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America's Japan and Japan's Performing Arts

Barbara Thornbury

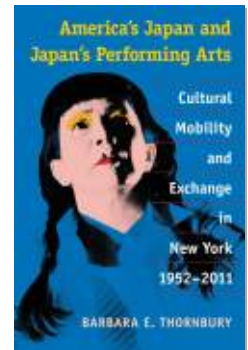
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Introduction

It may not be *their*, but it is certainly *our* Japan.¹

Q: Can you tell us a little more about what Americans perceive as Japan-ness?

A: For instance, it could be things like the stage set is extremely elaborately designed and constructed.

Q: Is it a kind of fetishism?

A: Well, you could say so.²

Eiko and Koma are quintessentially Japanese, and also longtime New York residents.³

This book is a study of the images and myths that have defined and shaped the reception of Japan-related theater, music, and dance in the United States since the postwar 1950s. In the mid-1980s, at the height of fierce trade tensions between the United States and Japan, Clyde Haberman reported in the *New York Times*, “Japanese contend that the trouble is not their lingering restrictions so much as American laziness in attempting to penetrate this country’s markets. Learn our language, Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone has said many times. Study our culture. ‘Americans don’t try hard enough’ is a favorite catch phrase.” Haberman contended, “The accusation infuriates many American executives, who feel that they could watch Kabuki plays all day and still get nowhere.”⁴

The executives’ angry sarcasm was rooted in a paradoxical fact. The American-led Occupation had targeted kabuki—especially its repertory of “feudal” plays such as *The Treasury of Loyal Retainers* (*Kanadehon chūshingura*)—as a cultural activity unsuited to a newly democratic Japan. But even before the Occupation ended in 1952, the art form was suddenly being put forward to the cold-war American public as a uniquely authentic example of Japanese culture. The kabuki boosters included a host of American theater professionals and writers—three Pulitzer Prize winners

among them—eagerly intent on helping rehabilitate the image of Japan as a friend of the United States in a world where the Soviet Union had now become the foe. The effects linger: although the economic and political climate has greatly changed, kabuki is still a major element in American understanding of Japanese culture.

I look at how “Japan” and “Japanese culture” have been discursively constructed, reconstructed, and transformed in response to productions that have taken place in New York, the main entry point and defining cultural nexus in the United States for the global touring market in the performing arts. My research is based on published reviews and related articles—in short, the substantial archival record of public engagement with a broad array of issues related to performance and Japan. The principal source is the *New York Times*, which has the most comprehensive and influential coverage of theater, music, and dance events that take place in New York—and is the primary voice among mainstream publications in shaping and recording the multi-strand narrative of America’s Japan. Examples also come from the “old-line general-interest print magazines,” which, together with the *Times*, have a long track record of covering performing arts events on and off Broadway for a national readership. “For decades *Time* and *Newsweek* devoted more space to opera and art and theology than to Hollywood or health. You may never have visited New York City, but to be a respectable figure in your town . . . it was helpful to know what operas were playing or what people were reading in Paris”—as well as in New York itself.⁵ I also include the *Village Voice*, “New York’s most important alternative newspaper,”⁶ for its in-depth treatment of the arts “downtown.” My research is additionally based on interviews with artists and arts administrators in the United States and Japan, as well as my own experience attending presentations.

The title of my book refers to historian H. D. Harootunian’s frequently cited essay “America’s Japan/Japan’s Japan.” The America’s Japan that Harootunian identified took shape during the Occupation era and continued to be developed by modernization theorists as an “appeal to fixed cultural values—consensuality—uninterrupted continuity, and an endless present derived from an exceptionalist experience.”⁷ The “America’s Japan” that I analyze in connection with the performing arts is a complex chronicle of cultural mobility and exchange—one that often reduces Japanese culture to a worn-out set of Orientalist stereotypes, but one that also broadly engages in a dynamic, transnational conversation about artistic production and encounter. Through forms such as kabuki, Japan’s culture is repeatedly depicted as a “timeless” one whose “enduring forms

[have] escaped mere history.”⁸ At the same time, the enormous volume of innovative and experimental work from Japan—introduced especially since the 1970s by downtown, avant-garde presenters such as La MaMa E.T.C. (Experimental Theatre Club)—has helped return “the realm of criticism,” again to use Harootunian’s words, “to the space of culture” by raising important questions regarding society and history.⁹

Two overlapping sets of Japan-focused performing arts events furnish a ready-made endpoint for this study. One is JapanNYC (Japan/New York City), a multi-genre, multi-site festival organized by Carnegie Hall that spanned eight months from fall 2010 until spring 2011. It encapsulates the America’s Japan of this study, providing a distilled summing up of the six-decade history of Japan-related performing arts presentations on which I concentrate. JapanNYC festival programming, in the words of Carnegie Hall executive and artistic director Clive Gillinson, aimed at taking a close look at Japan’s “fascinating culture . . . across the spectrum of its traditional and modern arts.”¹⁰ Performers from Japan included the Saito Kinen Orchestra, the Kashu-juku noh theater, the Kodo Drummers, the NHK Symphony Orchestra, the rock band Shonen Knife, a gagaku court music and dance ensemble, and individual artists ranging from shamisen, biwa, shakuhachi, and koto players to specialists in computer-generated sound. By also bringing together a roster of people with long and successful careers in the United States already behind them—including conductor Seiji Ozawa (artistic director of the festival), dancer-choreographers Eiko and Koma, and jazz musician Toshiko Akiyoshi—JapanNYC in effect paid tribute to key figures in America’s postwar cultural relations with Japan while at the same time symbolically capping off that long chapter in history.

The other set of events was the benefit concerts organized by John Zorn to raise money for Japan Society’s Japan Earthquake Relief Fund immediately following the magnitude 9 earthquake and ensuing tsunami that struck Japan in March 2011.¹¹ Zorn is a New York-based MacArthur “genius” award winner with a wide-ranging musical profile that welcomes frequent collaborations with fellow experimental musicians and composers from Japan—whose work he also produces in concert and markets on his own record label. The benefit concerts were based on “longstanding ties between what were (in the 1970s and ’80s) known as New York’s downtown improvisers and their Japanese counterparts and co-conspirators.”¹² One held at Columbia University’s Miller Theatre—which reportedly sold out in a couple of hours and was broadcast in Japan—featured Yoko Ono and her Plastic Ono Band, Yuka Honda and Miho Hatori of the rock duo

Cibo Matto, and rock and jazz singer Akiko Yano. A one-night double bill at the Abrons Arts Center brought together almost two dozen performers—singer-songwriter Norah Jones and the electronic experimentalists Miya Masaoka, Aya Nishina, and Ikue Mori among them. Participants in the marathon, thirteen-hour Concert for Japan held at Japan Society (which, along with Asia Society, refers to itself without the article *the*) included Ryuichi Sakamoto (piano and vocals), James Nyoraku Schlefer (shakuhachi), Mari Kimura (violin), and the rock quartet Hard Nips. All of the benefits were infused with the buoyant goodwill of audience members and performers drawn together in the face of crisis. Like Carnegie Hall's JapanNYC, they took place against the backdrop of regular, ongoing Japan-related programming that was also scheduled during the same period. Looked at as a whole, what occurred within the 2010–11 time frame represented both closure and counterpoint in the narrative of America's Japan through the performing arts.

Familiarizing and De-familiarizing America's Japan

Beginning in the 1950s, performing arts arriving on U.S. soil directly from Japan served the project of “educating Americans about their changing relationship to the world at large”—just as the American-made musicals and movies (such as *The King and I* and *South Pacific*) that have been the subject of Christina Klein's research did.¹³ With travel “function[ing] as a cultural space in which Americans could be trained to imagine and practice the kinds of exchanges that would strengthen the nation's global ties,”¹⁴ visits by performing artists to the United States were a significant category of exchanges aimed at strengthening those ties. The performing arts sometimes stood in interesting contrast to direct government-to-government diplomacy: in June 1960, at the very moment when President Dwight D. Eisenhower's planned trip to Japan was canceled because of angry rioting in Tokyo over renewal of the United States–Japan Security Treaty, the first fully professional kabuki troupe to perform in the United States was receiving wide and enthusiastic American media coverage—which in turn had positive reverberations in Japan.

Even before the 1960 visit, kabuki had come to represent postwar America's timeless Japan, the embodiment of an aestheticized exoticism that helped erase negative images of wartime Japan. James Michener, who won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1948 for *Tales of the South Pacific*, was one of the earliest and most vocal proponents of a visit by kabuki to the

United States. He was, as Klein has pointed out, a chief public educator about the countries of Asia. The basic goal of the essays he wrote for publications such as *Life* magazine and *Reader's Digest* was “to supplant the old knowledge about Asia—that presented it as ‘mute,’ ‘mysterious,’ and ‘remote’—with a new knowledge that renders it familiar, articulate, and approachable.”¹⁵ However, Michener and others eagerly promoted kabuki as a kind of safe harbor precisely because it revived “old knowledge” of a Japan unconnected to war. It was knowledge that had coalesced by the late nineteenth century around the image of “a secretive island with strange customs and impeccable taste.”¹⁶ Already in that era, American audiences had responded enthusiastically to the kabuki-esque dramas of the enterprising husband and wife team of Otojiro Kawakami and Sadayakko, who triumphantly toured the United States and Europe. For postwar America, Michener’s kabuki—followed by other traditional arts from Japan—would be carefully authenticated and explicated by credentialed experts. Michener’s vision took hold: grounded in periodic visits by troupes, kabuki in the United States continues to serve as a consummate symbol of an exoticized, ahistorical Japan.

In the summer and fall of 1970, productions directed by experimentalists Yutaka Higashi and Shuji Terayama at New York’s La MaMa E.T.C. broke open new ways of talking and thinking about Japanese culture. They did so by bringing Japanese culture “downtown,” into “the richly symbolic space claimed by the avant-garde,”¹⁷ and thus de-familiarizing the Japan that in the two decades following the end of the war had become the stock-in-trade of well-funded and well-established “uptown” institutions such as Japan Society, Asia Society, Lincoln Center, the Metropolitan Opera, and Carnegie Hall. Uptown Japan largely meant the officially sanctioned, elite, cultural heritage canon; in addition to kabuki, this included forms such as gagaku, noh, kyogen, and bunraku puppet theater. By providing access to “unsanctioned,” nonelite, contemporary, experimental, and even subversive work from Japan, La MaMa introduced Japan and its performing arts into new debates about artistic processes and practices in a self-consciously multicultural world while at the same time solidifying its own position as a prominent voice in those debates. The Brooklyn Academy of Music followed suit in 1973 with a presentation by Tsutomu Yamashita’s multimedia Red Buddha Theatre. Even Japan Society signaled a notable shift in its programming by hosting the 1976 U.S. debut of Eiko and Koma, who took up residence in New York and went on to become leading figures in American contemporary dance.

A central question for postwar American society was “How can we trans-

form our sense of ourselves from narrow provincials into cosmopolitan citizens of the world who possess a global consciousness?"¹⁸ The question continues to be asked today by the presenting institutions whose mission includes bringing theater, dance, and music from Japan (and other parts of the world) to audiences in the United States. The answers—published and circulated in reviews and background and preview articles—form the ongoing narrative of America's Japan through the performing arts.

Why the Performing Arts?

In their real-time, visceral, in-person immediacy, the performing arts are unique sites of cultural production, encounter, and critique. They are, to use Stephen Greenblatt's descriptor, "mobile signifiers" of culture.¹⁹ "The performing arts are my special concern," Sally Banes wrote in the introduction to *Greenwich Village, 1963: Avant-Garde Performance and the Effervescent Body*, "for the performing body is central to all the interconnecting arts of this period."²⁰ The same can be said for the more extended time frame of my study. Systematic examination of responses to theater, dance, and music from Japan also uncovers examples of what Paul J. Yoon has called the "Orientalist gaze upon Asian bodies."²¹ And, as Deborah Wong has argued, performance (her particular reference is to taiko drumming) "highlights the meeting ground of transnational movement, gender and the insistence on being seen and heard."²²

"[T]he security and economic issues of U.S.-Japan relations have attracted by far the most scholarly attention," Takeshi Matsuda has noted, "whereas the cultural dimension of that bilateral relationship has attracted relatively scant commentary."²³ As a body of knowledge, the performing arts merit more attention—if only because they are culturally, politically, and socially contextualized within some of the most highly acclaimed and accredited institutions in the United States. The actors, dancers, and musicians who are selected to appear on the stages of Lincoln Center, Carnegie Hall, the Brooklyn Academy of Music, La MaMa, the Joyce Theater, the Village Vanguard, The Stone, Japan Society, Asia Society, and other "spaces of authority" in the arts are those whose artistic credentials—and ethnic/national identities—are considered most definitively certified.²⁴ Their work has the greatest chance of being covered and reviewed by publications such as the *New York Times*—and, thus, of being documented in the archives of America's Japan.

Much has been said of Japan's "soft power," its cultural influence on a

global scale, especially since the publication of Douglas McGray's "Japan's Gross National Cool" in 2002.²⁵ Although McGray was focusing on anime and computer games, the performing arts are a core element in the domestic cultural landscape that translates into cultural exchange—and soft power. "Living in Tokyo, especially in the last five years or so," Tadashi Uchino has written, "one does have an undeniable sense of the growing domain of the theatre industry, with theatre culture gradually recognized as an integral part of the social life of the urban middle class."²⁶ Uchino cites dance in particular as "a genre that quickly adapted and responded to the fast-changing sociocultural landscape of the post-9/11 post-political/ideological milieu."²⁷ Like the popular-culture products highlighted by David Leheny in his essay on Japan's soft power in East Asia, presentations in the United States of performing arts from Japan, to varying degrees over the past sixty years, have been espoused by producers, presenters, and funding agencies as a way for Americans to "get to know the Japanese" so that "they will realize that they are kind and decent, creative and curious, and not to be feared."²⁸

The "performative," furthermore, is a defining element of intangible cultural heritage—the subject of global cultural policy making and dialogue, as reflected, for instance, in the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage enacted in 2003 by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the recent emergence of heritage studies as a field of scholarship.²⁹ The Japanese government enacted its own Cultural Properties Protection Law (*Bunkazai Hogoho*) decades earlier—in 1950.³⁰ In the 1950s and 1960s, visits to New York from Japan of *gagaku*, *kabuki*, *noh*, *kyogen*, and *bunraku* troupes firmly planted the expressions "national treasure" and "intangible cultural property" in America's vocabulary.³¹ These became key terms in the narrative of America's Japan, helping build the image of Japan as a repository of cultural heritage.

It is worth noting, finally, that the reception of Japan's performing arts abroad has been a topic of considerable interest and concern in Japan. This was especially evident in the 1980s and early 1990s, when the traditional arts in particular were being endorsed by Japan as frontline cultural ambassadors to turn attention away from the international trade frictions that were roiling relations with the country's largest trading partners.³² The August 1986 issue of *Gekkan bunkazai* (Cultural treasures monthly), a widely circulated journal published by Japan's governmental Agency for Cultural Affairs (*Bunkacho*), provides striking proof of the cultural-diplomatic role accorded the traditional performing arts: more than a dozen articles

on the history of government-promoted and -financed overseas tours of kabuki, bunraku, noh (and kyogen), gagaku, and the folk performing arts followed one after the other.³³ Books on the subject have also come out, such as Kazuyoshi Nishi and Tamotsu Matsuda's *Nōgaku kaigai kōen shiyō* (A history of noh productions abroad).³⁴ Shochiku, the entertainment conglomerate that has most kabuki actors under contract, brought out a comprehensive history of overseas kabuki tours, complete with reproductions of worldwide newspaper reviews.³⁵ Individual actors have joined the conversation, perhaps the best known being Mansaku Nomura and his son, Mansai, who have performed kyogen outside of Japan on a number of occasions—and included lively accounts of their touring experiences in their autobiographical writings.³⁶ The potency of the performing arts as “mobile signifiers”—in this case, where the global stage feeds back on the local—is nowhere more apparent than in the renown attained in artistic and academic circles in Japan by a few “foreign”-born performers of the traditional arts, such as the noh actor and teacher Richard Emmert. It is a point made, for instance, by Hiroko Miura, who included material on practitioners like Emmert in a section titled “Gaikokujin to nō” (Foreigners and noh), in her introduction to the art form for Japanese readers.³⁷

Why New York?

“No city in the world can offer a wider variety of such exotic musical alternatives than New York,” critic John Rockwell once wrote.³⁸ For Japan-born playwright Chiori Miyagawa, New York is “[t]he city where I am allowed to be nothing and everything.”³⁹ And, from the larger perspective of international history, New York more than anyplace else is where US postwar relations with Japan were reconfigured through cultural exchange—the setting, to give just one piece of evidence, for *Newsweek* magazine’s proud declaration to its national readership in 1954 that the New York visit of the Azuma Kabuki Dancers and Musicians meant that “[f]or the first time in history, a major classical dance company from Japan performed in the Western world.”⁴⁰ My focus on New York by no means denies the rich history of Japan-related theater, music, and dance presentations in Honolulu, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, Portland, Seattle, Washington, DC, Philadelphia, and Boston.⁴¹ There are also the smaller locales where museums and universities take the lead in enabling audiences to experience “Japan” live onstage—among them, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, the Hopkins Center at Dartmouth College, the University of Pitts-

burgh, and the University of Michigan. But, since New York is the central arena of the performing arts in the United States—and many of the Japan-related events that unfold around the country are part of national tours that either originate or culminate there—critics and writers employed by what were long referred to as the New York media (a less meaningful term in the digital age) dominate the discourse of America's Japan in response to the performing arts.

Institutions such as the *Los Angeles Times*, *Washington Post*, *Boston Globe*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *San Francisco Chronicle* have long contributed to conversations about Japan, but the *New York Times*, the “most influential newspaper on earth,”⁴² exemplifies what Christina Klein has called “a vast educational machinery designed to direct the attention of the American people to the world outside the nation's borders.”⁴³ Attending the 2006 Contemporary Dance Showcase on a Saturday afternoon at Japan Society, I made my way past an easel holding a huge laminated enlargement of a *Times* article published the day before about the participants and their works.⁴⁴ That Monday morning the newspaper ran a detailed review of the multi-day program.⁴⁵ Both were by Rockwell, the paper's chief dance critic at the time. The extensive coverage indicated that the event was a noteworthy one for the *Times* in its mission to cover the arts as broadly as possible for as broad a readership as possible. And, the write-ups were significant for Japan Society: for arts professionals there is nothing more desirable and validating than recognition by the *Times*.

According to Eric Homberger, “By the end of the Second World War, the cultural dominance of New York was a fact of American life. In theater, television, publishing, magazines, popular music, the art world—in everything except movies—New York was the arbiter of America's cultural marketplace.”⁴⁶ The New York press, not without a measure of self-interest, has frequently commented on expansions to—and occasional diminutions of—the city's perceived importance. “New York: Stage for All the World,” a 1955 *Times* photo-essay, proclaimed: “New York is a mecca for virtually all the world's artists. Sooner or later they must seek the prestige that the applause of the critical, challenging New York audience brings.” A photograph of the Azuma Kabuki Dancers and Musicians accompanied the piece, with the notation that the troupe was about to play again in New York after having “scored here last season.”⁴⁷ Almost three decades later, in “City in Performing Arts: No. 1, with a Difference,” the message was essentially the same: in dance “the city's dominance has increased, and New York is now recognized as the unrivaled world capital of dance—a title many would have denied it only 10 or 15 years ago.” In music “New

York remains the center of the music world: the home of more orchestras than any other city and of the Metropolitan Opera, the titan in the world of opera; the major international crossroads for touring orchestras and musicians; the standard-setter for artists seeking to make their reputations, and the generator of artistic ferment." Although Broadway, which "continues to set the international standard for production professionalism," had become too expensive to allow for experimentation, the article noted, "As a showcase for the best of international theater, New York is incomparable. Virtually every important theatrical company passes through sooner or later, from England's Royal Shakespeare Company to Japanese Kabuki theater to outstanding avant-garde companies from Eastern Europe and Asia."⁴⁸

The question "Why New York?" also points to the extraordinary attractiveness of the city for performing artists from Japan. Yuiko Fujita has used the term *cultural migrants* in her study of young people from Japan who move to New York and London for extended periods to engage in various types of cultural production. She cites statistics published by Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2006 showing that New York had the largest number of resident Japanese nationals of any city outside of Japan.⁴⁹ A 1979 *Times* article, "Japanese Dancers in America: What Draws Them?,"⁵⁰ argued that the growing number of women from Japan trying to build careers in the arts in New York was attributable to their desire to escape the constraints (patriarchal and otherwise) of Japanese society, and their belief that New York was the most appealing alternative.⁵¹ The point continued to be made (regarding both women and men) almost twenty years later: "Nearly all come to escape what they see as Japanese society's rigid dictates about what to study, where to work and even how to think. 'I was born with strong opinions, a tendency to reject rules, and I was rejected by a Japanese society which didn't allow that kind of woman,' said Chiori Miyagawa . . . who moved to New York as a teenager, [and] is one of the longer established and most successful of the expatriates."⁵² Midori Yoshimoto has observed that New York "acquired a utopian image for Japanese avant-garde artists," noting, "After 1964, when the Japanese tourist visa to visit the United States became available, the number of artists who visited New York for a short time grew rapidly."⁵³

Presentations on New York stages of Japan-related performance are situated within dense networks of border crossings and circulation, interactions, and collaborations. New York is a major node in those networks—a center in the not yet de-centered flow of cultural production. Reviewing Yukio Mishima's *Madame de Sade* (*Sado kōshaku fujin*), directed by Ingmar Bergman at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 1995, Vincent Canby wrote,

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About Japan Society

Founded in 1907, Japan Society has evolved into a world-class, multidisciplinary cultural hub. Since its inception in 1953, the Society's Performing Arts Program has introduced more than 600 of Japan's finest performing arts to an extensive American audience. Programs range from the traditional arts of noh, kyogen, bunraku, and kabuki to cutting-edge theater, dance, and music.

About Crossing the Line

Crossing the Line is the fall festival of the French Institute Alliance Française (FIAF), conceived as a platform to present vibrant new works by a diverse range of trans-disciplinary artists transforming and furthering cultural practices on both sides of the Atlantic. Visit crossingtheline.org for tickets and information.

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Fig. 1. House program for Ryoji Ikeda's *datamatics [ver. 2.0]*, presented by the French Institute Alliance Française (FIAF)'s Crossing the Line Festival in 2010. (Courtesy of the French Institute Alliance Française (FIAF).)

“Here is a Japanese play about an 18th-century French writer and libertine, as staged for the Royal Dramatic Theater of Sweden, in Swedish, being presented in New York with Donald Keene’s English translation heard via earphones. It could be utter confusion, but it’s as clearly defined and as elegant as any production you’re likely to see for a long time.”⁵⁴ The performing arts networks are growing ever more complex, and New York was where, in September 2010, the French Institute Alliance Française (FIAF) hosted Ryoji Ikeda, a Paris-based experimental visual/sound artist and composer from Japan, as part of the organization’s annual Crossing the Line Festival. Though “representing” France, he was simultaneously “reclaimed” by “Japan in New York” through cosponsorship of the event by Japan Society.

Performing Arts Databases: Japan’s Japan in the Global Performing Arts Marketplace

America’s Japan implies a concomitant Japan’s Japan, which I locate in a set of databases assembled in Japan that define and demarcate the boundaries of theater, dance, and music originating there.⁵⁵ Japan’s Japan is national culture for the global market, encompassing for the most part non-commercial performing artists—from those in traditional fields to experimentalists—whose stature and identification as representative Japanese artists have been “credentialed” by governmental, cultural, and scholarly entities in Japan. In contrast to America’s Japan as a historical narrative of cultural mobility and exchange, Japan’s Japan “brands” the concept of “Japaneseness” for the global performing arts marketplace. As Patrick Lonergan has observed, “[T]hrough the processes of branding . . . the authenticity of a cultural product is . . . grounded in the recognizability of its cultural sources.”⁵⁶

The Japan Foundation takes the lead here in its role as principal promoter and underwriter of Japan-initiated cultural exchange, which includes international performance tours by artists from Japan, as well as workshops and collaborative projects that bring together Japanese and non-Japanese performing artists. The foundation was formed in 1972 as a “special public institution” under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and reorganized in 2003 as an “independent administrative institution” of the Japanese government. It compiles and publishes online performer and drama databases and disseminates material through publications that include *Theater in Japan: An Overview of Performing Arts and Artists* (2008) and its

website, Performing Arts Network Japan (<http://www.performingarts.jp>), which is regularly updated with artist and presenter interviews and articles on developments in Japan's performing arts scene. The Japan Foundation also organizes and supports the annual weeklong Tokyo Performing Arts Market (TPAM), one of Japan's two main showcases—in a way “live databases”—for the performing arts. Like the yearly New York meeting of the Association of Performing Arts Presenters, TPAM, launched in 1995, offers performances, conference hall exhibit booths staffed by arts groups and presenting organizations, and programs of lectures and discussions, all of which provide meeting points for artists and presenters.⁵⁷ The other is the monthlong Festival Tokyo (F/T), which began in 2009: “In addition to presenting cutting-edge international co-productions without any ‘time difference,’ we produce works by renowned Japanese artists, transmitting them to the rest of the world.”⁵⁸ The festival's organizers include individuals frequently cited by the Japan Foundation as seminal figures in Japan's performing arts: dancer-choreographer Ushio Amagatsu and directors Hideki Noda and Yukio Ninagawa.

Theater critic and University of Tokyo professor Tadashi Uchino has developed an original “cognitive map”—in effect a kind of database—of twenty-first-century Japan-based performance.⁵⁹ Uchino, a performing arts consultant to the Japan Foundation and a trustee of the Saison Foundation, which provides substantial funding to contemporary theater and dance groups in Japan, plots his map with forty theater and dance companies and individual artists. “Japan's theater culture is now so manifold and compartmentalized that nobody can really have a unified image of the field,” he writes. “I was interested in the diversity of performance that we see every day in Tokyo, and 40 was the number required to give the map a certain degree of validity and reflect my understanding of Japan's contemporary theatre culture. In addition, I deliberately chose to highlight the younger generation of practitioners, most of whom were born after the 1970s.”⁶⁰ Uchino arrayed groups such as the Condors, Nibroll, Kaitaisha, chelfitsch, Noda Map, and Seinendan (all of which have performed in the United States) on a grid under headings that include literary/text, performance/body, remnants of modernism, politics of the body, and politics of representation. The accompanying analysis speaks to two goals that Uchino set for himself: “one, to historicize Japan's theater culture, and the other, to encourage a younger generation of artists who I think have both artistic and intellectual potential.”⁶¹

Membership Dance File is another major database, one that has been compiled by the Japanese Contemporary Dance Network (JCDN) mainly

as a reference tool for presenting organizations and their artistic directors. The file supplies statistics on virtually every dance artist active in Japan. JCDN was inaugurated in 1998 by Norikazu Sato, whose résumé includes an internship at New York's Dance Theater Workshop, where he worked with the US-based National Performance Network to expand public knowledge of and access to the arts. Performance tours and showcases are organized by JCDN for artists in Japan, and it communicates information about them in print and online (<http://www.jcdn.org>). Also working in the field of dance, writer and critic Takao Norikoshi is the author of *Hyper: Kontenporarī dansu tettei gaido* (*Hyper: Contemporary dance perfect guidebook*), a one-volume "encyclopedia" of Japanese dancers and dance troupes.⁶²

The Japan Foundation is among those bureaucratic apparatuses through which, as Aihwa Ong has written, "the nation-state . . . continues to define, discipline, control, and regulate all kinds of populations, whether in movement or in residence."⁶³ Inclusion in its databases—and the others that in effect supplement it—presupposes that in most cases the performing artist was born, educated, and professionally trained in Japan and established his or her career there. The databases are branding mechanisms that accord the status of global marketability to individuals who have already won recognition for their work from presenters, foundations, and other "accrediting" organizations within Japan. Recognition is tangibly measured in invitations to perform at important Japanese theater and arts festivals and in prizes that include, among others, the Toyota Choreography Award, the Asahi Performing Arts Award, the Kishida Drama Award, and the Kinokuniya Theater Award. The names of all those included in the databases of Japan's Japan potentially appear in the narrative of America's Japan, assuming that the artists participate in the flow of cultural exchange between Japan and the United States. The reverse, however, is not the case since America's Japan includes many artists who are neither based in Japan nor active as performers there.

America's Japan: A Taxonomy

"So what is authentic butoh, and who is entitled to do it?" The question was posed by Wendy Perron, dance writer, critic, teacher, and choreographer, in a 1999 *New York Times* essay previewing an upcoming series of performances by leading butoh troupes and individual artists from Japan, including Sankai Juku, Min Tanaka, and Kazuo Ono. Perron's interlocutor

was Koosil-ja—an award-winning, New York–based dancer-choreographer and musician whose style reveals some affinities with the art form. She told Perron, “Butoh grows in Japan and needs the water, the entire cultural environment of Japan, for its authenticity.”⁶⁴ Born and raised in Japan, Koosil-ja Hwang is ethnically Korean. She has lived in New York since 1981, when she came to study dance with Merce Cunningham. Until the mid-1990s she performed under her Japanese name, Kumiko Kimoto.⁶⁵ As her career was developing, so were ideas about multiculturalism and new ways of thinking about ethnic identity. Challenging monocultural understandings of Japan, she made the switch to her Korean name and began using her given name only. Today Koosil-ja heads her own troupe, which she calls koosilja/danceKUMIKO. Her work and teaching take her around the United States and to Europe and Japan. Given Koosil-ja’s personal history of mobility and the wide-ranging theoretical grounding of her work (she “creates links between bodies and a digital environment” and cites the influence of philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Pierre-Félix Guattari),⁶⁶ her statement on butoh can be interpreted as an intentionally ironic commentary on attempts to draw fixed geographical boundaries around the performing arts.

Which artists “count,” by virtue of being the subjects of reviews and articles, in the discursive construction, reconstruction, and transformation of “Japan” and “Japanese culture” through the performing arts? I propose a three-part taxonomy of America’s Japan: cultural heritage artists, internationalist and flexible-citizen artists, and American artists influenced by Japanese culture.

Cultural Heritage Artists

Cultural heritage artists—an alternative, more anthropological-sounding term might be *cultural lineage artists*—populate the databases of Japan’s Japan, presenting their work in New York as cultural exchange visitors. Almost without exception, they are Japanese by birth, education, and training and their careers are based in Japan. I subdivide them into two groups. The first is the “national treasures”—practitioners of kabuki and noh, among other arts, which are, in the aggregate, what Marilyn Ivy has referred to as “the traditional, immutable core of culture.”⁶⁷ The second group is made up of all the other artists who represent modern and contemporary Japanese music, dance, and theater. Their work is often interpreted by American reviewers as embodying, in Steven C. Ridgely’s succinct phrasing, “the enduring nature of Japanese cultural patterns,” such

as “group orientation, vertical society, minimalist aesthetics, and some hint of the samurai code.”⁶⁸

When philanthropist Lila Acheson Wallace donated a million dollars to Asia Society in 1971, her goal was to enable “a wide-ranging representation of the rich, ancient traditions of Asia’s performing arts.”⁶⁹ As already mentioned, the terms *national treasure* and *intangible cultural property* were introduced along with visiting troupes from Japan that included gagaku (in 1959), Grand Kabuki (in 1960), kyogen (in 1964), bunraku (in 1966), and noh (in 1966). The elaborately brocaded silk costumes, antiquated masks and patterns of makeup, and rich mix of unusual musical sounds and acting styles were irrefutable evidence of Japan’s rich cultural heritage. Like the term *ritual*, which appears with a high degree of frequency in reviews of performing arts from Japan, *national treasure* and *intangible cultural property* remove a presentation from critical scrutiny. They indicate that audiences are being given the opportunity to learn about and experience the fully formed products of another culture. The values associated with heritage convey a “sense of gravitas.”⁷⁰ Reviews and other articles are generally expected to respectfully introduce and help interpret such art—rather than critically evaluate it.

In Japan passage of the Cultural Properties Protection Law in 1950, which laid out a framework for identifying and designating “national treasures,” was a crucial step in the country’s postwar cultural rebuilding. It was not just a matter of trying to sustain practices that might succumb to the forces of modernization and Westernization but of producing a strong cultural identity for Japan. “The comprehension and valuing of different cultural expressions,” Amanda Kearney has noted, “are at the very core of cultural heritage legislation worldwide.”⁷¹ Fifty years later Japan’s cultural properties law became the model for a new set of cultural heritage designations intended to be applied globally. In 2001 UNESCO began identifying “Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity,” with noh and kyogen among the first to be included. Bunraku was named in the second round of designations in 2003; kabuki was added in 2005. More recently, the organization has been compiling expanded lists under the heading “Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.” Kabuki, noh (and kyogen), and bunraku were inscribed—to use UNESCO’s term—in 2008. Gagaku followed in 2009. Kumiodori (Okinawan dance drama) was added in 2010. The list also includes over a dozen examples of Japan’s folk performing arts and traditional craftsmanship, including Ainu dance and a form of papermaking.⁷²

The first visitors funded by Mrs. Wallace’s gift were the Edo Festi-

val Music and Pantomime troupe from Tokyo. In a production jointly arranged by Asia Society and Japan Society, they were booked into Lincoln Center—the apex of establishment performing arts venues—a site appropriately symbolic of American respect for Japan’s cultural heritage. Since the major traditional forms had already been introduced, it became a goal of Asia Society and its sister organization, Japan Society, to bring to New York lesser-known “folk” arts. American audiences would quickly learn that practitioners of such arts—including the Edo troupe, “based on a tradition that goes back to the seventh century,”⁷³ and the Awaji Puppet Theatre (which had its US debut in 1971, helping celebrate the opening of Japan Society’s new permanent home on East 47th Street)—also arrived with the imprimatur of national treasure. In the mid-1980s John Rockwell, then serving as a music critic for the *Times*, cited the “disparity [that] exists between classical, high-art musical traditions, folk music and commercial popular music,” adding, “Now, however, more and more governments and private impresarios like Miss Gordon [Beate Gordon, head of performing arts at Asia Society and, previously, Japan Society] are seeking out the folk musicians, too.” Rockwell’s point was that “the more ancient folk forms, uncontaminated by Western influence, have been harder to bring here.”⁷⁴

Kabuki became emblematic of America’s Japan not just because it was boldly exotic but also because it was perceived, to use Rockwell’s term, as “uncontaminated,” meaning that it was seen as untouched by globalized American culture. In contrast, troupes from the Takarazuka Revue, who have made several visits to the United States, have been dismissed by reviewers for their Radio City Music Hall–style proclivities. Unfamiliar, traditional arts from Japan appeal to seekers of distinction. “A work of art,” Pierre Bourdieu has written, “has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded. . . . A beholder who lacks the specific code feels lost in a chaos of sounds and rhythms, colours and lines, without rhyme or reason.”⁷⁵ Newspaper and magazine preview articles written by scholars and other experts help audiences attain a level of competence prior to a performance. And when people get to the theater they can solidify and expand their knowledge by studying the program notes, following the earphone commentary or reading the “supertitles”—translations projected above, or sometimes to the side of, the stage. *New Yorker* cartoons such as Danny Shanahan’s 1990 “Tuesday nights are Ed’s Kabuki League bowl-offs” and Pat Byrnes’s 2001 “What part of Noh don’t you understand?” provide proof of the strong impact on the American imagination of Japan-related cultural exchange efforts that give special prominence to the traditional arts.



"Tuesday nights are Ed's Kabuki League bowl-offs."

Fig. 2. Danny Shanahan's "Tuesday nights are Ed's Kabuki League bowl-offs," *New Yorker*, 10 December 1990. (© 1990 by The Cartoon Bank/Condé Nast Publications, Inc. Courtesy of The Cartoon Bank/Condé Nast Publications Inc.)

In the narrative of America's Japan, cultural heritage is rooted in the "traditional-arts-equal-national-treasures" equation but is not limited to it. It encompasses all artists understood as exemplifying "authentic" Japanese theater, dance, or musical practices—artists to whom the discourse of Japanese cultural continuity is often applied by critics in their reviews. A salient example is *butoh*. Along with Tatsumi Hijikata, Kazuo Ono originated the dance form in the mid-twentieth century—serving, until his death in 2010, as perhaps its most famous exponent within and outside of Japan. Ono's American debut at La MaMa in 1981 signified the formal introduction of *butoh* to New York audiences. Other now famous *butoh* artists who followed Ono on initial US visits in the 1980s include Sankai Juku, a troupe led by Ushio Amagatsu, and Dai Rakudakan, led by Akaji Maro. "What has happened in modern dance in Japan," readers of the *New York Times* were told in a 1982 essay previewing the appearance at that year's American Dance Festival of Dai Rakudakan and three other *butoh*



"What part of Noh don't you understand?"

Fig. 3. Pat Byrnes's "What part of Noh don't you understand?," *New Yorker*, 29 October 2001. (© 2001 by The Cartoon Bank/Condé Nast Publications, Inc. Courtesy of The Cartoon Bank/Condé Nast Publications Inc.)

ensembles from Japan, "is as diverse and confusing to the Western eye as the rest of Japanese culture may seem. However, a sense of proportion, or *'ma no kankaku,'* steeped in years of tradition, pervades choreography, as well as the other art forms."⁷⁶

Butoh demonstrates the potency of labels as markers of cultural heritage. *Hogaku* is slowly becoming known as an umbrella term for "Japanese" music and musical instruments, although artists are commonly identified with the specific instrument they play: shamisen, koto, shakuhachi, and taiko drums, for example.⁷⁷ By the mid-1960s koto musician Kimio Eto was a well-known figure in American music circles, regularly appearing in recitals and concerts.⁷⁸ Other instrumentalists who have achieved renown in the United States include Kazue Sawai and Nanae Yoshimura (koto), Hiromitsu Agatsuma (shamisen), Kifu Mitsuhashi (shakuhachi), and the Ondeko-za and Kodo troupes (taiko).⁷⁹

Contemporary theater from Japan is a segment of the cultural heritage/cultural lineage category in which language barriers and other socio-cultural issues of translation sometimes seem even more daunting than

in the case of the traditional genres. The most frequently staged works (in both English and Japanese productions) are Yukio Mishima's modern noh plays. Their appeal is attributable in part to Mishima's celebrity as a writer whose numerous novels- and plays-in-translation were released in the United States starting in the 1950s by Knopf, a major commercial publisher. Another reason is that, though "modern," the reference to noh plays readily reinforces images of Japanese cultural continuity.⁸⁰ Playwright-directors with a growing US reputation in the twenty-first century include Yoji Sakate and Toshiki Okada. Their work has been presented in Japanese (at Japan Society by their own Japan-based companies) and English (at other New York venues by American directors and actors).

Internationalist and Flexible-Citizen Artists

Mari Yoshihara has drawn attention to "audiences' inclination to assume that musical understanding and expression have a natural connection to the musician's geographical, historical, cultural—and by implication, racial and ethnic—background."⁸¹ Such an assumption is articulated across performing arts genres in the narrative of America's Japan, where the dividing line is often blurred between the two groups I call "internationalists" and "flexible-citizen artists." Internationalists are those who work in what is typically regarded as a Western cultural idiom (as ballet dancers, for example). Flexible-citizen artists, a term I adapt from the work of Aihwa Ong,⁸² form two subgroups. Both de-territorialize and re-territorialize Japanese cultural identity: one does so within the boundaries of what is typically regarded as a Japanese cultural idiom (such as *butoh*) while the other reconfigures those boundaries.

Internationalist and flexible-citizen artists are among those who "respond fluidly and opportunistically to changing political-economic conditions."⁸³ A number are the recipients of prestigious awards—such as the Grammy, MacArthur, and Guggenheim—which proclaim recognition of their status as established artists in the United States. They are Japanese by birth—and, sometimes, by education and training as well. Many internationalist and virtually all flexible-citizen artists base their careers outside of Japan. Some are no longer citizens of Japan. They include people who leave Japan having already developed professional ties to the arts world there or forge such ties later—and thus reconstitute their Japanese identity. *Racialist conceptualizations*, a term E. Taylor Atkins has used in his study of Japanese jazz musicians,⁸⁴ link them and their work to Japan—manifested in offers of project-support grants from the Japan Foundation,

invitations to perform at culture-specific venues (such as Japan Society) and events related to Japan, and, to a degree, attention from reviewers attracted to performance from Japan, loosely defined.

Across the performing arts spectrum—as directors of “Broadway” musicals, as ballet dancers, as classical “Western” and jazz musicians—internationalists contest racist conceptualizations of artistic practices. They become part of the narrative of America’s Japan in various ways—when they present their work at places such as Japan Society or in Japan-focused festivals, when they bring productions originating in Japan to New York, or simply by being identified as somehow representative of Japan. In 2002 Japan-based director Amon Miyamoto, whose résumé includes opera, musicals, and plays, brought his Japanese-language version of John Weidman and Stephen Sondheim’s *Pacific Overtures* from the New National Theatre in Tokyo (where it ran in 2000) to the Lincoln Center Festival.⁸⁵ Two years later Miyamoto returned to New York to stage the same musical using the original English script, becoming the first director from Japan hired to work on Broadway. Director Yukio Ninagawa, who is also based in Japan, is particularly celebrated for his boldly conceived, Japanese-language interpretations of Shakespearean and classical Greek dramas, which he often presents abroad—especially in London. His first production in New York was *Medea* at Central Park’s Delacorte Theater in 1986. He also brought *Macbeth* to the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 1990 and again in 2002. Other examples of internationalists are Yoko Morishita, “Japan’s first ballerina of international importance,”⁸⁶ who made her New York debut in 1970. By the middle of that decade she was a star performer in productions such as the American Ballet Theater’s *Sleeping Beauty* at Lincoln Center. Musicians form the largest cohort among the internationalists. Many of the names are well known: conductor Seiji Ozawa, classical pianist Mitsuko Uchida, violinists Midori (Midori Goto) and Mari Kimura, and jazz pianists Toshiko Akiyoshi and Hiromi (Hiromi Uehara). Although Midori’s accolades include the 2001 Avery Fisher Prize—a major honor bestowed only on instrumentalists who are American citizens or permanent residents—she is regularly referred to as “the world’s most prominent Japanese violinist.”⁸⁷

Flexible-citizen artists enter the narrative of America’s Japan because they *and* their artistic practices are linked with and, by extension, considered representative of Japan. The East-meets-West trope has frequently been invoked in reaction to their work. “She has the dynamism of Western dance, the elegance and precision of Japanese dance,” Philip Shenon wrote in 1984 about Junko Kikuchi. “Her style, it is said, was born in Japan,

[and] nurtured in the United States, where she spent several years in study. She tries to balance the best of the dance of the two lands: precision with energy, humility with freedom, restraint with daring.”⁸⁸ East-meets-West has mostly given way to a more nuanced, “cultural studies” approach—and to concepts such as hybridity. Reviewing Akemi Takeya at Japan Society in 2005, John Rockwell quoted performing arts director Yoko Shioya in observing that the dancer, a resident of Vienna since 1991, is part of “‘the diaspora of Japanese artists,’ creating hybrid work caught between Japan and the host country.” As if uneasy because there was no label that would readily place Takeya within a Japanese cultural matrix, Rockwell underscored her reputation as a “post-Butoh dancer.”⁸⁹

Dancer-choreographers are a particularly visible cohort of flexible-citizen artists, and the recipients of a large number of major awards—including the MacArthur “genius” award that went to Eiko and Koma (1996); the New York Dance and Performance (Bessie) Awards given to Yoshiko Chuma (1984 and 2007), Yasuko Yokoshi (2003 and 2006), Koosilja (2004), and Eiko and Koma (1984 and 1990); the Samuel H. Scripps American Dance Festival Award won by Eiko and Koma (2004); and Guggenheim awards that have gone to Kei Takei (1978), Eiko and Koma (1984), Yoshiko Chuma (1987), Koosilja (2007), and Yasuko Yokoshi (2009). The awards signify the individual achievements of the artists while also implicitly valorizing American ideals of multiculturalism. Eiko and Koma, who began their careers in Japan under butoh artists Hijikata and Ono, are a case in point.⁹⁰ Since their move to New York (from Japan, via Germany) and debut at Japan Society in the mid-1970s, they have been navigating the terrain of national, cultural, and ethnic identity. In a 1978 review Anna Kisselgoff described them as “[b]oth avant-garde and rooted in their own heritage,” observing that they perform “the obligatory Japanese number for Westerners. The small pine of the Noh play has been replaced by a fat pine trunk that hangs from the ceiling. The sense of slow time of Japanese classical theater is also present. And yet there can be nothing but admiration for the brilliance with which Eiko and Koma develop their drama.”⁹¹ Despite a four-decade career of work that “subverts and transcends our everyday notions of time and space” in every conceivable way,⁹² Roslyn Sulcas narrowly termed them a “Japanese-American duo” in a review of *Naked: A Living Installation*, given as part of Carnegie Hall’s 2010–11 Japan-NYC festival.⁹³

Unlike Eiko and Koma, Chuma and Yokoshi have achieved renown in New York’s avant-garde dance scene without extensive prior training in Japan—although both have cultivated connections there over the years.



Fig. 4. Advertising card, Eiko and Koma, Danspace Project, 2010. (Photo by Edwin Adhiputra, design by Takahiro Haneda. Courtesy of Eiko and Koma.)

Chuma moved to New York in 1978, four years after graduating from Kanazawa University. Shortly after arriving, she founded her School of Hard Knocks dance troupe, with which she has toured worldwide. Jowitt has written that Chuma “considers herself a citizen of the world, and she turns a penetrating and concerned eye on societies in turmoil and on the depredations of war. Some of her earlier pieces investigated the tensions between life in the U.S. and the postwar Japan she grew up in.”⁹⁴ Chuma was the first performing artist not living in Japan and not doing “Japanese” work to receive a commission from Japan Society. The resulting piece was the 1984 *Eager Witness*—the success of which helped further Chuma’s career in the New York dance scene and, at the same time, metaphorically “return” her to Japan within the institutional framework of Japan Society.

Yokoshi is an artist who has candidly suggested that her Japanese origin is one reason why American audiences pay attention to her.⁹⁵ Despite having come to the United States in 1981 to begin studying dance as an undergraduate at Hampshire College, and having built her career entirely on US soil, she has been mythologized as an artist “whom New York has been lucky enough to steal away from Japan.”⁹⁶ After a trip to Japan led her to begin studying and working with kabuki dance master Masumi Seyama

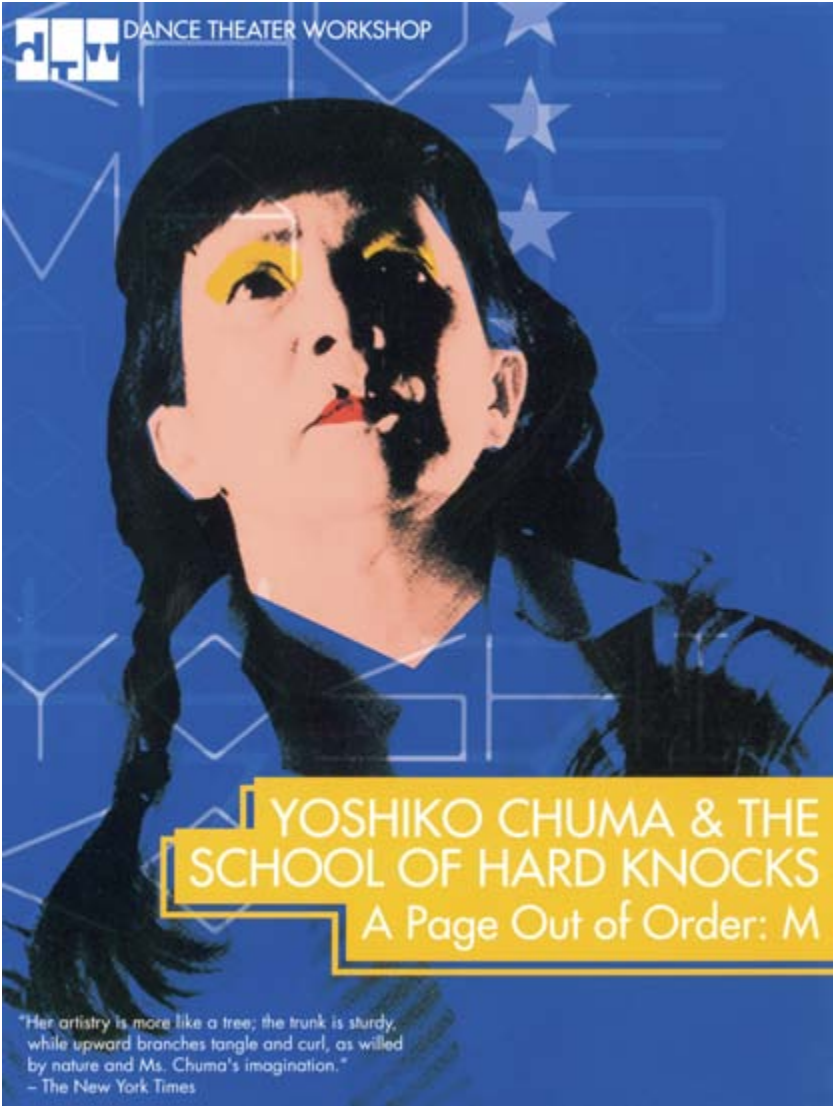


Fig. 5. Advertising card, Yoshiko Chuma and The School of Hard Knocks, Dance Theater Workshop, 2007. (Image by Hidetomo Mita. Courtesy of Yoshiko Chuma and The School of Hard Knocks.)

(who trained under “living national treasure” Kanjuro Fujima VI), Yokoshi choreographed the Bessie Award–winning *what we when we* (2006) and the critically acclaimed *Tyler Tyler* (2010), pieces that draw dance elements from kabuki. Yokoshi unhesitatingly describes kabuki as a purely serendipitous discovery: she had gone to Japan to accompany a boyfriend and just happened to start taking lessons from Seyama to pass the time. She had no prior interest in traditional Japanese dance. It was not an intentional career move.⁹⁷ Moreover, Yokoshi has expressed an unvarnished assessment of her identity as a “Japanese” dancer. In a roundtable discussion transcribed on the Movement Research website during the spring 2010 opening run of *Tyler Tyler* at Dance Theater Workshop, one of her company members remarked, “I feel I need to be extra familiar with the traditional Japanese form if I want to feel like I am coming close to doing it. A traditional Japanese dancer has trained and practiced for decades and this material comes out of them as if it was nature. It really becomes natural to them. We are faking that sense of being natural.” Yokoshi said in response, “I must remind you that I am as fake as you are. I have been familiar with this form for only seven years, and I don’t live in Japan. I only do periodical training with long absences. My familiarity with dance is closer to you rather than the Japanese dancers. If a well-trained dancer taught you, it would take triple the time. It’s good they don’t have to teach you. Their training is only mimicking. I teach you by remembering how I learned and struggled with it.”⁹⁸

Chiori Miyagawa is another forthright voice among flexible-citizen artists. “I am a Japanese-born American playwright,” she states.⁹⁹ Professor and playwright in residence at Bard College and “one of the nation’s foremost dramatists on Asian themes,”¹⁰⁰ Miyagawa came to New York as a teenager, having felt constrained in Japan, as already noted. Her work includes *Thousand Years Waiting*, “a contemporary ode to the 11th-century Japanese classic ‘The Tale of Genji,’”¹⁰¹ a play with “three simultaneous realities: present-day New York City, Japan circa 1000, and inside *The Tale of Genji*.”¹⁰² The 2006 production, directed by Sonoko Kawahara (who identifies herself as “a Japanese woman living in the United States”),¹⁰³ featured Osaka-based master puppeteer Masaya Kiritake in “the first collaboration between American theater artists and an Otome Bunraku puppeteer.”¹⁰⁴ Another piece, *Woman Killer*, was adapted from a bunraku play. In *I Have Been to Hiroshima Mon Amour*, Miyagawa explores historical memory: “The suffering of Japanese citizens is something I didn’t want to think about. It’s always been in my blood, but I didn’t think I was entitled to that memory,” she has said. “When Jean [Wagner, artistic director of Voice & Vision the-

ater company] asked me to write about it, it was like prying open a rusty door in my heart in a way."¹⁰⁵ Like other flexible-citizen artists, Miyagawa, who has been awarded grants from the Japan Foundation and the Asian Cultural Council, has extended the scope of her work to Japan. Her play *Stargazers*, which was commissioned by New York's Public Theater and presented in New York, was subsequently given a production in Japanese at the 2001 Asian Women and Theater Conference in Tokyo. "*Stargazers* was my first 'foreign' experience," Miyagawa has said. "I grew up as a theatre artist here, and I have always considered New York City my artistic home, even if in other ways I occasionally feel homeless."¹⁰⁶

"American Artists Inspired By Japanese Culture"

When Japan Society celebrated its centennial in the fall of 2007, artistic director Yoko Shioya enumerated the Japan-related presentations that were concurrently taking place at the society and other locations in New York, declaring that the city was "witness[ing] one of the most exciting performing arts seasons in its history . . . with the most cutting-edge performing arts from Japan, as well as work from American artists inspired by Japanese culture."¹⁰⁷ The latter included Big Dance Theater's *The Other Here*, produced at Dance Theater Workshop. Codirected by Annie-B Parsons and Paul Lazar, Big Dance Theater already had a track record of interest in Japanese culture: in 2001, the company presented the critically praised *Shunkin*, an adaptation of the story with the same title by Junichiro Tanizaki. In it "Lazar and Parson layer and feather aspects of the contemporary American pop music scene into their tale of love and power in ancient Japan."¹⁰⁸ Funded by a Japan Society commission grant, *The Other Here* drew on stories by Masuji Ibuse, as well as Okinawan traditional dance and popular music. It premiered at Japan Society in February 2007.¹⁰⁹

Within the narrative of America's Japan, "American artists inspired by Japanese culture," to use Shioya's phrasing, include people who are not "from" Japan but "perform" Japan. They encompass professionally trained and skilled players of Japanese musical instruments, practitioners of Japanese dance forms, directors of translated plays originally written in Japanese and dramas adapted from Japanese literary sources, and composers, dancer-choreographers, and other artists who create a range of Japan-related work—including pieces commissioned and presented by Japan Society.

American players of the shakuhachi and taiko are especially prominent. "[T]he dislocation and disjunctures brought on by cultural exchange have

profoundly altered the demographics, ideologies, and cultural workings of musical practices,” Yayoi Uno Everett has written, using the term *demographic ‘inversion’* in reference to the large numbers of students from East Asia who train in classical music at conservatories in North America and Europe. “Another type of demographic ‘inversion,’” she notes, “is observable in the practice of shakuhachi. In discussing the future of shakuhachi . . . at the 1997 World Shakuhachi Festival [held in Boulder, Colorado], the presiding masters expressed their concern over the waning number of shakuhachi practitioners within Japan: Katsuya Yokoyama half-jokingly predicted that ‘the tradition will migrate to America’ due to its popularity abroad.”¹¹⁰ New York–based shakuhachi musicians who appear on the concert stage include Ralph Samuelson, “an American expert,”¹¹¹ and a “virtuoso,”¹¹² who plays “hauntingly,”¹¹³ and Ronnie Nyogetsu Reishin Seldin, whose artistry has been described as “mesmerizing.”¹¹⁴ There are also James Nyoraku Schlefer, “a master of the shakuhachi,”¹¹⁵ and performer-composer Elizabeth Brown, who studied shakuhachi under Samuelson.¹¹⁶

Taiko drumming, as Paul J. Yoon observed in his analysis of the 1993 US film *Rising Sun*, is “a sonic synecdoche for ‘Japan.’ And sonically, the taiko is a menacing and thunderous icon for Japan, as opposed to the dulcet, almost tonal plucking of, for example, a *koto*.”¹¹⁷ Soh Daiko is a New York–based troupe that was founded in 1979, “attract[ing] those interested in and involved with Asian American political and artistic organizations in New York City.”¹¹⁸ While some of its members are ethnically Japanese, many have no ties to Japan. Nevertheless, Soh Daiko, which has been invited to perform at locations that include Lincoln Center and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, projects an image generally viewed as authentically “Japanese.”¹¹⁹ Appearances at Japan Society have helped sanction Soh Daiko as “Japanese”—especially following its joint concert in 1987 with the Japan-based Kodo troupe. “The issue of re-Orientalization,” Yoon has written, “has concerned Soh Daiko for a long time. . . . The difficulty of presenting a ‘traditional’ Japanese musical form in the context of late-twentieth-century America highlights the discursive structures that embed identity formations. Also apparent are the difficulties in representing Asian American identities within a social context that frequently positions Asians in America as foreigners in their homeland, adopted or otherwise.”¹²⁰ The inclusion of two Soh Daiko performances in the 2010–11 JapanNYC festival betokens the troupe’s established presence in the narrative of America’s Japan.

Other notable examples of American artists inspired by Japanese culture include Maureen Fleming, a longtime artist in residence at La MaMa,

who is “perhaps the foremost American practitioner of Butoh.”¹²¹ The New York Butoh Festival, which was held every other year from 2003 until 2009, provided a well-publicized setting in which American butoh artists could present their work. Organized by Ximena Garnica and Shige Moriya, founding directors of the CAVE Organization (a center in Brooklyn, New York, for the study and performance of butoh), the event framed butoh as a transnational artistic practice by spotlighting American dancers and choreographers in a series of productions that also included recitals by artists from Japan.¹²² In the field of theater, examples of plays translated from Japanese or adapted from Japanese literary sources and presented by American directors and performers include *Drum of the Waves of Hori-kawa*, based on a Chikamatsu play, which was directed in 2007 by Brooke O’Harra at the HERE Arts Center, and *Wind-up Bird Chronicle*, based on the novel by best-selling Japanese writer Haruki Murakami, which was directed in 2010 by Stephen Earnhart at the Ohio Theatre.

In 1963 New York City Ballet choreographer George Balanchine challenged American audiences to revise their assumptions about cultural identity in the performing arts. His ballet *Bugaku* was a stunning artistic experiment that had its inspirational genesis in the first visit to the United States of a troupe of gagaku musicians and bugaku dancers from Japan that was hosted four years earlier by the New York City Ballet itself. Balanchine asked Toshiro Mayuzumi, a pioneering Japanese composer of *musique concrète* who had already won worldwide acclaim for works such as the *Nirvana Symphony*, to compose the music. In the eyes of the *Times’s* music and dance critic at the time, *Bugaku* was a “stately mishmash,”¹²³ but with successive productions it gained many admirers—and now stands as a consummate example of work conceived by a (Russian-born) American artist inspired by Japanese culture. As Clive Barnes memorably wrote about the work later, “Whether the Japanese themselves know it, this is the Japan that any New York veteran of a few dozen Kurosawa movies would recognize. It may not be *their*, but it is certainly *our* Japan.”¹²⁴

Outline

In *America’s Japan and Japan’s Performing Arts*, I begin by looking at the period from January 1952, when the idea of bringing kabuki to America was initially aired in the pages of the *New York Times*, until the summer of 1960, when the first “authentic” (all-male, professional) troupe, dubbed Grand Kabuki, made its American debut in New York.¹²⁵ My purpose is

to document and analyze the discourse that was shaped by prominent critics and “Japan hands” during this defining era for establishing a new relationship with Japan. Although represented by kabuki, it is a discourse that grows out of all of Japan’s traditional theater arts. The 1959 gagaku visit referred to above, for example, marked a cultural exchange coup for the United States: the Imperial Household ensemble that traveled to New York had rarely performed publicly and never before outside Japan. I then track the expansion of America’s kabuki-Japan from the 1960s through the first decade of the twenty-first century, beginning with the seminal introduction of kyogen, bunraku, and noh to American audiences between 1964 and 1968 and continuing through periodic return visits by kabuki and the other traditional forms. Held up early on as a model for the concept of “total theater,” kabuki has now fully “arrived”—having entered the general American vocabulary as a richly suggestive (albeit somewhat negatively tinged) metaphor used by a range of commentators, journalists, and novelists. Over the span of sixty years, America’s kabuki-Japan has been the product of and continues to reflect a complex mix of cultural and political issues and interests.

I next examine the ways in which four distinctive New York institutions—Japan Society, La MaMa, Music From Japan, and the Lincoln Center Festival—have structured and conveyed knowledge about Japan through the performing arts. How critics—and audiences in general—respond to Japan-related theater, music, and dance directly relates to where work is shown and how it is contextualized. Power resides with artistic directors and producers—“the filters through which . . . artists must pass to be seen by the public”¹²⁶—who develop programming, select and recruit performers, schedule performance space, obtain financing, and generate publicity materials. Starting under the postwar stewardship of John D. Rockefeller III, Japan Society became—and continues to be—the foremost producer and presenter in the United States of Japan-related performing arts. It is also a leading granter of commissions to artists. The society has hosted scores of plays, dance events, and music programs; a rough count suggests more than six hundred, not even including the many workshops, lectures, and play readings that have also taken place. The other three institutions stand out among the substantial number of presenters and producers that have taken Japan-related performance outside of the walls of Japan Society and situated it within New York’s competitive performing arts environment. Beginning in 1970, La MaMa, which epitomizes the avant-garde onstage in the United States, brought rock musicals and experimental theater and dance from Japan to its downtown space—and

categorically de-familiarized a culture that audiences had come to think of chiefly in terms of the traditional arts. Founded in 1975, New York-based Music From Japan (the *F* is deliberately capitalized) has played a singular role in the arena of music-focused cultural exchange by serving as a conduit to US audiences of important new work by composers from Japan. With a roster of top-tier U.S.- and Japan-based musicians, it produces concerts every year, all of them taking place on the borrowed stages of well-known concert halls. Since the Lincoln Center Festival began in 1996, Japan-related productions have been integral to its lineup of international theater, music, and dance. One of New York's headline performing arts events, the three-week summer festival encapsulates the fluidity and contingency of cultural circulation and exchange on a global scale.

I then turn to a discussion of the critics, scholar/experts, and Japan-based correspondents whose writings construct America's Japan through the performing arts. They are "seeing-men" (and women), to borrow Mary Louise Pratt's terminology,¹²⁷ who function as cultural mediators and interpreters. Continually rendering judgments about what is authentically Japanese (and what is not), they help write "the histories through which the Orient, the East, and Asia have been configured through variegated practices of locating self against other."¹²⁸ Their output takes three basic forms: articles that preview forthcoming productions, reviews of presentations that have already occurred, and reportage intended to broaden and deepen American knowledge of the theater, music, and dance scenes in Japan. Preview essays, in effect, "soften the ground for nervous newcomers,"¹²⁹ alerting readers to upcoming productions and educating them about aspects of art forms with which they may be unfamiliar. The review that follows an event amplifies and contextualizes it for those who also attended and provides a kind of armchair theatergoing experience for those who did not. By the late 1990s the *Times* had launched an "Arts Abroad" column, giving space to pieces such as "Taking Taiko, Japan's Big Drum, into the Hip-Hop Age."¹³⁰ However, articles by correspondents and specialists with experience in Japan were being regularly and widely published long before that and are an important component of the archives of America's Japan. I consider how the terrain of language has been negotiated in US presentations of theater from Japan. Such presentations are sites of linguistic contestation and tension. Non-Japanese-speaking audiences rely on technologies of access to foreign words spoken—and cultures experienced—live onstage: supertitles, wireless earphone translation and commentary systems, and program notes. I begin by discussing what can be termed Japan's "theater of translation"—the ongoing, century-old

project of translating plays from abroad into Japanese and bringing productions of them to the stage in Tokyo and other theater centers with Japanese casts. In contrast to the linguistic domestication of foreign theater that is the norm in Japan, language is a principal marker of foreignness when Japanese theater travels abroad. I go on to look at critical responses to a range of theater from Japan by way of proposing an analytical framework for what Susan Bassnett-McGuire has called the “intercultural transfer” that has taken place over the past sixty years.¹³¹ I identify three principal discursive strategies: surrender, assuming universality, and resistance.

I conclude the study by focusing on Carnegie Hall’s extended celebration of Japanese culture in 2010–11 and the concerts curated by John Zorn that stood out among the various benefits held in New York following the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Japan. Both sets of events took place alongside the regular flow of Japan-related programming that also occurred during the same general span of time. Taken together the presentations that unfolded from the late summer of 2010 to the summer of 2011 embody a period of closure and counterpoint in what Stephen Greenblatt has referred to as “the restless process through which texts, images, artifacts, and ideas are moved, disguised, translated, transformed, adapted, and reimagined in the ceaseless, resourceful work of culture.”¹³²