The Kanamaru-za: Japan’s Oldest Kabuki Theatre

Samuel L. Leiter

Tucked away in the small town of Kotohira, Shikoku, is Japan’s oldest kabuki theatre, the Kanamaru-za, built in the 1830s and recently restored. It is now the site of an annual kabuki festival, where major stars perform in conditions like those when the theatre was new. This article offers a historical introduction to the playhouse and, with ground plans and nearly forty photographs by the author, takes the reader on a guided tour of the place. This material was originally presented in a shorter form in August 1996, in New York City, at the annual conference of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE).

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In March 1995, while in Tokyo for a week of conferences, I saw a new film by Shinoda Masahiro called Sharaku. One of the most striking features of this colorful movie, which purports to explain the still-unidentified identity of the eponymous late-eighteenth-century ukiyo-e artist, is the scenes set in a kabuki playhouse, Edo’s Nakamura-za, as it might have looked in the 1790s. Standing in for the Nakamura-za is a theatre that actually was not built for another four decades and exists not in Tokyo (formerly Edo), nor even in one of the two other major kabuki cities, Kyoto and Osaka, but in the small town of Kotohira (or Konpira-San) in Kagawa prefecture, Sanuki province, on the island of Shikoku, several hours by train from Osaka. Previously I had seen this theatre, the Kanamaru-za (or Konpira Ōshibai), only in an occasional photograph in a Japanese text. The sole English-language source picturing it is Kawatake Toshio’s Japan on Stage (1990, 74), where it is unidentified. Its screen presence was stunning, packed as it was with a simulated eighteenth-century audience, even though the theatre had been dressed up and somewhat altered from its regular appearance to conform with earlier architectural features. The most obvious revision was the addition of a thrust stage (tsuke butai), an element that did not vanish from kabuki until well into the nineteenth century, some-
what later than it did in contemporary English theatres as the apron shrunk to make room for more audience seating. When I returned to Japan in the summer, a priority was to visit the theatre and learn something about it. I still know of no non-Japanese source in which it is discussed, and there are surprisingly few Japanese works that describe it more than perfunctorily.

Kotohira’s alternate name of Konpira-San derives from a famous shrine best known for its veneration of the Indian and Buddhist deity Kumphira, of which Konpira is a corruption. Konpira, conceived as a fish or crocodile with the body of a snake, is revered as a deity who protects seafarers and other travelers and is known for his miraculous deeds (Fujiya Hotel 1950, 475). Shrines to Konpira are found throughout Japan, although that in Kotohira is Japan’s largest and most often visited, being a sort of once-in-a-lifetime mecca for pious citizens. Interestingly, early kabuki and bunraku (puppet theatre) produced a number of revenge dramas centered on Konpira.²

Pilgrims, who have visited the town en masse for hundreds of years, climb a seemingly endless flight of stone stairs, lined on either side by countless souvenir shops, before reaching the shrine—and its glorious view—at the top of a mountain. Those who, for one reason or another, are unable to make the ascent can hire sturdy men to bear them aloft in a kind of lightweight palanquin. Shortly after beginning the ascent there is a road to the theatre leading off to the left. It takes

![Figure 13. Slope leading to Kanamaru-za. (All photos: Samuel L. Leiter)](image_url)
one up a less arduous slope (Figure 13) past red lanterns and vertical stone markers on each of which one of the theatre’s names, Konpira Ōshibai (Konpira Big Theatre), has been chiseled. (Figure 14). The walker then arrives at a stone supporting wall, with a wooden staircase (Figure 15) that one climbs to reach the elevated plateau on which the playhouse is situated. Before the steps, though, is a public signpost on which is stated in Japanese (Figure 16):

National Designated Important Cultural Property
Old Konpira Big Theatre (Kanamaru-za)
Japan’s oldest kabuki theatre (shibai koya), Old Konpira Big Theatre, was built in Tenpō 6 (1835). Before then, temporary theatres were built here as needed to serve not only as regular playhouses but to function as lottery (tomigushi) halls as well.
Figure 15. Stone supporting wall with wooden staircase to left.

Figure 16. Public signpost.
During the Edo period, Japan’s greatest actors (sen ryō yakusha) appeared in this theatre, which resulted in its name becoming renowned among the playhouses of the land.

Sparked by the theatre’s selection in 1970 as a National Designated Important Cultural Property, a fund-raising drive lasting four years was instituted in 1972, and over $2,000,000 was collected. In April 1976 the theatre was restored to its original form on this site.

Every year since 1985 a kabuki production is held here and a great deal of attention is focused on it throughout the nation.

Kotohira City Board of Education

Actually, the theatre had been officially recognized somewhat earlier, when the prefecture’s board of education announced its designation as a Prefectural Important Cultural Property in 1953. Although most sources give 1835 as the date for the original theatre, official records note its completion in 1836. According to Kusanagi Kinshirō (1955, 1), the date of 1835 derives from an inscription on a no-longer-extant overhead beam that was part of the theatre’s supporting structure and was visible until the theatre was renovated in 1898. The older date is understood to have been the year in which construction was begun, with completion reached the following year.

Kabuki theatres, now usually called gekijō, were normally referred to in the past as shibai koya (or goya), meaning something like “play huts,” the word koya suggesting a makeshift and temporary structure. This may be, it has been said, because theatres were flimsy fire-traps—indeed, the average life of a premodern Japanese theatre has been estimated at about ten years. There are, however, many old theatres dotting the countryside, particularly in farming and fishing villages, some with histories older even than the Kanamaru-za’s. Nevertheless, although one of these goes back to 1806, they are considered unworthy contenders for the honor of Japan’s oldest kabuki theatre because they are either open-air theatres established on shrine or temple grounds, for amateur performances at religious festivals by local farmers or fisherfolk, or have been so extensively renovated that they no longer bear anything like their original appearance. The Kanamaru-za was established as a first-class theatre for professional actors and as such is unique in retaining something like its pristine form. There are two other comparable theatres in Japan: the Yachiyo-za in Yamaga city, Kumamoto prefecture, and the Kōraku-kan, in Kosaka city, Akita prefecture. Both inherit architectural traditions from earlier times and deserve close examination, but they date from 1910 and thus are far too late to be in the running.
Kotohira was an entertainment center from the time of the Genroku period (1688–1703) and was particularly active during the town's three annual festivals, in the third month, the sixth month, and the tenth month (according to the old lunar calendar). The town, which now has a permanent population of 11,983, was home to 2,781 in 1840, although its numbers were (and are) regularly swelled by the constant influx of pilgrims and tourists. A screen painting from the early eighteenth century depicts a wide assortment of sideshows and more formal entertainments, including an outdoor nō play being performed at about where the Kanamaru-za was eventually built. Sumo wrestling was an especially popular crowd pleaser, but following a riot during a match in the 1750s, sumo was forbidden and came increasingly to be replaced by theatre and acrobatics.

Largely because of its popularity as a religious mecca, Kotohira enjoyed privileges rare outside of the major cities. Among such privileges were the establishment of a brothel district and, from 1825, the institution of a lottery—both of which the officials chose to ignore, although not granting them official licenses. The site of the Kanamaru-za was not only used by nō actors but was also the frequent location for the construction of temporary kabuki and puppet theatres, built as needed. In fact, by 1825 the town was considered the nation's chief theatre venue after Edo, Osaka, and Kyoto. The future Kanamaru-za location was also used for a kind of lottery called tomigushi that contributed considerably to the already prosperous town's wealth. When the Kanamaru-za was built, it was with the express purpose of serving as a lottery hall when not in use for theatrical productions. The relationship between the municipal government and theatrical art was thus quite strong in Kotohira, unlike the adversarial situation that generally prevailed in the major theatre cities.

In addition to the recent restorations, which incorporated as many of the original elements as possible, the Kanamaru-za underwent minor renovations over the years, perhaps the most extensive being the replacement of its hip-gabled roof in 1890. And for much of the present century, its old-fashioned straw mat floor seating was abandoned in favor of Western-style chairs and its “secondary” or kari hana-michi runway was removed.8

After receiving permission from the shrine and temple officials serving the area’s powerful Takamatsu clan, a local carpenter built the Kanamaru-za as a replication of one of the three major Osaka theatres, the Ōnishī Shibai (later called the Chikugo-za and the Naniwa-za),9 whose plans he obtained on a trip to Osaka. Construction of the theatre, first called Konpira Ōshibai,10 cost about 1,000 ryō. Funds for the project were raised by the local geisha, who accumulated money by
clipping the incense sticks by whose burning (a stick an hour, more or less) they calculated the time they spent entertaining their clients. Thus they were able to serve more clients in a shorter period of time. This method of raising funds was also sometimes used to collect enough to pay visiting companies to remain a full month. Such money was called hanekin ("clipped money") or fujōkin ("dirty money"). The theatre built by these means was appreciated by traveling actors as the only one of its class to the west of the Kyoto-Osaka region (known as Kamigata).

On visiting the town, a troupe of actors would be welcomed with considerable fanfare according to the Kamigata custom of norikomi ("boarding and entering"). The theatre’s personnel would turn out in full dress to greet them as they came along the highway from Tadotsu, after which the actors—much like barnstormers who toured European towns at the same time—would march through the town in a parade called the machi mawari ("around the town"), to make their presence known, until they at last entered the theatre, where a ritualistic, rhythmic handclapping ceremony (teuchi shiki) would greet them. This old practice continued until as late as the Taishō era (1912–1926).

The theatre was under the control of a local temple, the Kane-mitsu-in, until the Meiji period (1868–1912). When the hereditary abbot of the temple, a man of surpassing respectability, chose to attend the theatre, he did so privately, when no ordinary spectators were present. It was normally forbidden for priests from his temple to venture outside its precincts. In the company of a select group of distinguished samurai, he watched the play from a place in the second-floor galleries (sajiki) located on what is designated the “western” (nishi) side of the house, where his presence was masked by a bamboo blind. Such visits were termed oshinobi ("incognito").

In 1877, the playhouse passed into the hands of a man named Kyōhō, known as an otokodate, the Edo-era term for swaggering commoners who protected their class from overbearing samurai. He was head of a local gang called the Ippo Gumi ("One Way Gang") and was also the founder of the town’s fire brigade. When he became the proprietor, he set up a fire alarm in front of it and hired men dressed in haori jackets to keep the place safe from conflagrations. He also changed the theatre’s name to the Inari-za. (Inari was an important agricultural deity worshiped throughout Japan, especially by actors.) During these years, plays were usually given in full-length, all-day (tōshi kyōgen) performances—rather than the growing practice elsewhere of staging only favorite scenes—and productions began at ten A.M., closing at 9 P.M. The place’s name was altered to Chitose-za (Thousand Years Theatre) when it was bought in 1897 by Kawazoe Sadaji, who
revised the frontage’s appearance to reflect that of Osaka’s Kado-za.\textsuperscript{11} Business was poor, however, so the theatre passed over in 1900 to Kanamaru Genjirō, who paid 4,500 yen for it and gave it its final name.

From the top of the steps leading to the theatre’s plateau is a lovely view of the lower reaches of Kotohira (Figure 17) and the mountains beyond. Nearby is a booth selling tickets to visitors wishing to examine the building. In August 1995, the price was 300 yen (around $3.00) for an adult. All that was available at the theatre for reference purposes was a recent program, a postcard-ticket combination, and an illustrated flyer, printed on two sides, but containing some useful if compactly presented information. Despite the dozens of souvenir shops that proliferate all over town, none sold any sort of books or pamphlets about the theatre. There is, moreover, no museum attached to the theatre,\textsuperscript{12} where information would easily be available. At any rate, apart from a handful of tourists, visible in some of the photographs, the theatre was practically deserted.

The facade of the theatre contains much of interest, although I visited during the off season when no performances are in progress. During the kabuki presentations, which have become an annual event since 1985, the theatre is vividly adorned with banners and lanterns (as in the past) and the drum tower (yagura) over the entrance is draped in a curtain bearing the familiar crane crest of Shōchiku, the mono-
lithic entertainment company that now controls most kabuki. As Color Plate 1 makes clear, the yagura was undraped when I attended. The Edo-period tradition was to drape the tower—the public sign of a theatre’s official license to produce—only when a company was in residence and to take down the curtain on closing day. In the old days, a large drum would have been placed in this enclosure to announce the commencement of performances.

The theatre’s frontage measures 13 ken, 2 shaku (about 80 feet). The vertical signboards (kanban) hanging from beneath the eaves list the names of actors who recently appeared on the stage, and the (artificial) bales of rice piled up at the front represent gifts from corporate sponsors or groups of fans. At the left is a vertical banner bearing the name of the actor Nakamura Baigyoku IV. It is not clear from the picture, but there are three entrances (kido) into the theatre, left, center, and right, under the eaves. Those to the left (the ōkido, “large entrance”) and right (goyō kido, “honorable use entrance”) are of normal height, but the entrance in the center is very low, forcing theatregoers to bend over in order to enter (Figure 18). This is the nezumi kido (“mouse entrance”), so named because of its supposed resemblance to a mouse hole. It was standard in all Edo-period theatres as an effective means of crowd control: since only one person at a time could enter, it was difficult to get in without a ticket. I did not
avoid banging my head upon entering. In the nineteenth century, my head might also have been bashed—had I started a fight or tried to gate-crash—by a stick-bearing guard hired to keep order. At first this was the job of a local gang leader, but from 1858 it belonged to an infantryman recruited from the samurai barracks at the Kurayashiki battle camp in Bizen.

In the big cities, theatregoers could enter either via the kido or via the adjoining teahouses (shibai jaya) at either side, where reservations could be made. There was no such arrangement in Kotohira, so the front entrances were used by all classes of people. Important persons used the ōkido, persons associated with the Kanemitsu-in used the goyō kido, and the average playgoer used the nezumi kido. Edo-period theatregoers were sold a ticket in the form of a flat, oblong, wooden board called a fuda (or torifuda). It was 7 sun (about 10 inches) in length, and 2 sun, 1 bun (about 3 1/2 inches) in width. The Kanamaru-za’s fuda-selling place used to be located to the right of the nezumi kido. The price depended on the seat desired.

On entering the theatre, the visitor steps into a wide but shallow lobby area, the first part of which is for removing one’s shoes. Slippers are available for those who wish them. One then steps onto a hardwood floor to the left of which (Figure 19) is a staircase leading to the second floor. The doorway, back-lit by the sun in the picture,
Figure 20. Right-side lobby staircase.

Figure 21. Entry to first-floor, left-side seating.
leads to the left side (or eastern, higashi, side) of the auditorium. To its right is a curtained room (the toya or agemaku) from which actors make their entrance onto the “main” or hon hanamichi. To the right of the lobby (Figure 20) is another staircase to the second floor. The sliding doors along the lobby wall lead to an audience area at the rear of the auditorium. At the far end of the wall, just before the stairs, can be seen the curtained entrance to the right side of the auditorium.

Once through the entranceway to the left (Figure 21), the visitor has access to the tatami-mat box seating along that side of the house. This is the sajiki seating, which runs along the east and west sides of the theatre on both floors. Visible is the tatami seating that juts out several feet into the auditorium from beneath the overhead gallery. To its immediate right is another tatami-mat area for smaller groups, each section separated from the next by a wooden board. Just to the right of the latter area is the hanamichi—8 ken, 3 shaku long (about 50 feet)—at the far end of which is the stage with its musicians’ room (geza or hayashibeya) at stage right. Because of its proximity to the hanamichi, which allowed its occupants to view the actors’ backs so closely, the area to the left of the runway is called the geiura (“behind the acting”). These seats were originally lower in price than those in
the pit or hiraba. The most expensive seats, as they still are even in the major cities, were in the sajiki. Electric lights that simulate shielded oldtime candles can be seen burning in front of the stage, which is dressed with the nonlocalized pine tree background used for kabuki works, like Kanjincho (The Subscription List), that derive from the no theatre and are called matsubame mono ("pine tree board plays").

In the toya (Figure 22), a full-length mirror awaits the actors for last-minute adjustments before they make their entrance into the auditorium, which can be seen through the door at the left. The signboard leaning against the wall simply says "toya" and is for the benefit of visitors. Viewing the auditorium from the toya (Figure 23), with the room's agemaku curtain pulled to the side, the visitor—like an actor about to make his entrance—sees the hanamichi stretching before him to the stage and a tatami-floored pit to the right. The pit, originally the doma ("earth place"), was later called the hiraba ("level place") to distinguish it from the "raised" doma (takadoma) seating introduced in nineteenth-century theatres along the sides in front of the lower sajiki.
It is divided into small seating areas called masu, after the name for a type of Japanese measure. Unlike the visitors in the picture, who are seated on the wooden partitions, theatregoers sat on the floor (with or without cushions), eating and drinking and capable of turning easily in any direction to follow the action on one or the other hanamichi. Sitting in a chair in a contemporary kabuki theatre does not permit such freedom of movement. (The hiraba is in fact gently raked to permit better visibility.)

The photos also show a large TV set on stage. This is used to show visitors a continually repeated videotape of a documentary about the theatre. The tape has generous portions devoted to recent productions depicting the theatre in action with a full house. The four metal columns supporting the roof are not from the 1835 building but were installed during the renovation of 1890, when the original roof beam was removed.

Having entered the hiraba and turned momentarily from the stage to the toya (Color Plate 2), the spectator sees the opening from which the actors appear. Closer inspection reveals the railing for the stairs that lead up to the toya from the area beneath the stage (naraku). Apparent as well is the little raised and enclosed space (takaba) directly in front of the entrance where a theatre functionary used to sit and oversee the auditorium. The diamond-shaped plaques along the side

**Figure 24. Auditorium viewed from near stage. At rear are aoda and ōmukō.**
Figure 25. Area over ōmukō.

Figure 26. Paper lanterns over auditorium.
of the hanamichi indicate the row numbers. A similar system of plaques runs across the front of the stage, using characters from the Japanese syllabary, to further help spectators find their places. Woodblock prints of the nineteenth century show such seat markers, although not necessarily using the system seen at the Kanamaru-za. The system of using a combination of syllabary characters and numbers was sometimes replaced in other theatres by indicating rows with terms such as take ("bamboo") or matsu ("pine").

We can now move closer to the stage and survey the auditorium from the stage left side (Figure 24). At the rear is the other side of the wall of sliding doors seen on entering the lobby. Before it is an undifferentiated area for audience members. This is the aoda ("green fields"), a space formerly set aside for nonpaying spectators. The term derives from a farmer’s phrase, "the fields have produced a poor harvest" (aoda ni miirinashi). To its left is a small platform from which another functionary helped keep order. Above it is a balcony area, the ōmukō ("great beyond"), a place that came to be known in all kabuki theatres as the seating area preferred by connoisseurs (tsu), presumably because it was the least expensive, allowing for repeated visits. A closer view of the ōmukō (Color Plate 3) shows it to be on three levels, each with tatami flooring. Figure 25 reveals the area over the ōmukō, with its post and beam architecture.

Paper lanterns (lit today by electricity) decorate the theatre’s ceiling (Figure 26) and interior, the latter seen from the stage in Color Plate 4. The auditorium is further dressed up with cherry blossoms and the like during actual performances. Color Plate 4 also reveals a feature no longer found in kabuki theatres: the karaido ("empty well"), a square opening (closed over when not in use) located at the junction of the hanamichi and the stage. Actors can appear from it via steps leading from the basement. Because the actor using it is moving under his own volition, it allows him to time his entrance more precisely than when he rises on the slow-moving elevator trap (suppon, or "snapping turtle") on the hanamichi. The karaido was also used to represent a muddy pond or rice paddy in scenes set near such locales, and the well would be filled with a mudlike concoction that would cling to the actors realistically when they emerged from this spot or fell into it. When filled with mud it was known as the dorobune ("mud boat"). I do not know of any other kabuki theatre that still retains the karaido.

The suppon can be seen in Figure 27 at a position between the metal column at the center and the flat dividing board in the geiura seating at the bottom right. (This board is also visible in the plan shown in Figure 28 and may have been used to provide easy access to the hanamichi for audience members on special occasions.) It is oper-
ated manually, as of old, from beneath the stage. Figure 29 provides a closer view of this device from the perspective of an actor moving toward the stage. Figure 30 shows that the *suppon*, situated at the *shichisan* or “seven-three” spot on the *hanamichi* (because it is supposed to be seven-tenths of the distance from the *toya* to the stage), is precisely in line with the fifth row, vertically, of *masu*. The angle at which a theatregoer seated on the floor in *masu* row five views the *hanamichi* is shown in Figure 31. Used mainly for the entrances of mystical characters, the *suppon* creates a magical effect when they appear and disappear within an auditorium that is considerably more intimate than the huge theatres in which *kabuki* is generally produced today. The effect is enormously enhanced when the theatre is darkened and the face of the strange figure slowly emerging on the elevator is illuminated by the *sashidashi*—a long, slender, black pole with a candle at its end, held by a black-robed stage assistant (*kurogo*).

The theatre holds from 1,000 to 1,200 persons, whereas Tokyo’s Kabuki-za seats 2,600. A good sense of the theatre’s intimacy relative to modern *kabuki* venues can be gleaned from Color Plate 5, which does not include the seating areas to the sides of the two *hanamichi*. Color Plate 6, though, takes in the *kari hanamichi* and the raised tatami seating to its side. The latter would, in Edo, have been called the *takadoma*,

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*Figure 27. View of hanamichi and suppon from sajiki.*
Figure 28. This plan of the first story is based on a plan provided with the theatre’s ticket brochure. Key: (A) Nezumi kido, (B) Lobby area (uchi kido), (C) Patrons’ footwear storage (gesokuba), (D) West lavatory, (E) East lavatory, (F) West (nishi) sajiki and East (higashi) sajiki, (G) Hiraba, (H) Aoda, (I) Toya, (J) Geitura (the brochure says hi no shusseki, or “eastern seats”), (K) Main or hon hanamichi, (L) Temporary or kari hanamichi, (M) Kraidoo, (N) Demago, (O) Geza, (P) Mawari butai, (Q) Seri, (R) Suppon, (S) Gakuya, (T) Furo (bath), (U) Kodōgu heya (prop room), (V) connecting board. Terms are both those on the brochure itself and those provided by the author.
Figure 29. Close-up of suppon.

Figure 30. View of hanamichi in suppon area as viewed from masu.
Figure 31. Same view as Figure 30, but from a seated perspective.

Figure 32. View of stage from ōmukō.
Figure 33. Inside left-side sajiki.

Figure 34. Sajiki seen from ōmukō.
Plate 1. Exterior of the Kanamaru-za, Kotohira, Shikoku. (Photo: Samuel L. Leiter)

Plate 2. Toya entrance-way onto hanamichi. Note railed-in takaba area. (Photo: Samuel L. Leiter)

Plate 3. Ōmuko seating. Stage area is to the left. (Photo: Samuel L. Leiter)
PLATE 4. Auditorium seen from stage right. Note karaido at junction of stage and hanamichi. (Photo: Samuel L. Leiter)

PLATE 5. View of stage from rear of house. Tourists in picture are sitting on crosswalks, but audience would sit on floor. (Photo: Samuel L. Leiter)

PLATE 6. View down kari hanamichi on right side of house. (Photo: Samuel L. Leiter)
Plates 7-9. View of right side of house from ōmukō. (Photo: Samuel L. Leiter)

Plate 8. Support structure for revolve. Vertical beam fixed in position with rope is used to push revolve. (Photo: Samuel L. Leiter)

Plate 9. The ōbeya. Stairs lead up to it at the extreme left. (Photo: Samuel L. Leiter)
PLATE 10. Bassanio to Portia: “Only my blood speaks to you in my veins. . . .” (Photo: Courtesy Shanghai Theatre Academy)

PLATE 11. Lei Liya (Ophelia) walks toward the stream to commit suicide. (Photo: Courtesy Shanghai Theatre Academy)

PLATE 12. Agamemnon gives the order to go into battle. (Photo: Courtesy Shanghai Theatre Academy)
but in the Kanamaru-za they are called by the strange name of demago (“thrust-grandchild”). To their right is the first floor “west” sajiki, beyond which runs a veranda on the outside of the theatre. The rain shutters along the wall have been opened to allow light to stream in.

Whereas the hon hanamichi is about five feet wide, the kari hanamichi measures about half of that. When necessary for certain plays, such as the “Numazu” scene from Igagoe Dōchū Sugoroku (A Board Game While Passing Through Iga), a plank is set up across the rear of the hiraba so that the actors may leave the stage by the hon hanamichi, traverse the hiraba (with spectators to their front and rear), and move back to the stage via the kari hanamichi. The relationship between the height of the slightly raised runways and the position of the floor-seated spectators creates a truly exciting dynamic between audience and actor, completely unlike the effect of actors walking down the aisles of a Western-style theatre. As might be expected, all sense of intimacy with the performance on the hanamichi is lost as one gets increasingly further away from it in balcony seats at theatres like Tokyo’s Kabuki-za, where there are many seats from which the hanamichi is practically invisible. This distancing effect does not occur at the Kanamaru-za, as one sees from Figure 32, taken from the ōmukō balcony overlooking the runway. However, those people not seated near the front railings of the upper sajiki, as in Figure 33, will clearly have trouble seeing the hon hanamichi, so sight-line problems do occasionally arise. The depth of the sajiki can be seen even more clearly in Figure 34.

Color Plate 7, taken from roughly the same position, expresses much of the theatre’s atmosphere. It shows the west side upper and lower sajiki, the closed shoji screens behind the second-story sajiki, and the shoji (backed by rain shutters) at the uppermost level of the west wall. On the wall of the corridor outside the sajiki is a row of additional rain shutters, as seen in Figure 35. Such shutters are called madobuta (“window lids”) or akari mado (“lighting windows”). Outside them is platforming for stagehands. These outer shutters do not slide, but lift up from the bottom and are held in place by wooden poles. Shown again in Figure 36, where they are fronted by shoji, these shutters were the principal means of illuminating and darkening the house during the pre-electricity years, when candles were used very sparingly because of the danger of fire. Plays are now staged using the old technique of having the stagehands outside the shutters open and close them on cue, creating relatively quick—if noisy—lighting changes, which are especially effective in gloomy ghost plays (kaidan mono).

Kabuki theatres always have an orchestra present, but unlike Western theatres, which usually place their musicians in a designated place between the auditorium and the stage, where only the conduc-
Figure 35. Corridor outside upper sajiki.

Figure 36. View of madobuta.
tor is prominent, kabuki prefers to have its musicians perform from an onstage position. Sometimes, especially in dance plays, they are visible in formal costuming; sometimes, usually in dramas, they are invisible as they play in the offstage music room called geza ("lower seat") or hayashiibeya ("musicians’ room"), built with a latticed screen that allows them to see the stage action while remaining hidden. The musicians, who in Edo were at first on stage left, then upstage, and finally, by the nineteenth century, on stage right, where they still are, remained on stage left in Kamigata. The Kanamaru-za, however, elected to have such a musicians’ room on either side of the stage, an idiosyncratic convention that was useful when two different schools of music were used in the same piece (a convention called kakeai), each school occupying a different music room. As now constituted, the stage left room is gone, replaced by a low, railed-in area, over which remains a second-story, screened-in room (the yuka) employed by the chanter (tayū) and shamisen player combination (called chobo) in works influenced by or adapted from the puppet theatre. The bamboo screen or blind (sudare) can be rolled up to reveal the performers. A similar room is in this position in most theatres and can be seen at the center of Figure 37. Directly in front of it hangs the vertically striped traveler curtain (hiki maku)—green, persimmon, and black—that has come to be associated with kabuki. (In the past, however, these colors were not ubiquitous and each theatre had its own distinctive scheme.) The curtain has been tied back to hang here in full view of the audience, as it used to do (although most old prints show it on the other side of the stage), but in modern theatres it is pulled into the wings when not in use. Old kabuki theatres lacked the proscenium (introduced during the Meiji period) that would have allowed the hiding of the curtain.

The stage opening, measured between the two supporting pillars (daijin bashira) at either side, is 8 ken (about 48 feet). When one compares this with the almost 90-foot-wide opening of the Kabuki-za, it becomes clear how much has been lost as modern kabuki theatres moved increasingly toward gigantism and away from the most effective means for expressing theatrical art. In this regard, an easy comparison can be made between kabuki history and the process of enlarging—and artistically weakening—the great London theatres, Drury Lane and Covent Garden, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Over the stage is a gridwork of bamboo poles that in Edo was called sunoko ("drainboard") but in the Kanamaru-za is known by the Kamigata term of budōdana ("grape shelf"). Although, traditionally, kabuki sets make only sparing use of flown-in scenic elements (such as clouds), a grid is necessary not only for scenes requiring flying but, more importantly, as a place from which to drop the thousands of tiny,
FIGURE 37. Stage-left curtain position and chobo yuka.

FIGURE 38. Revolving stage.
triangular pieces of paper that stand for snow, or the silver ones used for rain. If one of the stagehands in the flies was to accidentally drop a sandal along with the snow, it was sufficient incentive for playgoers in the ōmukō to throw their seat cushions at the stage. A fly gallery with a pulley system (rokuro) and numerous ropes is situated on the stage left wall in the wings.

The Kanamaru-za, as a kabuki theatre worthy of the name, includes a manually operated revolving stage (mawari butai), whose outline can be seen in Figure 38. To examine its mechanism, one must descend into the naraku ("hell") area beneath the stage. Until the theatre’s modern renovation, its naraku, whose height is a bit over six feet, was considered truly hellish: damp, dirty, decrepit, and supposedly haunted by the ghosts of actors rumored to have been buried there after dying in stage fights (tachimawari) fought with real swords to settle personal grudges. One of the purposes of the naraku is to provide a quick and easy means of connection under the hanamichi between the toya and the backstage dressing rooms (gakuya). This is especially useful for quick change effects. But actors came to find the Kanamaru-za’s naraku so distasteful that they chose to run along the veranda (nure’en) outside the lower sajiki to get from one place to the other. Figure 39 exposes the steps leading from the toya to the now present-
Figure 40. Passage under *hanamichi*.

Figure 41. *Suppon* framing and mechanism.
Figure 42. Suppon framing and mechanism, seen from another angle.

Figure 43. Central axle of revolving stage and beams for pushing it.
**Figure 44.** Stone traction steps.

**Figure 45.** Entrance to *karaido*.
able *naraku*, whose floor has been covered with boards. The path through the *naraku* to the dressing rooms is seen in Figure 40, which also shows the wooden structure supporting the *hanamichi*. Stopping for a moment along this path allows for a view (Figures 41 and 42) of the *suppon*’s elevator trap arrangement.

Beneath the stage itself are the wooden beams and platforming used to power the revolving stage and the trap (*seri*) set into it. There is only one trap on the stage proper, unlike the three found on such large stages as the Kabuki-za’s. Its frame is visible amidst the beams supporting the revolve. Figure 43 and Color Plate 8 show the thick central axle on which the revolve swivels, the hanging beams (there are three) — tied in place with ropes when not in use — against which stagehands place their shoulders to move the disk, and the framed structure surrounding the main elevator trap. On the floor are stones set into the earth (now a layer of concrete) as foot grips, seen more closely in Figure 44. Nearby (Figure 45) is a small ladder leading to the *karaido* entrance that will allow the actor to suddenly emerge practically in the laps of the audience. Another ladder unit (Figure 46), at the far end of the path under the *hanamichi*, leads to the backstage and dressing room (*gakuya*) areas.
**Figure 47.** Plan for second story. Key: (A1) Ömukō, (B1) Second-story (nikai) east sajiki, (C1) Second-story west sajiki, (D1) Yuka room for chobo, (E1) Obeya, (F1) Gakuya.

**Figure 48.** Leading actors’ dressing room.
Backstage, on the stage left side, is another set of ladderlike stairs leading to the room from which the chobo performers accompany certain plays. (See Figure 37 for the audience view of this room.) The veranda outside the first floor west sajiki can be seen at the rear. The dressing room area—where graffiti from actors of yore, scratched in the wood, are still visible—is located on two floors, as it was in Kyoto and Osaka, unlike Edo, where it was on three floors. Kusanagi (1955, 8) notes that the theatre was built with eight small dressing rooms in addition to a large, communal one (the obeya, or “big room”). There were three individual rooms to the west of the obeya and two to the east. That at the extreme west was reserved for the actor-manager (zashira). The renovations appear to have kept the number of individual dressing rooms, but they have been redistributed: there are now five on the first floor and three on the second, in addition to the obeya. Two are to the west of the obeya and one to the east. These are visible in the floor plans (Figures 28 and 47). Among these small rooms, intended for the leading actors, is the one shown in Figure 48, designated for female impersonators (onnagata), and that in Figure 49, for the musicians. Color Plate 9 depicts the obeya, used by the lower-ranking actors who figure in crowd and fight scenes. This room was also used for
rehearsals. The lower-ranking actors are themselves called ōbeya, among other terms. To get to this room, located on the upper floor, one must climb yet another steep ladder, the opening for which can just be seen at the left of the picture. Outside the ōbeya is a corridor that runs over and across the backstage area (Figure 50). From it can be seen the rear of the flats used for the stage setting. Also backstage, visible in the plan for the first floor (Figure 28) at the extreme left of the rear wall, is a small room with a bath (furō). The equally small space in front of it is now designated as a prop room (kodōgu beya).

During the twentieth century, the Kanamaru-za was used mainly as a movie theatre. It did not reemerge as a regular center for kabuki until after its major renovation. What has now become a brief, annual festival began when Nakamura Kichiemon II, Sawamura Sōjūrō IX, and others produced the play Saikai Zakura Misome no Kiyomizu (Reunion Amidst the Cherry Blossoms After the First Meeting at Kiyomizu) and the dance Niwakajishi (Spirited Lion) for three days from June 27, 1985, shortly after they had staged the program at Osaka’s Naka-za. Kichiemon II was very impressed with the theatre, which, with its two
hanamichi and oldtime lighting, he found more appealing than the Naka-za. Indeed, its appeal led him to return not long after to produce a television production of two more works, designed to exploit the theatre’s resources to the fullest. Eventually, all of kabuki’s greatest contemporary stars trekked to Kotohira to offer their services in an annual kabuki festival at the end of every April. The festival came to be called Kotohira Kabuki. In 1995, tickets for this limited engagement ranged from $70 to $120.

For those interested in comparative studies, one of the most remarkable things about kabuki is the unusual number of ways in which—without documented influence—it paralleled the history of European theatre, especially England’s, during the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries. Company organization, relations with government authority, commercial business practices, role typing, increasing realism and spectacle, stage technology, acting traditions, the star system, and many other facets of kabuki reflect practices that, while innately Japanese, nevertheless are strikingly similar to what was happening in the West. When, therefore, Westerners acquainted, even modestly, with theatre history, but not with Japanese theatre, enter the Kanamaru-za, they will not feel as if they have crossed the border into some exotic theatrical environment (like a nō theatre, for example), where architectural features—for all their beauty—may feel somehow alien because of their relative oddness. The visitor is more likely to feel, for all the obvious differences, rather at home. Of course, one might note with some initial confusion the hanamichi (first perfected around 1735), where there should be aisles, and the partitioned, empty masu where fixed seating ordinarily would be. But one would quickly observe a stage that, like a conventional one in the West, fills up one end of a familiar-looking auditorium and, despite its lack of an obvious proscenium arch does after all contain wings, a revolve, and an elevator trap. One would notice that the more-or-less square auditorium—like the oblong playhouses of seventeenth-century France, and the opera houses that soon proliferated all over the continent—allows people at the sides to look across the pit to those on the other side. One might then realize that, even more important, the Kanamaru-za’s shape enhances the sight-lines for the acting that occurs on the culturally specific hanamichi. Moreover, awareness would dawn that, like many contemporary Western theatres and opera houses, the Kanamaru-za has a rear balcony and sajiki seating containing boxes that reach all the way along the walls to the stage itself. Fire laws prevented Japanese theatres from having more than two levels of such seating (as did Drury Lane during the Restoration period), although eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European playhouses, like fancy wedding
cakes, tended to add additional layers. Further striking a note of familiarity would be the angled musicians’ rooms, downstage right and left, that recall the similarly placed doorways (for entrances and exits) found on English stages of the late seventeenth through mid-nineteenth centuries. All in all, Westerners in the Kanamaru-za would not have to strain their imagination to feel as if they were in a box-pit-and-gallery structure, albeit one designed in wood by a Japanese architect.

Despite the existence of kabuki theatres in more accessible places, none provides anything approximating the flavor of an Edo-period playhouse as closely as does the Kanamaru-za. Visiting it in the off season allows unhurried theatre lovers the pleasure of investigating its every nook and cranny with no one looking over their shoulder. Visiting it when kabuki is being produced will undoubtedly conjure potent images of a time far removed that, until now, could be revisited only in old theatrical woodblock prints. No matter when one visits, though, it will be an experience to savor.

NOTES

1. The film’s attempt to recreate an old-time audience is effective but, either for artistic or technical reasons, not always accurate. While trying to show the appearance of an onstage audience, for example, it packs a group of spectators together at stage right but does not employ the upstage-right bleachers called rakandai and yoshino, where such audiences would normally have sat, watching the actors from the rear. (There were once such seating areas at the Kanamaru-za.) For further information on terms, theatres, and actors mentioned in this report, see Leiter (1979), presently undergoing a major revision to be published in 1997. My research in Japan was made possible by a grant from the Professional Staff Congress of the City University of New York, and acceptance as a Visiting Scholar at Waseda University, Tokyo, for which I thank Professor Torigoe Bunzō. A number of helpful facts about the Kanamaru-za were supplied in a letter from the Kotohira Board of Education, to whom I express my gratitude.

2. A still-performed Konpira play is Kuwanaya Tokuzō Irifune Monogatari (The Story of Kuwanaya Tokuzō’s Harbor Entry), first staged in 1770.

3. This is another name for the theatre, Kyū Konpira Ōshibai.

4. Literally, “thousand-ryō actor,” to designate the actor’s high salary in gold pieces (ryō).

5. An untranslated line at the bottom of the sign asks people not to throw their cigarettes here.

6. I am grateful to Professor Eloise Pearson Hamatani and Hamatani Hitoshi (stage manager of the National Theatre of Japan, Kokuritsu Gekijō) for providing me with a copy of a small volume (Kusanagi 1955) about the theatre. Professor Barbara E. Thornbury supplied me with helpful informa-
tion on Kotohira. Justin Leiter created the computer graphics of the Kana-
maru-za's Floorplans (see figures 28 and 47).

7. Professor Laurence Kominz provided me with information on these theatres. (See also Peyotoru 1992, 8–9.)

8. The *kari hanamichi* has gained the “temporary” designation—as opposed to the “regular” or *hon hanamichi*—because it is used only occasionally in major *kabuki* theatres and is removed when not required. The *kari hanamichi* at the Kanamaru-za is permanent, however, like its predecessors from the time when such runways were called by such terms as *higashi no ayumi* (“eastern walkway”). As this term suggests, the use of “eastern” and “western” differs in Kotohira from the practice in the major cities, where audience left is west and audience right is east.

9. The Ōnishi got its name (Great Western Theatre) from its location. Its more successful rivals were the Naka-za (Central Theatre) or Naka no Shibai and the Kado-za (Corner Theatre) or Kado no Shibai. All were located in the still popular Dōtonbori entertainment district. The Naka-za, now in a twentieth-century building, is still in business, although the structure is scheduled for major reconstruction.

10. *Ōshibai* refers to first-class theatres with official licenses from the shogunate to perform, designated by the drum tower (*yagura*) outside the front of the building over the entrance. In opposition were the *koshibai* (small theatres) or *miyaji shibai* (temple or shrine theatres) that were licensed by religious offices and restricted in the number of days they could perform. Like the “illegitimate” theatres of European cities, such as London and Paris, the smaller theatres were often a thorn in the flesh of the majors and frequently ignored restrictions imposed upon them. Such theatres do not seem to have competed with the Kanamaru-za, which was apparently the only game in town.

11. Tokyo’s Meiji-za, still in operation although in a later building, opened in 1885 under the name Chitose-za.

12. The Yachiyo-za, however, has its own museum and shop.

13. One *ken* = 1.987 yards; one *shaku* = 0.995 foot.

14. Spectators viewing the annual productions still sit on the floor, despite the discomfort such a position now holds for most Japanese, who have become accustomed to chairs. In the past, one could rent a small cushion (*hanjō*) for additional comfort. Like the Western custom of bombarding actors with tomatoes, Japanese audiences often threw their cushions at ineffective actors.

15. These photos were taken with an instamatic-type camera, sans wide angle or—beyond the most primitive—zoom possibilities.

16. The wider, but equivalent, seating on the east side of the house is not designated by this unusual term.

17. The old double *geza* arrangement was removed during the 1970 renovations to allow more room for the actors.

18. Fire regulations prohibited three-story construction in theatres, but managements got around the proscription by calling the second floor a mezzanine (*chūnikai*).
19. Although revolving stages were known to certain court designers of the Renaissance, they were not introduced into conventional Western theatres until 1896, when Karl Lautenschlaeger installed one at the Munich Residenztheater, possibly because of Japanese influence. The first Japanese revolving stage is said to have been invented during the Shôtoku and Kyôhô eras (1711–1735), when the Edo playwright Nakamura Denshichi devised a primitive mechanism called the bun mawashi. A more advanced version was created by playwright Namiki Shôzô I for a play of his at Osaka’s Kado-za in the twelfth month of 1758. This is the type that was installed at the Kanammaru-za, although Edo began using somewhat different technology for its revolves from 1793. In 1847, an Edo production first used a revolve within a revolve, each capable of moving in a different direction, but this was not used at the Kanammaru-za.

20. Traps have been known to European theatre since the medieval period, but Japan did not have one until Higuchi Hanemon invented a trap mechanism for the puppet theatre during the Hôei period (1704–1710). It was the creation of Namiki Shôzô I, however, that came to be used in kabuki after being introduced in a 1753 play he wrote for Osaka’s Ônishi Shibai, the theatre on whose architecture the Kanamaru-za was based.


22. The theatre’s office may be reached at (0877) 73-3846. It is open every day but Tuesday from 9 A.M. to 5 P.M.

REFERENCES