

INTRODUCTION TO DAMINE KABUKI

From the time of the Grand Opening of the Krannert Center for the Performing Arts in 1969, for many years, Kabuki productions performed by University of Illinois students were presented annually at Krannert Center for the Performing Arts (KCPA). These productions came to be known as "Illini Kabuki". In 1991 the Illini Kabuki production of **Achilles: A Kabuki Play** was invited to tour Japan; among the invitations was to perform at the annual Kwan Yin Kabuki Festival in the mountain village of Damine. This was the first time any outside group was ever invited to perform in their annual Festival, which was dedicated as an offering to Kwan Yin (the Bodhisattva or Goddess of Mercy, venerated in their shrine) continuously for some 300 years. Being a small mountain village, there were no hotels or inns so the Illini Kabuki group, which included student performers, the Chancellor of the University, Director of KCPA, faculty and staff, were all hosted in individuals' homes. Since 1991, every three years, Damine children and adults have been coming to the United States to perform at selected cities, towns and KCPA.

When the Kabuki curriculum closed upon my retirement from the University, costumes were placed in storage. Among them were costumes for the production of **The Monstrous Spider**, which had been a very popular production, hence the costumes were very much in use and in need of considerable repair. The entire set of costumes for **The Monstrous Spider** was donated to Damine, and in 2012, I went to Damine to guide and assist in the disassembling and rebuilding of the costumes. Under my direction, the costumes were completely taken apart, linings were replaced, and this time, smaller in size to fit the villagers. It took some 40 days of intense labor to reconstruct the costumes. In February of 2012, the costumes were used for the first time and were acclaimed by the audience. This November's Damine production of **The Monstrous Spider** will serve as a "homecoming for the costumes" back to KCPA.

A KABUKI DANCE DRAMA: KOTOBUKI SAMBASO

Before modern times, Japan was an agricultural country. The spiritual base of the culture was founded in both Shintoism and Buddhism, so it was natural to see the divine or spiritual in all things. The farmers in the villages would pay homage to the gods of nature by asking for divine guidance in protecting seedlings during the growing season when planting in the spring, and the promise of a good harvest at the end of the season. Labor on the farms was backbreaking and difficult. Rice paddies are filled with water and the seedling plants were planted in the mud. To ease this difficult labor, music with rhythm, especially a drumbeat with words, were used and the planting was carried out almost as in a dance. Then, when harvest time arrived, a great celebration at the Shinto shrines took place and as part of the entertainment, the *sambaso* and other comical dances were presented. The *sambaso* is a stylized dance describing the cycle of the life of a seed, from germination to harvest time. As each new season begins, the *sambaso* will be performed to ask for the blessings of the gods of nature. Eventually, these performances became even more stylized and refined, and in time, became an important part of the Noh Drama productions. In time, the *sambaso* also became a part of the Kabuki program with even more stylization and exaggeration in planting the seeds for successful germination. This dance is acted out in comic style. “Kotobuki Sambaso” is a Kabuki version. In Kabuki, there are many varieties in *sambaso*. This has become one of the most popular of dance dramas.

KOTOBUKI SAMBASO

KOKORO KUMAGAI [a 5th grade girl] takes part as the head of the theatre troupe

HINA TAKESHITA [a 5th grade girl] in the role of Senzai [meaning “one thousand years of longevity”]

TSUKUMO KUMAGAI [a 6th grade boy] in the role of Sambaso [seed planter]

TOKI OGAWA [a 6th grade girl] in the role of Sambaso [seed planter]

When the group finds their places on stage, Senzai takes a box to the head of the troupe which holds the mask of Okina, the God of Longevity. This god offers a prayer for all of the audience members to each receive happiness and longevity. After Okina and Senzai retire, the Sambaso begin to act out the hard labor in comedy. These characters of Sambaso have a beautiful fan, which they use as a basket of seeds. In their right hand, they each hold many golden bells in pyramid shape to represent seeds. These golden bells are shaken against the floor to act out the planting of seeds.

TSUCHIGUMO

[*tsuchi* = earth; *gumo* or *kumo* = spider]

This play, originally from the Noh Drama repertoire, was adapted for Kabuki in the late 1800's. The story line is based upon an ancient folk tale. Once there was a gigantic spider that caused havoc among the people. The Shogun Yorimitsu asked his chief attendant Yasumasa to eliminate and destroy the "spider"

Scene I

On stage, Yasumasa, the chief attendant, announces that his lordship has been ill for a long time without apparent reason. So he has been appointed to guard his lordship in his bedchamber every night. He awaits Yorimitsu's arrival. Yorimitsu appears with an attendant who carries his sword. Yorimitsu says he is feeling better so he will not require an additional guard, so Yasumasa retires to the next chamber. Lady attendant Kocho appears and announces that she has brought medicine from the apothecary. Lord Yorimitsu asks Kocho to describe the beautiful autumnal colors since he has not been able to go out to see them for a long time. Lady Kocho entertains him with a dance and story. Then she retires to prepare the medicine. While Yorimitsu is resting, suddenly a monk appears from nowhere; he says he comes to do a ceremony for the complete recovery of his Lordship.

The young attendant sword bearer suspects that this monk is the "evil creature in disguise". The monk, Chichu, announces that he is the cause of the Lordship's illness. Suddenly he throws a web over his Lordship and then disappears. Yasumasa comes back from the next chamber to protect his Lordship. Lord Yorimitsu orders Yasumasa to go after Chichu, the spider, and destroy it.

Scene II

Deep in the mountains, with Yasumasa as the head, warriors and foot soldiers arrive with torches in hand come to the spider's cave. A beautiful dance sequence between the spider and warriors takes place.

The spider is eventually killed, and with a grand "mie" pose, the show ends.