’s First Visit to the Pleasure Quarters (1860) are set in grim surroundings, graveyards, remote hovels, and deserted riverbanks that occupy the margins of human society. Major characters are social outcasts—thieves, pimps, gangsters, and murderers—who callously indulge in seduction, extortion, torture, and murder, not to mention incest and suicide. Mokuami even came to be called the “bandit playwright” because so many of his heroes were romantic outlaws; plays featuring them were termed “bandit plays” (shiranami mono), a good example being The Three Kichisas.

Nanboku was a master writer of the ghost play (kaidan mono), in which a grotesquely disfigured spirit, usually a woman like Kasane, takes vengeance on a lover who has betrayed her. Ghost plays were performed in summer when souls of the dead were honored and when, some suggest, ghastly scenes would have a chilling effect on sweltering audiences. Supernatural effects such as transformation, the appearance of a ghost, or the manifestation of giant, magical toads (as in Masakado [1836]) called for new and often complicated stage devices (keren). Among the most spectacular were flying through the air via ropes and pulleys and the burning and collapse of a castle or mansion. Revolving stages were built with a second revolve in the center, which made possible simultaneous movement in opposite directions.
**The Tale of the Martyr of Sakura** (1851) is kabuki’s only overt political protest play. Somber in mood, it depicts the terrible suffering of poor farmers who are powerless within the feudal system. The scene in which Sōgo leaves his children, knowing they will be executed because he dares to face the shogun personally, is exceptionally poignant. His actions possess selfless nobility, a far cry from the violent narcissism of the villain Yoemon in *Kasane*, the conniving outlaws in *The Three Kichisas*, or the con games of Kihei and Oroku in *The Scandalous Love of Osome and Hisamatsu* (1813). Dance plays that used the sensual imagery of sexual desire thrived during these years. Often, as in *Kasane*, they were peopled with the same underworld characters as raw domestic plays (the same story could be staged as a dance or straight drama). Great dancers of this time, such as Bandō Mitsugorō III (1773–1831) and Nakamura Utaemon III (1778–1838), became famous in transformation dances (*hengemono*) in which they displayed their acting versatility by performing multiple roles in rapid sequence. This was accompanied by instantaneous, seemingly magical, costume changes that enthralled audiences. A major impetus to the development of dance was the creation of new styles of subtle and sensuous shamisen music and singing, elegant *tokiwazu* (as in *Masakado*) and emotionally powerful *kiyomoto* (as in *Kasane*). The aesthetic of cruelty, noted earlier, is highly developed in dance plays such as *Kasane* where beautiful music and gracefully danced fighting movements counter the action’s bloody content. Both Nanboku and Mokuami wrote long sections of dialogue in phrases of seven and five syllables (*shichigochō*), which actors spoke in flowing, rhythmic patterns, thereby beautifying otherwise vulgar language.

New role types were created in raw domestic plays—handsome, erotic villains (*iroaku*) and beautiful, flamboyant, independent females (*akuba* or *dokufu*)—that took their place among standard kabuki role types: bravura hero, patient leading man, romantic lead, court villain, comic, comic villain, princess, maiden, prostitute, wife, and mother. At the same time actors reacted against being bound to a single role specialization, and the greatest stars, among them Ichikawa Danjūrō VII (1791–1859), sought fame for their versatility in a wide range of roles. There was no higher honor than being called a “multiple threat” (*kaneru yakusha*). And the pay was better because an actor was paid extra for each role he performed.
The gradual dissolution of other old customs can be seen as well. The system of annual contracts between a theatre and its acting personnel fell into disuse, and actors began to move among companies during the year. The ceremonial “face-showing” of the new acting company at the season's start in the eleventh month was gradually abandoned. Theatres continued to go bankrupt. Troupes in Osaka resorted to constant touring to sustain their livelihood. Producers shunned the financial risk of mounting new and untried all-day plays and instead put together programs of three or four unrelated pieces—acts taken out of long plays (like Osone and Hisamatsu) and independent one-acts (like Kasane or Masakado).

The unsettled nature of this period is clearly reflected in the government’s decision, in 1842, to move Edo’s three licensed kabuki theatres out of the city proper and force them to rebuild, at crippling expense, in open fields in Asakusa at the edge of the city near the Yoshiwara prostitutes’ quarter. That same year, the period’s greatest star, Ichikawa Danjûrô VII, was banished from the city for seven years for flaunting an unlawfully extravagant lifestyle. But kabuki was a tenacious survivor. Both Danjûrô and kabuki endured, while the government did not.

1872–1905

In 1868, Japan’s military government was overthrown in the name of “restoring” the young Emperor Meiji to his rightful position as the nation’s direct ruler. Within a year, the feudal system was abolished and kabuki lost the social stability and intellectual coherence that had supported its unbroken development for over two and a half centuries under successive Tokugawa shoguns. In the remaining decades of the century, Western philosophy, government, technology, science, art, and literature were eagerly studied and selectively imported by the new Meiji government leaders. The managers of kabuki had always balanced newness against tradition, change against continuity. Now they had to strike a precarious balance between foreign and Japanese theatre systems. Their difficult mission was to restore the freedom that kabuki had enjoyed in its earliest years, before Tokugawa oppression. That this freedom was in part imaginary did not diminish the urgency of the quest.

In one respect kabuki benefited greatly from contact with Europe and, to a lesser extent, America. Government officials promoted kabuki as an official or state
entertainment equivalent to Europe’s grand opera and ballet. In order to accomplish this task, the old art of “riverbed beggars” had to be cleaned up, modernized, and made more socially presentable. In 1887, government officials, literary men, and kabuki actors in Tokyo formed the Society for the Reform of Theatre. Among its aims were abolition of the hanamichi, the onnagata, stage assistants, and other non-Western characteristics of kabuki. (None of these techniques were, in fact, abandoned in the traditional repertory.) In 1887, kabuki received the highest seal of cultural approval when the Meiji emperor and his family attended specially arranged performances starring Ichikawa Danjûrô IX (1838–1903), Onoe Kikugorô V (1844–1903), and Ichikawa Sadanji I (1842–1904). These achievements were the result of the wrenching effort to reform kabuki by ignoring and erasing its past.

Under new government regulations, twenty new theatres were rapidly constructed in downtown areas in Tokyo, most designed for kabuki, where they drew a new, elite audience. The Shintomi-za, built in 1878 by Morita Kanya XII (1846–1897), introduced Western theatre features such as gas (and later electric) lighting and chair seating. Kanya invited a stream of foreign dignitaries, including former president Ulysses S. Grant, to watch his innovative productions. For a decade, the Shintomi-za was Japan’s “national theatre” in all but name.

Relaxed government regulations allowed actresses to return to the professional stage for the first time in 250 years. In 1879, Kanya cast English and American actresses in a kabuki play set in Europe, while the two young daughters of Danjûrô IX appeared with their father at the Kabuki-za in the premier of *The Mirror Lion, A Spring Diversion* in 1893. The most successful kabuki actress was Ichikawa Kumehachi (1846–1913), who studied with Danjûrô and headed several women’s kabuki troupes in the 1890s. These were exceptional cases, however, and—despite a few later attempts—actresses were never allowed to replace the onnagata. Kanya and other producers took Western plays such as *The Merchant of Venice, Tosca, William Tell,* and Bulwer-Lytton’s *Money,* adapted them to Japanese settings, and performed them as kabuki.

The most important playwright of the late Tokugawa period, Kawatake Mokuami, continued to write plays of all types until his death in 1893 at the end of the first half of the Meiji era. The domestic plays he wrote about commoners of the
recent Tokugawa period, such as *The Fishmonger Sōgorō* (1883), were little changed in their construction from the thief and gangster plays he had written a decade earlier. However, the exceptionally harsh criticism of samurai cruelty and of feudal injustice in *The Fishmonger Sōgorō* could have been written only in the Meiji period. Mokuami also collaborated with Danjūrō and Kikugorō to create two new genres of kabuki drama that reflected in opposite ways the new times. For Danjūrō he wrote *Sakai’s Drum* as a so-called “living-history play” (*katsureki geki*) that was intended to present the historical past in a truthful manner. Government censors no longer insisted that historical figures be disguised with fictional names. In a series of plays written in the 1870s and 1880s, Mokuami attempted to dramatize history as truth. But this was neither easy nor without risk: Mokuami and Kanya were sued by descendants of the Mito clan when the playwright characterized the famous samurai Mito Kōmon as a murderer. In his roles in living-history plays, Danjūrō discarded traditional poses, exaggerated exits, theatricalized costumes, and exaggerated makeup in his search for psychologically honest, or “gut,” acting, which privileged interiorization over external theatricality.

Mokuami was at the forefront of writing plays set in the Meiji period—plays that were not about feudalism but about life in modern Japan. He wrote for Kikugorō *The Woman Student* (1877) and eight other “cropped-hair plays” (*zangirimono*), named for the short haircut that symbolized modernism in the early Meiji period. Kikugorō was an especially versatile actor who, along with Kanya and Sadanji, enjoyed the challenge of playing modern roles taken directly from the streets of contemporary Japan: military officers, geisha, stationers, policemen, newspaper reporters, students, and the like. New Westernized objects of daily life appeared on stage: rickshaws, telegrams, and bowler hats. The modernity of the new cropped-hair plays is nowhere more apparent than in the English dialogue that Kikugorō spoke while playing a British balloonist named Spencer in a play at the Kabuki-za in 1891: “Ladies and gentlemen. I have been up three thousand feet. Looking down, I was pleased to see you in this Kabuki-za. Ladies and gentlemen, with all my heart, I thank you.” It is notable that Kikugorō maintained a traditional style of kabuki acting, including humorous metatheatrical references, while speaking in English. Mokuami continued many elements of traditional kabuki in *The Woman Student:* the
aestheticized bloody murder scene enacted to plaintive kiyomoto music, divided
dialogue, atmospheric sound effects, and quiet shamisen music under long speeches
of self-revelation. And the plot is resolved through an old-fashioned personal
vendetta—Oshige dutifully kills Nao, her father’s murderer—that was an anachro-
nism in the new social and legal order. That is, Mokuami did not create a new
dramaturgy for his cropped-hair plays as he did for his living-history dramas.

Mokuami musicalized kabuki production by calling for an almost continuous
flow of shamisen melody and song: either offstage background music, puppet-theatre
narrative chanting, or a character playing an instrument as part of the dramatic
action. Mokuami’s successor as house playwright at the new Kabuki-za (built in
1889) was Fukuchi Ōchi (1841–1906), former government official and journalist.
Mokuami had adapted famous nō and kyōgen dramas into kabuki dance plays for
Danjūrō and Kikugorō in part to raise kabuki’s status. Now Fukuchi continued this
enterprise, drawing on the old, elite arts of nō and kyōgen to write in 1892 the dance-
comedy The Dropped Robe and in 1893 the spectacular dance play Mirror Lion. These
plays deliberately show their ancient origins (whereas eighteenth-century kabuki
adaptations of nō had disguised these origins). The Dropped Robe is known as a “pine-
board play” (matsubamemono) because its set copies the simple nō stage backed by
pine boards, a setting first introduced into kabuki in 1840. Many nō and kyōgen
costuming, movement, voice, and music elements were retained. At the same time,
Danjūrō and his supporting artists brilliantly utilized kabuki’s full range of musical
styles and sophisticated movement vocabulary to fashion new, elegant musical and
dance dramas that have become uniquely beautiful works in the traditional reper-
tory. The dance plays, short and composed in one act, fit admirably into the usual
program that was made up of three or four excerpts or short plays. The three top
actors of this era, Danjūrō IX, Kikugorō V, and Sadanji I, were so memorable that
the time is affectionately called the “Dan-Kiku-Sa” era of kabuki.

The playwright Tsubouchi Shōyō (1859–1935) was a scholar, teacher of English
literature, and translator of Shakespeare’s complete works. Deeply influenced by
Shakespeare’s ability to create psychologically living characters like Hamlet, Othello,
and Lady Macbeth, Tsubouchi composed historical dramas of considerable complex-
ity and power. His plays inaugurated the “new kabuki” (shin kabuki) movement.
Tsubouchi, and playwrights who followed him, were intellectuals, authors, journalists, and scholars from outside the kabuki world. They gradually replaced most of the old house playwrights. In “new kabuki,” traditional techniques of kabuki performance are largely ignored, thus fulfilling at least some of the prohibitions desired by the Society for the Reform of Theatre several decades before.

The eighteen plays in this collection span a period of some two hundred years. From their varicolored theatrical and dramatic palette, we gain an astounding picture of a complex theatre art that grew through continual change and development. Kabuki artists also created a resilient artistic core of stylized, beautified reality that underlay all play types and performance styles. From these plays it is abundantly clear that kabuki is not, as it is sometimes said to be, a monolithic theatre with a limited range of possibilities. On the contrary, its dramaturgy, themes, characters, and performing styles continually altered reflecting audience reality, while keeping a firm hold on its past: Just a Minute! is a boastful, fantastic early work; Precious Incense is morally implacable, serious, and mature; Kasane reeks of over-the-top cruelty and decadence; while The Woman Student speaks in the unmistakable voice of the modern world. The plays in this collection are all marvelous examples of dramatic writing intended to be acted on the stage and continue to stir contemporary audiences to admiration and excitement.