

Glimpses of the Wave of New Japanese Classical Dancers

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1. Hanayagi Shotaro III, Onoe Kikunojo III, and Shida Maki

It's no exaggeration to say that the five members of the Goyokai (including the three who are directors at Buyo Kyokai), Nishikawa Minosuke, Hanayagi Motoi, Yamamura Tomogoro, Hanayagi Juraku and Fujima Ranko, are at the top of the Japanese classical dance world. But last year, the activities of three other dancers who are approaching the pinnacle of these five were particularly striking.

The first dancer that I would like to feature is Hanayagi Shotaro III. In *Shotaro no Kai* (April 2, Cerulean Tower Noh Theatre), she performed the Ichu piece *Matsukaze* (*The Pining Wind*), based on the classical Noh play, and the Nagauta piece *Aya no Tsuzumi* (*The Damask Drum*), also based on a Noh play. In a recital by dancers at her school, *the 61st Ginreikai* (October 2, National Theatre, Small Theatre), she played the poet-priest Saigyō in the Nagauta piece *Shigure Saigyō* (*Saigyō in the Autumn Rain*) (the courtesan Eguchi was played by Hanayagi Rikasen) and Hanjo no Mae in the Kiyomoto piece *Sumidagawa* (*The Sumida River*), (The boatman was played by Hanayagi Suketaro.) In these dances, she fully displayed the unique qualities of a female Japanese classical dancer. In the male role such in *Aya no Tsuzumi* she exuded strength of character, and as Saigyō in *Shigure Saigyō*, she fully became the role.

Next, I would like to discuss Onoe Kikunojo III. Like Fujima Kanjuro VIII, he is one of the most active choreographers that is creating new dances for kabuki theatre. Although it has been 11 years since he took the name of Kikunojo, this year for the first time he had his own recital, *Onoe Kikunojo no Kai* (September 3, National Theatre, Large Theatre). He performed two dances with the

choreography of Onoe Kikunojo I (1910–1964), the Itchu Bushi piece *Shojo* (*The Sake Loving Water Sprites*) (original choreographic plan by Onoe Kikunojo I and choreographed by Onoe Bokusetsu), playing the Shojo spirits together with kabuki actor Onoe Matsuya and Onoe Bokusetsu as the sake seller Kofu, and the Gidayu piece *Cho no Michiyuki* (*The Lovers Reborn in Hell as Butterflies*), playing the role of Sukekuni while the role of his lover Komaki was played by kabuki onnagata Onoe Kikunosuke. In addition to these two classical dances, there was also a new piece, Sosaku Nagauta *Yamata no Orochi*, based on the ancient myth of the god vanquishing the eight-headed serpent. Kikunojo played the eight-headed serpent Yamata no Orochi to the narration of Onoe Matsuya. This performance showed that Kikunojo is a dancer on a scale far above the other young dancers of his generation, and I look forward to seeing how he will contribute to the Japanese classical dance world in the future.

The third dancer I would like to feature is Shida Maki, the second head of the Choyo School of Ryukyu Buyo. For *Maki no Kai* (September 16, Cerulean Tower Noh Theatre), she performed classical dance for the female characters (*onna odori*) *Nuhwa Bushi*, Sosaku *Kunnohra* and Sosaku *Kurokami* (*Black Hair*), choreographing a new dance in the style of Ryukyu Buyo to a piece of Japanese classical music. She has a well-deserved reputation for performing classical dances for female characters, but with *Kurokami*, she created a new dance in the form of a classical dance for a female character and used that colorful figure to squeeze out a deep and wide range of feelings of women that I felt represented a breath of fresh air for Japanese classical dance. The dance had a feeling of combining Japan and Okinawa, and I believe that it was like a cord connecting Japanese classical dance and Ryukyu Buyo.

I would like to list some of the dancers and the pieces that they performed that were special achievements last year. Among classical dances, Izumi Shoyo performed the Kiyomoto piece *Bunya* (The 6th Shoei Kai, March 12, National Theatre, Small Theatre) with highly polished dance artistry. Nishikawa Yuko created a piece carrying on the achievements of Hanayagi Shigeka with *Tagitsu* (*Turbulent Water*) (Yuko no Kai, Hanayagi Shigeka director and choreographer, November 22, National Theatre, Small Theatre). The appearance of Hanayagi

Motoi in the piece as well brought new life into it, which was extremely moving. Among new pieces, Gojo Tamami's Sosaku's *Orphée* (81st Tamami Kai / Gojo Tamami Recital, written, directed and choreographed by Gojo Tamami III, October 13, National Theatre, Small Theatre) was particularly excellent. There was a perfectly balanced collision of the understanding of the roles and expressive powers of the three main performers playing Orphée (Tamami), Euridice (Fujikage Shizue) and Persephone (kabuki *onnagata* Nakamura Kyotae) that brilliantly created a space where the worlds of the living and the dead could struggle against each other. Fujima Kiyotsugu has long been focused on creating the art of *onnagata* for Japanese classical dance, and his activities through the year were particularly impressive. In his own dance Senju Kai (April 17, National Theatre, Large Theatre), he performed a work which he not only wrote but also produced, choreographed and directed, *Yamato-Hime Gojunko – Yamato-Hime to Sada Yakko* (*The Journey of Princess Yamato – Princess Yamato and Sada Yacco*), which juxtaposed the journeys of the mythical Princess Yamato from the ancient chronicles with the world travels of Sada Yacco (1871–1946), known as the first actress in modern Japan. At the *Buyo Onnagata no Kai* (July 24, National Theatre, Small Theatre), which he organized and produced, he danced the Nagauta piece *Kishu Dojoji*. And in another of his own recitals, *Hanatsugu Kai in Tokyo* (November 1, National Theatre, Large Theatre), he performed an original dance for which he wrote the lyrics and created the choreography for a dance version of Mizukami Tsutomu's novel (and famously directed by Shinoda Masahiro in the 1977 film) *Hanare Goze Orin*, which is about a blind female traveling musician. The way he equally emphasizes the creation of new works and a search for techniques of *onnagata* that are unique to Japanese classical dance is quite wonderful.

2. Performances to Say Farewell to the First National Theatre

The National Theatre was built in 1966, and since it will close in a year for rebuilding, this year's performances are dedicated to saying farewell to the first National Theatre building. As part of this, on September 23, the National Theatre presented its 170th performance of Japanese classical dance in the Large Theatre with the *Buyo Meisaku Shu I* (*Masterpieces of Traditional Japanese Dance I*). The

program began with the Kiyomoto piece *Shiki Sambaso* (*Okina with the Flowers of the Four Seasons*), with Onoe Bokusetsu as the Okina, Onoe Yukari as the Senzai and Onoe Kikunojo as the Sanbaso. Second was the Gidayu piece *Oshichi*, with Inoue Yasuko as the girl prepared to burn down the city of Edo for the sake of love. Third was the Tokiwazu piece *Awa Mochi* (*The Millet Dumpling Peddlers*), with Nishikawa Senyoichi as Kinehachi, Bando Tomona as Ousu, Mizuki Sensho as a *torioi* female street musician, Fujima Toka as a woman from an archery stall, Hananomoto Kotobuki as a peddler of *fukujuso* spring blossoms and Nishikawa Shinsho as a peddler of *yomena* greens. The program concluded with the Nagauta piece *Kurozuka* (*The Black Mound: The Demoness of the Adachi Plain*), with Hanayagi Juraku as Yukei Ajari, Hanayagi Genkuro as the mountain priest Yamatobo, Hanayagi Suzuhiko as the mountain priest Sanukibo, Hanayagi Jutaichiro as the luggage porter Tarogo and Hanayagi Motoi as the old woman Iwate who is actually the demoness of the Adachi plain.

The performance assembled the top veteran dancers, and they were all appropriately cast, for a stable, dependable program. However, although the performance was billed as *Masterpieces of Traditional Japanese Dance*, only the first piece, *Shiki Sanbaso*, could be said to be pure Japanese classical dance. The other two dances originated in the kabuki theatre and required acting skills as well as pure dancing ability. Hanayagi Motoi in *Kurozuka* has acting skills to rival kabuki actors, but the same is not necessarily true for the other dancers in the program. I think that one of the key challenges for the National Theatre will be to plan programs that will make clear the essential differences between kabuki dance and Japanese classical dance.

Another performance in the farewell series was the National Theatre's 171st classical dance performance with *Mai no Kai - Keihan no Zashiki Mai* (*Traditional Kyoto-Osaka Dance*) (November 26, Small Theatre). The first part of the program beginning at 12 p.m. presented the Jiuta pieces *Neya no Ogi* (*Fan of the Bedchamber*) by Yoshimura Yukari, *Hayafune* (*The Swift Boat*) by Yamamura Waka, *Miyako Junitsuki* (*Twelve Months in Kyoto*) by Umemoto Sensho, *Yashima* based on the Noh play about the ghosts of the battles between the Genji and Heike clans by Inoue Mameka, the Kamigata Uta piece *Fumitsuki* (*The Seventh*

Month) by Umemoto Umesakuya and the Jiuta piece *Kigisu (The Pheasant)* by Yoshimura Kisho and Yoshimura Teruyuki. The second part of the program beginning at 3.30 p.m. presented the Jiuta pieces *Cha Ondo (The Tea Dance)* by Yoshimura Nao, *Kantan*, based on a Noh play about a man who experiences all the glories of the world in a brief dream and awakens to the emptiness of worldly success by Inoue Yasuko, *Naniwa Junitsuki (Twelve Months in Osaka)* by Yamamura Tomogoro, the Kamigata Uta piece *Kiri no Ame (Misty Rain)* by Umemoto Umekinhana and the Jiuta pieces *Masazuki (The New Year)* by Yamamura Hikari and *Tamatori Ama (The Diving Girl Retrieves the Jewel)* by Inoue Yachiyo based on a Noh play about a girl who brings back a precious jewel from the undersea palace of the dragon god for the sake of her son but at the cost of her life. There were representatives of all the major schools of Mai presenting a wide range of things to enjoy, with Yoshimura Nao from the Yoshimura school displaying a fresh charm. The Umemoto school was represented by its head Umemoto Sensho (the dance name of Kabuki actor Kataoka Ainosuke), Umemoto Umesakuya and Umemoto Umekinhana, showing that its tradition is being properly transmitted to the next generation. Yamamura Tomogoro from the Yamamura school skillfully conveyed the light and easygoing feeling of the city of Osaka, and Yamamura Hikari evoked the felicitous atmosphere of New Year through a loving couple. Inoue Mameka from the Inoue school served as a fine example of the art of a Gion *geiko*, and Inoue Yachiyo's dance could be said to be sheer perfection and was very profound.

In addition to these two programs, to commemorate the 55th anniversary of its opening, the National Theatre produced *Suodori no Sekai (Traditional Japanese Dance without Adornment)* (March 5, Small Theatre). Although much of the repertoire of Japanese classical dance comes from kabuki theatre, the most distinctive type of dance might be *suodori*, where the dancer performs without a stage set or costume and expresses everything in a formal kimono with minimal props except, most importantly, a dance fan. This means that the performer must express everything through pure dance movement. In this presentation, the use of mime in kabuki dance was explained, and then they showed how it is transformed in *suodori*. For a presentation titled *Suodori no Sekai*, this emphasis on

kabuki dance could hardly be said to have focused on the essence of *suodori*. It is sad that this was such a missed opportunity. Also, it presented *Hanagata – Meisaku Buyo Kansho Kai (Star and Masterpiece Traditional Japanese Dance Performance)* (July 23, Small Theatre), and all the dances were originally from kabuki. It's almost as though the producers at the National Theatre believe that Japanese classical dance consists only of kabuki dance, which if true would be extremely unfortunate. They must emphasize the unique qualities of Japanese classical dance much more.

3. Performances Sponsored by the Buyo Kyokai

Like the previous year, the major dance recital of Buyo Kyokai (Japanese Classical Dance Association), scheduled for February 19–20 in the Large Theatre of the National Theatre, was canceled due to the pandemic. But Buyo Kyokai did produce three performances. It sponsored *Nihon Buyo – Sono Tasai na Hyogen (The Diverse Expressions of Nihon Buyo)* (October 21, Kanze Noh Theatre) and *Todoke Asu e – Keisho no Wadachi – Nihon Buyo Koen (Classical Japanese Dance Recital – Bring the Path of the Transmission of Tradition for the Sake of Tomorrow)* (October 12, National Theatre, Small Theatre). Then, to feature a new work, as the fifth presentation of Mirai-za – “Sai,” it presented *Ginga Tetsudo 999 Hitori no Shonen no Saichi no Monogatari (Galaxy Express 999 – The Story of a Boy’s Wisdom)* (June 3–5, National Theatre, Small Theatre).

In the performance at the Kanze Noh Theatre, the geisha of the Shinbashi district appeared and gave a simple introduction to the songs and dances of the geisha districts and dance movements. Then there were two pieces by Japanese classical dancers, *Yoichi no Dan – Sosaku Kyogen Gakari (Yoichi’s Verse: Creative Kyogen Opening)*. The choreography was by Onoe Bokusetsu, the music was composed by Handa Junko and the flute and percussion was arranged by Tosha Rosen. The dancers were Hanayagi Genkuro, Nishikawa Senshigero and Hanayagi Shue. The program also featured Onoe Yukari in *Fuji Musume (The Wisteria Maiden)*. In the performance at the National Theatre, Small Theatre, the main piece was *Odetta Ultimate Love – from Swan Lake*, choreographed by Hanayagi Tokijukyo. There were also two rare Nagauta pieces choreographed by

Hanayagi Suketaro, *Kanjaku Keisei* (The Courtesan), a portrait of a courtesan based on the version originally performed by kabuki actor Nakamura Kanjaku and *Futatsu Domoe* (*The Double-Swirled Crest*). The pieces were performed by groups of female dancers. I was very happy that both performances inspired hope for the future.

The new piece was a staging of Matsumoto Leiji's famous comic. I imagine that it was intended to show the contemporary relevance of Japanese classical dance. But I find that I must agree with what the designer of Japanese gardens Tatsui Takenosuke wrote in the monthly *Nihon Buyo* (v. 78, no. 8): "After watching it, it made me think that I had even less of an idea of the image that present day dancers have of Japanese classical dance than before. It even made me think that maybe the best thing would be to just take Japanese classical dance and dismantle the whole thing." I believe that the problem is probably that contemporary classical dancers are trying for expressions that are the total opposite of the techniques that they have been taught. I can't help but think that they have discarded the goal of totally expressing the lyrics of the music with their entire bodies.

4. Activities of Veteran Classical Japanese Dancers

At the *Onoe Kikune Momoju o Iwau Kai* (Recital to Celebrate Onoe Kikune's 100th Year) (July 21, Kioi Small Hall), Onoe Kikune and Onoe Bokusetsu danced the Tomei piece *Kono Kimi* ('My Lord,' - the Japanese title uses a poetic word for bamboo) in choreography by Bokusetsu. Even though there were no stage costumes or adornments of any kind, the two performers had a unique presence. They evoked the bamboo of the title vividly, suggesting their straight and upright lives and careers as dancers over long years.

There was a recital of *suodori* on April 18 at the Small Theatre of the National Theatre to commemorate the recognition of Nishikawa Senzo as a Person of Cultural Merit. Senzo danced *Matsu no Midori* (*The Green of the Pine*). His use of the dance fan was extremely precise and careful and seemed to express his long years of devotion to Japanese classical dance and his passion for dance itself. This is something unimaginable in the West.

5. As Always, Many Commemorative Recitals Were Produced by Dance Schools

There were many recitals put on by schools of dance including the following: *Shosei Fujima Murasaki Jusan Kaiki Tsuizen – Sandaime Fujima Murasaki Shumei Hiro Murasaki-ha Fujima-Ryu Buyo Kai* (Fujima School Murasaki Branch Dance Recital Commemorating the Thirteenth Anniversary of the Death of Fujima Murasaki I and the Name Taking of Fujima Murasaki III) (January 30, National Theatre, Large Theatre), *Nidaimo Saruwaka Kiyokata Sanju Kinen Dai 74 Kai Saruwaka Kai* (Recital Commemorating the 80th Year of Saruwaka Kiyokata II – The 74th Saruwaka Recital) (April 23, National Theatre, Large Theatre), *Hossoku 70 Shunen Kinen Dai 58 Kai Seiha Wakayagi-Ryu Teiki Koen* (58th Regular Recital of the Seiha Wakayagi School Commemorating the 70th Anniversary of its Founding) (August 20, National Theatre, Large Theatre), *Bando Kai Soritsu 100 Shunen Kinen Kai* (Recital Commemorating the 100th Anniversary of the Bando Kai) (September 17–18, National Theatre, Large Theatre), *Wakayagi Ryota Aratame Wakayagi Kichiryozo Nabirome Koen Wakayagi Kai* (Wakayagi School Recital Commemorating the Name Taking of Wakayagi Ryota to Wakayagi Kichiryozo) (November 20, National Theatre, Small Theatre) and *Shichisei Nakamura Shikan Junen-Sai Jakusei Kai* (The Jakusei Recital Commemorating the 10th Anniversary of the Passing of Nakamura Shikan VII) (November 27, National Theatre, Large Theatre). Among them, particularly noteworthy was Fujima Murasaki I's granddaughter Fujima Sawako taking the name Fujima Murasaki III as a Japanese classical dancer. She commemorated this by dancing the Nagauta piece *Kyoganoko Musume Dojoji* (The Girl at Dojoji Temple) and by playing Shizuka Gozen in the Kiyomoto piece *Michiyuki Hatsune no Tabi* (The First Birdsong of Spring) with her older brother Fujima Takahiko, who took the name of Fujima Kakeru on this occasion, as Tadanobu. This was the birth of a star, who is both an actress and a Japanese classical dancer, and we can expect great things from her in the future.

6. Fresh Shoots for the Future in Groups of Young Dancers

Fresh shoots could be seen in *Reimei no Kai* (New Dawn Group) (January 29,

Nihonbashi Koukaido), featuring dancers from the school of Fujima headed by Fujima Kanemon, Fujima Yukihiko, Fujima Hirotaro, Fujima Toyohiko and Fujima Naozo, and in *Dai Yonkai Soten Koen (4th Blue Sky Concert)* (August 24, Tsukishima Shakai Kyoiku Kaikan), featuring the same Fujima Naozo together with Hanayagi Kiina and collaborating with traditional musicians. The first performance focused on developing the techniques of *suodori*, while the second sought to find the appeal of Japanese classical dance through connections with a wide variety of traditional performing arts. The fact that Fujima Naozo is a member of both these groups promises great things in the future.

Also, there were performances by veteran artists like Hanayagi Sonokisuke's *Nihon Buyo Taku no Tsudoi* (March 6, National Theatre, Small Theatre), the *6th Hanayagi Tamaito / Izumi Yuki Recital Tamayu no Kai* (November 8, National Theatre, Small Theatre) and Nishikawa Zuisen's *Toki no Kai* (November 13, Cerulean Tower Noh Theatre). These performances had the high level of technique and creativity that is worthy of artists with their experience. You could say that these are the people keeping the Japanese classical dance world alive today.

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7. Topics

In 2021, Nishikawa Senzo was recognized as a Person of Cultural Merit, but this year, there were no appropriate candidates for the Agency for Cultural Affairs Art Award or New Face Award from the world of Japanese classical dance. In part, this is due to the rise of ballet in Japan, but it can also be said that this is because Japanese classical dance, here including Ryukyu Buyo and regional traditional performances, has not gone far enough in finding the essence of the Japanese way of using the human body for artistic expression. In 2022, Futabakai of Yamamura school dance won the prize for excellence in the National Arts Festival. From next year, the Arts Festival Prize will no longer be awarded. This marks the end of the role of this prize.

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Nihon buyo (Japanese classical dance) critic. Born in 1944 in Sendai and graduated from the theatre division of the literature department of Waseda University majoring in kabuki. Worked for a publishing house as an editor for such periodicals as *Okinawa Performing Arts*, the quarterly journal *Folk Performing Arts*, and the monthly magazine, *Japanese Music and Classical Dance*. To explore the art of physical expression, he became a critic and is a member of advisory committees for institutions, including the Japanese Cultural Agency and the Society for the Advancement of the Arts in Japan. In 2016, his book *Critique: History of Japanese Physical Expression—Ancient, Medieval and Early Modern Period* (Nihon Buyo-sha) was published.

(Translation: Mark Oshima)