

IN JAPANESE THEATERS

Another Interesting Description by Maurice Hageman.

WOMEN CAN'T ACT WITH MEN

But Are Allowed to Appear in Casts Composed Exclusively of Their Sex.

In his concluding letter on the customs prevailing among Japanese actors and in Japanese theaters, Maurice Hageman of the Marie Bell Opera Company writes of the actors and their audiences as follows:

No women are allowed to perform on the same stage with Japanese actors. The laws against this are very strict. Men are skilfully trained from their boyhood to impersonate women, and bring this to the highest pitch of perfection, both in speech and in gestures. Actors playing female roles never undertake male characters; even in their daily life they speak like women, either through habit or in order not to spoil their carefully cultivated falsetto voices. To me, however, this always made the impression of extreme affectation. Messrs. Hanahira and Hikutonokoh are considered the best female impersonators in Japan. I was told, on several occasions, although I cannot vouch for the truth of it, that about a century ago, when men and women performed together, several murders were committed among the actors through jealousy. The actors themselves, however, always strenuously denied these allegations and ascribed these conditions to the fact that women were intellectually inferior to men (ye shades of Mother Blavatsky!) and were not able to betray emotional feelings as well as men, when properly trained. Whatever the facts in the case may be, and whatever the cause, the Japanese government forbids the acting of men and women on the same stage together.

There are also a few traveling companies, of which the members are all women, and in which some of them impersonate men very cleverly. I have only once seen a company of this kind in a minor theater in Osaka. Their moral status was reported to me to be slightly Zolaesque. I do not believe that these oriental Sam Jack organizations ever performed in the larger theaters.

The wardrobe is furnished by the management, although the leading actors all possess a large private wardrobe of beautiful and costly costumes, which have been in their families for many decades. The greatest care is taken of them, and they are packed away in sandalwood trunks. The two swords ("daisho"—long and short) worn by the "daimios" (princes) and "yakunins" (noblemen) are, for stage use, made out of wood, but very closely resembling the real articles. The commoner was never allowed to carry more than one sword. Some of the swords have a sheath attached to them, which contains a small and very sharp pointed knife, like the small knives attached to claymores. These knives were used for being thrown at a distant adversary, or for skinning wild animals.

The hairdresser has his shop in the theater, near the dressing-rooms of the actors. Great care is taken of the wigs, which are dressed afresh for every performance. The coiffeurs use a kind of flesh-colored paste, which makes it impossible, even standing quite near an actor, to see where the wig ends and the forehead commences. It does not melt, is not greasy, and conforms to the movements of the skin. It is far superior to our wig paste.

On our opening night there were several Japanese actors in my dressing-room, and on seeing me paste on the mustache for the part of "General Boone," they were all greatly astonished. They showed me some of their mustaches, which they fixed with fine silk threads behind the ears to hold them in place. I made them all a mustache out of hairdressers' wool and gave them some of my mastic and ether to paste them on with, for which, on the following day, they all returned different presents, for the Japanese are not only the cleanest nation on the globe, but I also found them the most grateful for even the smallest of favors. Talking about Japanese cleanliness—a whole chapter could be devoted to this subject. Even the poorest coolie would no more go without his hot daily bath than without his frugal bowl of rice. And this winter or summer. If cleanliness is next to godliness, our little Japanese friends will all be in the front rows in the happy hereafter. But I am writing about theaters and actors and not about bathhouses, although they form an interesting subject. Be "revengeful and nos moutons."

Every actor has a dressing-room to himself, and a dresser, who acts also as a private prompter, only prompting the actor in whose service he is. These prompters follow the actors on the stage and crouch behind or beside them, with book in hand, to whisper the lines to

them. They are dressed in black gowns and hoods, and are called "shadows." They are supposed not to be seen by the audience. It is a strange sight in a new piece to see three or four actors on the stage, each with his own particular prompter crouching beside him. As soon, however, as the actors become perfectly familiar with their lines, they go on without their prompters. This is not strange, though, then to hear some one talking on our stage in a perfectly audible tone of voice, which can be heard all over the house, and to have another individual but a few feet away from the speaker, who is supposed to be utterly deaf to his expressions, although a moment previous or an instant later he might be able to hear a pin drop. I tried to explain this to some of our Japanese conferees, and one of them asked me if he (the speaker on the stage) was supposed to be able to turn his hearing on and off like a faucet—at his own will. And then I stopped explaining, and mopped my noble brow. What a Jap hears he hears for keeps, and you cannot talk him out of it, or make him believe that he is suffering from mental aberration.

A Japanese audience does not use chairs. They sit or kneel on "tatamices" (thick straw mats). The ground floor or pit of a Japanese theater is divided into little square boxes, about six feet wide each way and two feet deep, holding from four to six persons. On the second floor around the auditorium are also boxes of a little larger size, which are occupied by the elite. The place for the gods, who have to stand up, forms the back part of the second floor, and is divided from the rest of the theater by perpendicular wooden bars about three inches thick and at a distance of about six inches from each other.

In the back part of the lower floor is a box reserved for police officers, which is generally well occupied. They wear blue uniforms, with broad, yellow stripes and brass buttons, and carry heavy canes, nearly three feet long. Their services are very seldom required, as a Japanese audience is almost invariably an orderly one.

The spectators on entering a theater, leave their "gettas" (clogs) at the door, and receive in return little wooden checks, duplicates of which are attached to their clogs. On leaving, these are returned to their owners in exchange for the checks and a small fee. The few Japanese who wear shoes take these off, and enter in their stockings. Small wooden boards serve as admission tickets. They are collected during the performance, and not at the door, collectors going from box to box to do so.

The Japanese thoroughly understand the art of amusing themselves in a decorous manner. A poor coolie will scrape enough money together during several months to take himself and family to a "shibubai" (theater), and in one day spend every cent of his small savings without stint or regret. On that day he will indulge in every luxury attainable within the limit of his means, and pass the entire day and evening in a theater, eating, drinking, smoking, sometimes overcome by the fumes of the warm "saké," taking a little nap during an intermission, and enjoying the performance intensely. I saw the entire day and evening, for in Japan most performances commence about 11 or 12 o'clock in the forenoon, and do not close until after midnight. The neighboring tea-houses provide the spectators with every kind of refreshments.

The program consists of several pieces—comedies, ancient and modern dramas, and dances, which form the last number in the entertainment. This dancing must be seen often to be appreciated by foreigners. It consists of strange but graceful movements of the head, arms, legs and body, and of stamping with the feet. It is not unlike some of the dances of the Hindoo Bayaderes, without their furious wind-ups, however. It is the embodiment of the poetry of motion.

After our engagement at the "Shimabarah" in Tokyo had come to an end, Mr. Kanjah invited all the leading Japanese and foreign actors to a banquet. Many toasts were given, and we parted from each other on the best of terms. Miss May, Miss Howe, Mr. Vernon, and myself were each presented with a gold medal in remembrance of the first engagement of a foreign company in a Japanese theater.

To conclude, I wish to state that the Japanese theaters must not be confounded with the Chinese theaters and their continued infernal noise. They are as far superior in every respect as the Japanese race is superior to the Chinese "Bayonarah."

—Maurice Hageman.