

# Asian Odyssey

A National K-12 Interdisciplinary Curriculum Model

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## THEATER IN CHINA AND JAPAN A LOOK AT THE BEIJING OPERA AND THE KABUKI THEATER

### Grade Level

This lesson was written for late Elementary and early Middle School for Language Arts.

### Objective

Students will explore then compare and contrast the Chinese (Beijing Opera) and Japanese (Kabuki) forms of theater. They will then create their own performance pieces based on these forms. This lesson will be carried out over the course of a month, allowing appropriate classroom time for each step in the creation of an independent performance.

### Concepts

- Beijing Opera—(also known as the Peking Opera) is a popular form of Chinese theater that combines acting, spoken dialogue, singing, dancing, athletics, and acrobatics. The action is accompanied by a traditional Chinese orchestra, which consists mainly of loud percussion instruments and two-string fiddles. Wooden clappers are used to highlight the actions on stage. Actors use very few props and convey the meaning of their words and songs through gestures, mime, movement, and facial expression. The actions of opening a door, going up stairs, rowing a boat, or threading a needle are done purely through the actor's mime-like gestures. The stories of the Beijing Opera were taken from plays performed in China at an earlier time as well as from traditional stories and novels, which are often based on actual events in Chinese history.

The Beijing Opera (originally known as *pihuang* or *lutang*, or “plucking [a stringed instrument] at random” is thought to have originated in 1790 to celebrate the 55<sup>th</sup> year of the reign of the Qianlong Emperor (which coincided with his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday). Performers of this new art form drew heavily on previous opera styles that had been performed at the imperial court and in the theaters of Beijing during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries (there are 365 styles of traditional Chinese opera). By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Beijing Opera had fully developed its unique style with its more colorful repertoire and greater emphasis on acrobatics.

The Beijing Opera has four types of characters: male (*sheng*), female (*dan* or *tan*), the “painted face” (*jing* or *ching*), and the clown (*chou* or *ch'ou*). Male roles include such characters as government officials, scholars, and warriors, roles that demand highly trained athleticism and acrobatic ability. The male roles are also divided into old men (beards) and young men. Female roles were traditionally performed by men, but today women take the parts. These include elderly, dignified widows and mothers; elegant aristocratic women; maids, who wear brightly colored costumes; women warriors; and female comedians. “Painted face” roles include warriors, nobles, adventurers, and demons. In acting and acrobatics, different roles follow different patterns, all with exaggerated movements

The actors wear elaborate colorful costumes and painted faces or stylish masks that are symbolic of the roles they are playing. Because the operas were originally performed outdoors to large crowds, the performers sing in loud voices and the lyrics have clearly defined rhythms. The Beijing Opera is still very popular in China with many professional companies performing both in the capital and throughout the country.

- Kabuki—developed in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century as an offshoot of dance and puppet shows. Its beginnings are obscure, but it seems to have developed from open-air performances of dancing and singing whose themes were taken from epics and myths. Legend has it that in the early 1600s a Shinto shrine dancer named Okuni “frolicked” (*kabuku*) on the banks of the River Kamo in Kyoto. Okuni and her all female troupe created such a lively performance, mixing dancing with comedy skits, that it became a great success. The government grew concerned with the possible spread of immorality engendered by the performances, and in 1629 the shogun, the military ruler of Japan, decreed that women were no longer allowed to perform in public. At first, female roles were played by young men, but this, too, led to problems so that by the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century only adult males were allowed to perform in Kabuki.

In order to find suitable material for these new types of acting troupes, dramatists revisited the traditional theater classics of Noh and Kyogen (Kyogen were the comic vignettes given between the Noh plays). The puppet theatre of Bunraku was also an important source of inspiration. One of the favorite themes of Kabuki became the conflict of an emotion, such as friendship, love, or passion, with the claims of society. Many of the plays deal with the clash of feudal loyalty and family affection or with elopements and double suicides.

Each character in the Kabuki repertoire has a prescribed costume and makeup. For examples, princesses always wear elaborate crowns of twinkling silver-foil flowers. White faces usually denote nobility of spirit, while red faces generally belong to villains (the Kabuki style of makeup is said to have been inspired by that of the Beijing Opera). Kabuki is performed on a special stage with a long raised ramp known as the *hanamichi*, which cuts through the audience to the stage allowing the actors to make spectacular entrances and exits.

Kabuki was an actor-centered theater. Each role in the Kabuki repertoire was allocated to a family of actors, who played it from generation to generation, with each family having a *mon*, or coat of arms, worn on their costumes to identify them. An actor known as the *onnagata* specializes in creating the illusion of idealized feminine beauty. A counterpart to this is the *aragoto* (“rough business”) style of acting used to portray superheroes, those who right the wrongs that have been done. *Aragoto* actors wear fantastic cosmetic masks and at the climatic moments they strike a powerful pose, grimacing and crossing their eyes to express intense anger or other emotion. The *aragoto* style created by Ichikawa Danjuro I (1669-1704), the founder of Kabuki’s leading family of actors. The name has been handed down through the family for generations. Danjuro XII is very active in Kabuki today, following in the footsteps of his father, Danjuro XI, and working with his son who will succeed him as the next Danjuro. In Japan, the actor is venerated as a combination of celebrity movie star-pop singer-television personality.

The genre of Kabuki became an endless source of inspiration for artists of the day. One artist, who was probably an actor himself, painted nothing but close-up portraits of actors. They were so realistic that he was accused of stealing their souls. The Cleveland Museum has an outstanding collection of woodblock prints based on portraits of actors and scenes from Kabuki performances.

## Materials

*Actor Otani Tokuji as the Servant Sodesuke*, 1794, CMA 1930.206

*Ichikawa Ebizo IV as Tajkemura Sadanoshin*, 1974, CMA 1930.205

*Ichikawa Danjuro VII as Kan Shojo in the Mt. Tenpai Scene* (from the series *Famous Kabuki Plays*), 1814, CMA 1985.333

*Motsumoto Koshiro IV as Gorobei, the Fish Seller from Sanya*, 1794, CMA 1974.78

*Sanjo Kantaro as a Young Woman Standing in a Wisteria Arbor*, early-or mid-1730s, CMA 1916.1128

*Perspective View of the Interior of the Nakamura Theater with Ichikawa Ebizo II as Yanone Goro*, 1740, CMA 1916.1154

*Haze on a Clear Day at Stone Bridge* (from the series *Eight Elegant Views of Chanted Accompaniments for Kabuki Plays*), early 1810s, CMA 1940.720

*Nakamura Utaemon III as the Monkey Trainer Yojiro* (from the series *Famous Kabuki Plays*), mid-1810s, CMA 1985.332

*Going to the Kabuki Theater in the Hour of the Hare* (from the series *The Twelve Hours with Daily Events*), late 19<sup>th</sup> century, CMA 1943.44

*The Actor Segawa Kikunojo II Dancing with a Parasol*, late 1770s, CMA 1985.354

Chenshang, Don. *Painting of Beijing Opera Characters*, China Press and Periodicals, 1981.

Jaeger, Claude. *A Night at the Peking Opera* {16 mm film reel--20 minutes}

Siu, Wang-NGai and Peter Lovrick. *Chinese Opera: Images and Stories*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997.

*An Introduction to the Chinese Opera, Vol. 1: Kun Opera; Sichuan Opera*, (CD).

Shaver, Ruth. *Kabuki Costume*. Rutland, VT: Charles E. Tuttle, 1990.

*Japan: Kabuki & Other Traditional Music*, Ensemble Nipponia, (CD).

## Web Quests

[www.usd.edu/~pshan/Webquest.html](http://www.usd.edu/~pshan/Webquest.html)

<http://www.chinavoc.com/arts/perform/opera/beijingopera.htm>

<http://www.paulnoll.com/China/Opera/index.html>

<http://www.chinapage.com/beijing-opera.html>

<http://library.kcc.hawaii.edu/~bzhang/pkopera/pkopera.html>

<http://www.chinapage.com/xwang/roles.html>

<http://library.thinkquest.org/03oct/01397/main.htm>

<http://web-japan.org/kidsweb/meet/kabuki/index.html>

<http://kabuki-bito.jp/eng/top.html>

<http://kabuki21.com>

## Procedure

### Day One

1. Introduce students to the background and key concepts of the Beijing Opera (see Concepts). Show students images from *Chinese Opera: Images and Stories*. Ask them to describe in words what they see. If possible, show the film *A Night at the Peking Opera*, or play an excerpt of the CD of Chinese Opera. Ask them to discuss what they like and dislike about the music. Draw out positive aspects of the music from the students.
2. Next introduce them to the background and key concepts of Kabuki, emphasizing that Kabuki evolved out of older theatrical forms, in this case the plays of the Noh theater.
3. Show students the images of Kabuki actors and performances from the Cleveland Museum of Art, sharing the label information with the class.
4. For homework, have students use WebQuest to learn more about the Beijing Opera and Kabuki.

### **Day Two: Beijing Opera**

1. Have students discuss the information found on WebQuest. Reiterate the symbolic meanings of color and gesture.
2. Explain the symbolism in acting in Beijing Opera; then, have students split into small groups and act out a few scenarios without using props. Challenge the groups to use subtle symbolism to represent whether they are a male or female character, the social class they belong to, and the emotion that their character wishes to project. Have them use the following:
  - a. Riding a horse, slowly and fast
  - b. Opening a door
  - c. Rowing a boat, in good weather and in bad weather
  - d. A thief trying to steal money at night
  - e. A young girl doing embroidery
3. For homework, have students do research about possible Chinese tales, historical events, or legends that might be used for their theatrical presentation.

### **Day Three: Kabuki**

1. Introduce the students to the key concepts of Kabuki. Show students the images from the CMA again and ask them to describe in words what they see. Then play an excerpt from the Kabuki CD. Ask them to discuss what they like and dislike about the music. Draw out positive aspects of the music from the students.
2. Have the students create a Venn diagram (this can be done in groups or as a class on the board) about the similarities and differences of Beijing Opera and Kabuki.
3. For homework, have students do research about possible Japanese tales, historical events, or legends that might be used for their theatrical presentation.

### **Day Four Onward: Creating the Play**

1. Set up a shelf with resource materials for students to refer to for the month that they will have to prepare before their play.
2. Divide students into two even groups, either by assigning them to a group or having them draw from a hat. Assign the Beijing Opera to one group and Kabuki to the other.
3. In essence, each group will need at least one (if not two) director(s), a writer, a costume designer, and someone to stage the acrobatics. The remaining students will be actors. Assign these positions, have students vote amongst themselves, or draw the positions from a hat.
3. The students are to create a performance of the story they have chosen as a group. Make sure to set due dates for the script, dress rehearsal, and final performance. Enlist parents to create costumes and do makeup on the day of performance.
4. Perform the plays for the whole school.

### **Enrichment**

- A. Learn about Noh theater. Create your own Noh masks.
- B. Learn about the traditions of Bunraku, the puppet theater of Japan. Create your own puppets.

### **Ohio State Standards**

#### Language Arts

- #2 Acquisition of vocabulary-Define the meaning of unknown words and author's use.
- #2 Conceptual Understanding-Identify and understand new uses of words and phrases, such as similes and metaphors.
- #2 Acquisition of vocabulary-Determine the meanings and pronunciations of unknown words by using dictionaries, etc.
- #3 Comprehension strategies-Establish and adjust purposes for reading, including to find out, to understand, to interpret, to enjoy, and to solve problems.

- #3 Comprehension strategies-Summarize important information, recognizing main ideas and identifying details to support each.
- #3 Comprehension strategies-Make inferences based on implicit information and provide justification for those inferences.
- #3 Comprehension strategies-Select, create and use graphic organizers to interpret information.
- #3 Independent Reading-Independently read books for various purposes.
- #4 Reading applications-Analyze information found on charts and diagrams.
- #5 Reading applications-Interpret how an author's choice of words appeals to the senses and suggests mood.
- #6 Writing processes-Generate writing ideas through discussions with others and printed material.
- #7 Writing applications-Write responses to novels, stories and poems that organize an interpretation around several clear ideas.
- #9 Research- Use a variety of communication techniques to present information gathered.

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