

KUROGO - MEN IN BLACK

黒子
くろこ

One of the charms of the chuban print above is not only the puppet figure of Yaegakihime, but also the clearly visible figures dressed and hooded in black who are assisting in the performance. Nelson translates 黒子 as a prompter or stagehand. Literally it translates as "black boy." *Kurogo* are also referred to as *Koken* 後見 or こけん, assistant. (Ernst in his glossary section points out that *kurogo* is an alternative term for *kurombo* 黒奴 or くろんぼ.) (1)

(1) The Kabuki Theatre, by Earle Ernst, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1998, p. 285. Nelson (5403) translates this word as negro, dark-skinned person, smut, prompter and stagehand. Mark Spahn and Wolfgang Hadamitzky in The Kanji Dictionary (4d7.2) are far less delicate with their definitions. In fact, they use the "n" word and the term darkie plus black-clad stagehand. Neger

There is a caveat somewhere in here in that Leiter states: "Bunraku puppeteers wear similar black robes and hoods." this raises the question --- for me at least --- as to whether or not these figures can be properly referred to by this term. If anyone reads this and knows I would like to hear from you.

Stage Assistants In addition to the regular performers, the *koken* (stage assistant) serves a valuable function on the stage. He is especially important in dance pieces. During the demanding *hayagawari* (quick costume change), the *koken* must carefully follow the movements of the dancer, all the while remaining close behind him, and at the crucial moment assist in the *hikinaki* ("pulling out"), by which a layer of clothing is quickly removed revealing a costume of different pattern and color. The *koken* is also known as *kurogo* ("black costume") since he is often dressed all in black.

In the Kabuki plays there are few persons on the stage besides the actors and those are not characters but stage assistants. They are strange-looking figures clad and hooded in black: the "kurogo" and the non-hooded "koken" who sometimes take places behind the actors as prompters, but most of the time their jobs consist of handling props. The main classes of scenes in the Kabuki are the *Jidaimono* or historic scenes, with their subdivisions composed of exaggerated action; the *Aragoto*, which are used consistently by the eighteen masterpieces of the Ichikawa School of Actors; the *Sewamono*, usually included in the domestic melodrama; and the *Shosagoto*, which uses dances like the "hataraki," famous for its agitated movements.

Kurogo – In the Japanese puppet theatre known as *bunraku* the *kurogo* or puppet masters wear black robes that signify that they are merely part of the background.

Kurogo ----- "Man in black." The prop and costume handlers in kabuki and bunraku theaters. Dressed in black clothes from head to toe, with hoods and veils, they are "invisible" to the audience, who disregards their presence on stage

kurogo a black-robed stagehand
These ninja-like assistants help Kabuki actors change costumes on stage.

A *koken* is an onstage stagehand who is seen but not sensed. The *koken* helps actors with costumes and props. In the event of an accident, the *koken* is ready to take over the actor's performance immediately. The *koken* is actually "invisible" in that he is ignored by the audience and does not interrupt the flow of the performance.

KOKEN A player who dresses entirely in black and is considered to be "aesthetically invisible." The term is borrowed from Japanese Kabuki theatre. Kokens can serve as "stage hands" in the creation of simulated supernatural effects, operate puppet monsters, can stand by to watch out for the safety of participants, or assist or observe in other ways. The Spectators are supposed to ignore the presence of Kokens, although they may take notice of what Kokens do. For example, if a Koken lifts a book off the table, an Spectator may notice that the book is "floating," but ignores what's making it float.

KOKEN (stage attendants)

The shite actors responsible for dressing the main actor and sitting at the rear of the stage to take care of details of performance. In the event that the main actor is incapacitated, the main stage attendant takes his part.

De Koken zit meestal Linksachter op het podium zoals te zien is op onderstaand figuur



shallow stage of no great height; although it does not reach the same pitch of realism as on the *kabuki* stage, the scenery is elaborate, and cunningly contrived to allow for the movements of the puppets and their handlers in different planes of depth and height. The puppets are two-thirds life size and the principal characters need for their display a chief handler, who wears a ceremonial costume and is not masked, and two assistants in hooded robes; the minor characters are handled by a single hooded assistant. All these handlers are visible to the audience; the technique of manipulation from above by strings, although it has its exponents in Japan, has not succeeded in establishing its right to a stage of its own. The action is accompanied by the chanting of the story, usually by one singer, to the music of a *samisen*, or Japanese guitar; sometimes the chorus sings in unison, and the music has no independent existence apart from the chanting which it forms a rhythmical background.

The *kabuki* stage (see No. 120) is also wide, shallow, and not very high; its depth is limited by the adoption of the revolving stage which dates from 1760, and is an integral part of the scenic presentation. Another special device characteristic of the *kabuki* stage, although adapted from the *Nō*, is the *hana-michi*, the 'flower way', running on the left-hand side from the back of the hall to the stage at the level of the spectators' heads. Along this the characters make their entrances and exits, and to it they sometimes withdraw for an aside; it is sometimes duplicated by a similar though narrower passage on the right-hand side. The curtain does not rise but rolls back to one side. The scenery is elaborate and complete to the last detail; but since the scene is Japan, where simplicity to the point of asceticism is the rule, this over-elaboration does not serve to distract the attention. The costumes are similarly fitted to the part; rich brocaded silks in historical subjects, plain where the scenes are drawn from common life. The performers are not masked, unless for performance of an actual *Nō*, when a replica of the *Nō* stage is sometimes constructed on the stage; but in the classical plays they are heavily made up in conventional style appropriate to the character represented. Female parts are taken exclusively by male actors who specialize in these roles. Music and sound-effects are provided by a small party of instrumentalists inconspicuously placed behind a lattice on the left of the stage; where the play is adapted from the marionette theatre a *kyōrui* reciter and a *samisen* player sit in open view on the right; if from the *Nō*, in addition to the chorus and a number of *samisen* players seated on the stage, there will be the special *Nō* musicians seated in front of them. Finally, mention may be made of the stage assistants, the *kurōgo* and *kōken*, the one hooded and the other not. Like the handlers of the marionettes they are conventionally invisible; they survive from a time when the actor had a shadow who crouched behind him with a

light on the end of a bamboo to illuminate the play of his features.

As in the Chinese theatre, it is the rule for individual scenes from several plays to be acted in the course of one performance; these scenes have their own names and enjoy a semi-independent existence apart from the play of which they form a part. The *kabuki* theatre recognizes three main classes, the *jidaimono* or histories, with a subdivision composed of scenes of exaggerated action, the *aragoto* (it is of these last that the '18 masterpieces' of the Ichikawa school of actors consist); the *sewamono* or domestic melodramas; and the *shosagoto* or dances. A typical programme would thus consist of a selection of scenes from one of the histories followed by a dance; and a second half consisting of a melodrama followed by another dance.

The *Nō* stage (see No. 121) has a floor of polished cypress 18 feet square, raised 3 feet from the ground; it projects into the auditorium so that it is surrounded by the audience on two sides, separated from them only by a narrow path of loose pebbles. Four stout pillars support a temple roof, the eaves of which are some 12 feet from the ground and the ridge 20 feet. The front pillar on the right is the pillar of the Second Actor (*waki*) and diagonally across from it at the left rear is the pillar of the First Actor (*shite*, *shitey*). On the right a balcony some 3 feet wide accommodates the chorus of ten singers; at the back a transverse back-stage half the width of the main stage accommodates the four musicians and the two stage assistants; from its left-hand edge runs at a backward slant a passage of the same width, some 40 feet long, the *hashi-gakari*, by which the performers enter and leave the stage, closed at the far end by a narrow curtain.

There is no scenery; on the back wall of the rear stage is painted a stylized pine-tree, and along the bridge railing are three small pine-trees or branches. The properties are equally exiguous, a frame 2 feet square from which spring four light posts to support a roof representing a house, a temple, or a palace, as the play may require. The costumes are of a great richness, and the First Actor, especially in the second part where he performs the dance which is the kernel of the play, wears a mask. None of the other players is masked; essentially there are only the two actors, of whom the second occupies a minor role, but they have companions, *isure*, so that there may occasionally be as many as ten performers on the stage at once. The music, consisting of a transverse flute, two hand-drums—of which the smaller, held on the right shoulder, is played with a thimble, the other on the knee with the flat of the hand—and a larger flat drum resting on the floor and played with two sticks, provides a rhythmical background only.

The play normally opens with a short introductory chant delivered by the Second Actor from the bridge, indicative of the 'order' to which the play belongs. Advancing to the

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traditional position he recites his name or description and purpose; then follows the journey-song, at the close of which he retires to his pillar. This is the cue for the entrance of the First Actor in his first impersonation, with a chant similar to the Second Actor's, but more developed. As he enters the stage after this chant the Second Actor addresses him, and the theme of the play and the emotions it evokes are developed in exchanges between the two; the first part of the play is rounded off by a chant, more or less prolonged, by the chorus, at the close of which the First Actor (his real character now made known) retires.

Then follows an interlude during which an actor in ordinary costume, and bearing the same name as the performers in the four comic interludes which separate the individual plays, once more relates the story of the play in a prose recitative. The second part of the play opens with the Second Actor's waiting-song; the First Actor then reappears in his real person as god or hero, and performs the great dance or dances for which the rest of the play provides a setting.

Although there are special movements within it which are more animated and even exaggerated, in general the dance is a stately gliding to and fro, without raising the heel, in a series of three, five, or seven steps in a line, accompanied by gestures, of which the most striking is the throwing up of the great brocade sleeve. The dancer is in stocking feet, the floor is highly polished and specially constructed for resonance; the tapping, beating, and stamping of the feet, accompanied by the syncopated rhythm of the drums, the piercing notes of the flute, and the sharp ejaculations of the musicians, all go to make up the total effect. The dance normally is composed of five movements, each accompanied by the use of a special accessory such as a fan, a sword, or a sacred wand.

Between the individual plays which go to compose a *Nō* sequence there are interposed, in order to relieve the emotional tension, short comic interludes or farces, *kyōgen*, performed in ordinary dress and without masks. That is not to say that there are not parts which call for costume or a wig, that the use of a mask is not sometimes the point of a scene, that parodies of the *Nō* and its masks are not common. Nothing is sacred to the *kyōgen*, the *daimyō* or feudal lord, the monk, the friar, not even the dread ruler of the lower regions; and every object of popular fun finds a place, the drunken or impudent or dishonest or stupid servant, the boaster, the glutton, the shrew, the gallant; almost it might be said that every precept of the classical canon of education is turned to ridicule. If the purpose of the *Nō* is magical, here is counter-magic.

The modern classification of the *Nō*, on which is based the selection of pieces to form a programme, divides them into:

(1) The god piece;

(2) The battle piece;

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(3) The wig piece; woman's dance;

(4a) The mad piece;

(4b) The historical piece;

(5) The finale; demon's piece.

The ordinary day's programme of five pieces contains in addition four *kyōgen*, and lasts for six or seven hours, beginning at nine or ten in the morning or at one in the afternoon. Although not selected to form a programme, the following summaries will give some indication of the content of the individual classes:

Oimatsu, or The Ancient Pine. The ninth-century poet-minister Sugawara no Michizane, unjustly exiled through a palace intrigue, was miraculously followed into exile by his favourite trees. He was subsequently deified as the god of calligraphy. In the first part the spirits of the trees are represented by their attendant gardeners; in the second the spirit of the aged pine tree performs the solemn, stately *Shin no jo* dance.

Atsumori. In the great war of the twelfth century which has furnished the Japanese stage with so many of its themes the young hero turned back to face the gnarled veteran and was slain; but the slayer shaved his head and became a monk. In the first part the monk appears in person and the hero as a young reaper. The first dance of the second part is symbolic of the dance and song with which the elegants of the defeated clan whiled away the night before the battle; the second mimes the hand-to-hand fight, ending with the absolution of the monk.

Ha-goromo, or The Feather Robe. A fisherman finds an angel's feather robe, without which she cannot return to heaven, and is persuaded reluctantly to return it to her. In gratitude she performs the 'dances that are danced in heaven'.

Aoi no Ue, or Lady Aoi. Drawn from the eleventh-century romance of Genji, the Japanese Don Juan, another fertile source of inspiration for the stage, Aoi is possessed by the jealous spirit of a rival. In the first part the incantations of a sorceress evoke the jealous spirit in her natural form; in the second she is incarnate as the devil of jealousy.

Ataka, or The Barrier of Ataka. The youthful hero on the opposing side in the battle in which Atsumori lost his life quarrelled with his brother, the founder of the Kamakura shogunate, and was forced to flee in disguise. Led by his faithful supporter, the gigantic monk Benkei, the party come to a barrier, which they are allowed to pass on the production by Benkei of a subscription list, *kanjinchō*, in proof of their bona fides as mendicant friars. When they are called back for a second scrutiny, Benkei dances the *Ennen no mai*, the dance of longevity, one of the temple dances from which the *Nō* form descends.

Ko-kaji. The swordsmith Munechika is commanded to forge a blade for the emperor and invokes the aid of Inari, the god of rice