

Concerning the Japanese Kabuki Stage

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Abstract. The depiction of the performance space in Japanese Kabuki theatre illustrations has been influenced by the Western perspective. The use of Western perspective in Kabuki drawings differs from the way in which it is employed in depictions of Western theatres. A characteristic of the Kabuki theatre is the wide stage front, which opens up on the sides.

This research paper considers the special characteristics of the traditional Japanese Kabuki stage. It analyses *dougu-cho* (set drawings) which are backdrop paintings for Kabuki set designs. Perspective drawing is employed in *dougu-cho* drawings, which feature the entire stage. Therefore, the picture plane of backdrop drawings is quite wide. In Kabuki backdrop paintings there are often several vanishing points on one picture plane. As a result, the audience does not perceive a unity of space on stage. Since the point of views is not limited to a single one, from whatever position the audience sees the stage it appears slightly wrapped or contorted. In addition, the direction of the *hanamichi* (runway) contributes to the ambiguity of visual space. The Kabuki audience sees the stage like a painting, the scenery on the stage confuses the orientation of audience. This effect encourages an interactive form of viewing the performance. Illusion unites the audience and the performers.

Keywords: perspective drawing, backdrop painting, Kabuki

MSC 2000: 51N05

1. Introduction

W. SHAKESPEARE wrote in ‘Hamlet’, “*as t’were, the mirror up to nature*”. He represented a diversity of human life in his plays. Plays are not organized by performers and drama alone, the stage design, lighting, music, and the theatrical space also play a very important role. Moreover, a play becomes more vivid with the reaction of the audience. A play is based on the expression of the human body, and it unites the fields of literature, music, painting, sculpture, and architecture. In Western realism a theatrical performance represents the real world on stage. The lines, actions of the performers, theatre sets, and costumes of the play

are very close to the feeling of reality. The method of perspective drawing developed during the Italian Renaissance was used in the theatre to represent a realistic space.

However, the Japanese traditional theatre known as Kabuki, is not a realistic play that is performed to drama, music, and dance. In Kabuki, it is not necessary to present the real world, rather it aims to reveal universality and humanity and to amuse the audience. Early on Kabuki the performances imitated the *Noh* theatre, however, gradually over a long period of time the Kabuki theatre developed a specific form of stage design, called *Joshiki*. Once the program of a play was decided, the first step of putting together the performance was the creation of the *dougu-cho* set drawing, which shows the theatre from the front. The *dougu-cho* is based on the design of the *joshiki* stage. The stage set is designed so that the audience may enjoy the ‘picturesque’ in each scene. This research paper considers the *characteristic aspects of theatre and backdrop depictions* in the *dougu-cho* drawings of Kabuki.

2. Western Theatre

In the ancient Greek Theatre, the audience looked down upon the central plane of the round stage. This round theatre features a stage on the ground level. The stage was wider than a 180-degree angle, and there was a wall at the back of the stage. This tradition had been handed down until the Roman period, at which time the platform stage was adopted. From distant seats the platform stage was viewed by looking downward, while from seats close to the stage the audience was looking upward. This style was adopted in most Western theatres. The Roman theatre incorporates architectural elements such as columns, windows and doors on the wall of the upper stage; the stage functions as scenery. However, the scenery is not always related to the drama itself.

During the Renaissance, the term ‘*perspective*’ was applied to the stage set. In describing a comedy that was performed at Palazzo Ducale, Urbino, in 1513, Baldassare CASTIRIONE (1478–1529) related that “*the stage represents a beautiful city with streets, churches, towers, those streets and buildings are three-dimensional. Moreover, the presentation of the city was drawn precisely by the perspective method. There was a building that was shaped of an octagonal pyramid. . .*”¹ This method of perspective drawing was applied to the scene painting, and it connects to the drawing in *Cita ideals* in the National Gallery at March. *De pictura* by ALBERTI (1407–72) was already published in 1436; thus the stage painting was influenced by perspective painting methods. Sebastiano SERLIO (1475–1554) integrated his knowledge of Greek and Roman theatre architecture and theoretical drawing methods of perspective drawing in *Regole generli architettura, Lib II. Prospetiva* written in 1545. And architect Andrea PALLADIO (1508–80) attempted to reproduce the theatrical set of the ancient Greek and Roman theatre as a result of VITRURIUS’ research. After the development of the perspective method, the expression of theatrical scenes was influenced by the expression of painting and became more real and eloquent. In the seventeenth century, backdrop painting, which was drawn by the perspective drawing method, was applied to sliding scenery panels, and the style became very popular in Italian-style theatre throughout Europe. Reality and speedy development of the stage was popular at the time and the audience preferred to sit far away from the stage in order to better experience the effects. Until the mid-nineteenth century designs of theatre sets were produced using the method of perspective, and stage designs were extravagant. However, an innovation movement in the theatre world took hold after the

¹HASHIMOTO showed a letter from CASTIRIONE on *Perspective and Theatre Play* [1], p. 21.

mid-19th century, resulting in increasingly symbolic and simplified stage sets, which were less realistic.

3. The stage of Kabuki

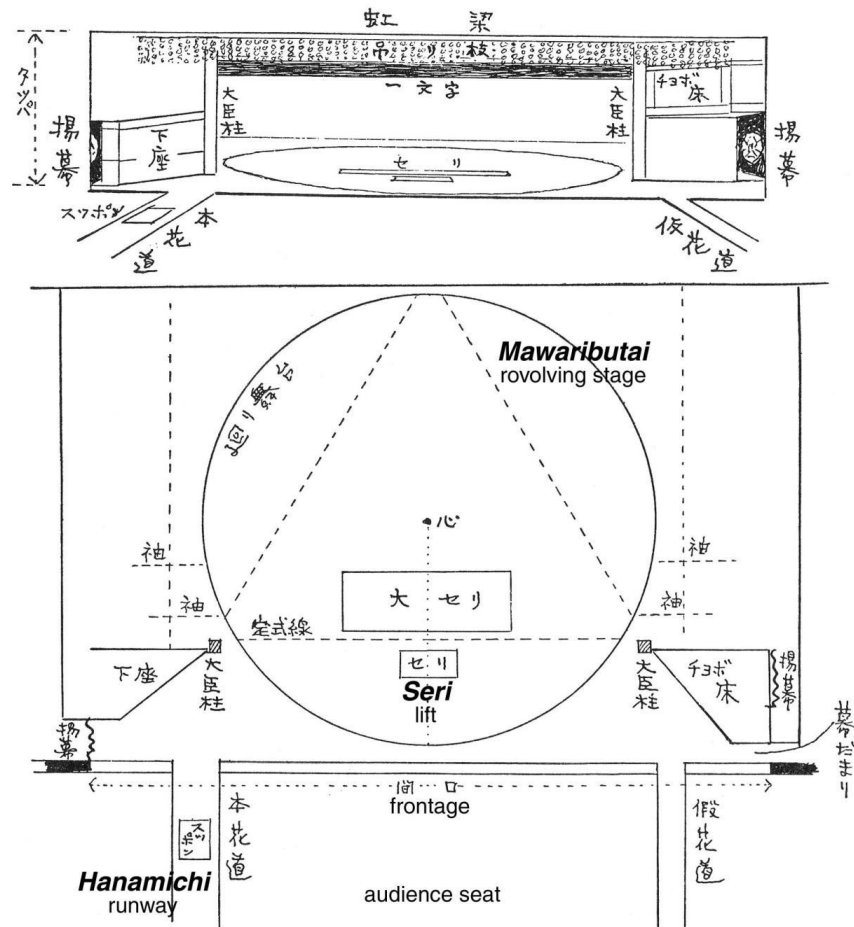


Figure 1: Plan and elevation of the stage at the *Kabuki-za*

Western theatre and opera are “*performing art*” forms, however, Kabuki is usually classified as “*theatrical play or entertainment*”. Kabuki is thought to have first been performed at Shijo-Gawara, Kyoto in 1603 by IZUMO NO OKUNI, who danced and sang the “Kabuki *odori* (dance)”.² Initially, Kabuki was performed outdoors. The Kabuki stage imitated that of the *Noh* theatre. The Kabuki stage had a gable roof structure, a 5.4-meter square stage, and a *hashigakari* hallway. *Noh*, a highly spiritual form of drama, is often abstract in its expression. On the other hand, Kabuki is more specific in its expression. This fundamental difference between *Noh* and Kabuki led to different approaches in the stage designs. During the mid-17th century, the *tukibutai* (apron stage) was adapted to the front of the 5.4-meter square stage and a draw curtain and large scenery sets were also put into use. In the latter half of the 17th century, the dimensions of the Kabuki stage grew to 9 meters and the theatre buildings expanded to 18 meters by 27 meters. The roof over the audience seats came to be

²In 1603, ELIZABETH I died and SHAKESPEARE just has finished writing ‘*Hamlet*’. The *Edo period* just has started in Japan at that time.

built by wood. The *hanamichi* was installed on both sides of the stage front. The structure of scenery sets known as *seri* (lift) and *mawaributai* (revolving stage) were invented. The stage design came to resemble that of present day Kabuki. During the *Edo period* Kabuki became very popular and the theatres subsequently became larger.

After the opening of Japan to the West in 1868, other aspects of stage design were influenced by Western stage styles. A new lighting system made night performances possible. In 1889, a Western-style building, the *Kabuki-za*, opened and the position of the audience seats changed from the floor to chairs. While the architecture of large theatres after *Meiji period* was Western in style, the Japanese style was maintained for the stage. A compromise was made between Japanese and Western approaches to design. The primary characteristic of the *Kabuki-za* design is the proportion of the wide stage front to the low ceiling. The expansion of the audience seats made the stage long at the sides. The proscenium style in which sections of the stage were removed was established. The stage surface is a Western-style, picture-frame stage, but with proportionately longer sides. Another characteristic is the maintenance of Japanese stage elements such as the *seri*, *mawaributai* and *hanamichi*. However, this stage structure determines the depth of the stage; the space where performers actually act is very narrow. For example, the front of the *Kabuki-za* today is 27 meters wide and the diameter of the revolving stage is 18 meters. When the two sides of the revolving stage are set back to back, the depth of the stage becomes 9 meters – half the original space. The stage measures: 27 meters along the front, 6.3 meters high and 4.2 meters deep. The stage is therefore, longer than deep and quite flat (Fig. 1).

4. *dougu-cho* drawings

When the program of the play is decided, the next step in the production of the play is to create *dougu-cho* set drawings, which view the theatre from the front. *dougu-cho* are based on certain established rules known as *joshiki*. According to these principles, drawings have to be made for each play, even standard classical programs. When the *dougu-cho* is completed, large scenery sets are created according to the overall rendering of the design as well as the details. *Dougu-cho* are color drawings that show a plan of the whole stage from the front view using perspective drawing methods in a 1/50 scale. This paper will research some drawings in *Kabuki Joshiki Butai Zu-shuu* by Ryo TANAKA (1884–1974)³.

- **Sugawara Denju Tenarai Kagami** (Fig. 2)

There is the scene of the mountains on the left side of the stage. The stage is based on the classical style platform⁴ featuring a noren curtain, clay wall and additional stage of a typical farmhouse.

When the lines of the depth are extended, they do not converge at one point. However, it seems that there is a visual center (Vc) in the center of the stage, the distance of eye is short and the visual field is small. The horizontal line (HL) is positioned half the height of the picture plane.

³It was shown about TANAKA [3]. He was involved with producing stage sets and backdrop paintings at the department of scenery at Imperial Theatre at Tokyo after graduating the department of Western painting at the Tokyo School of Art. In 1919, he travelled to study European theatre art with a famous actor, Ichikawa ENNOSUKE II and others, and he was influenced by a lot of Western system on theatre.

⁴It is a regulation when producing a platform stage above the stage. There are three kind of height.

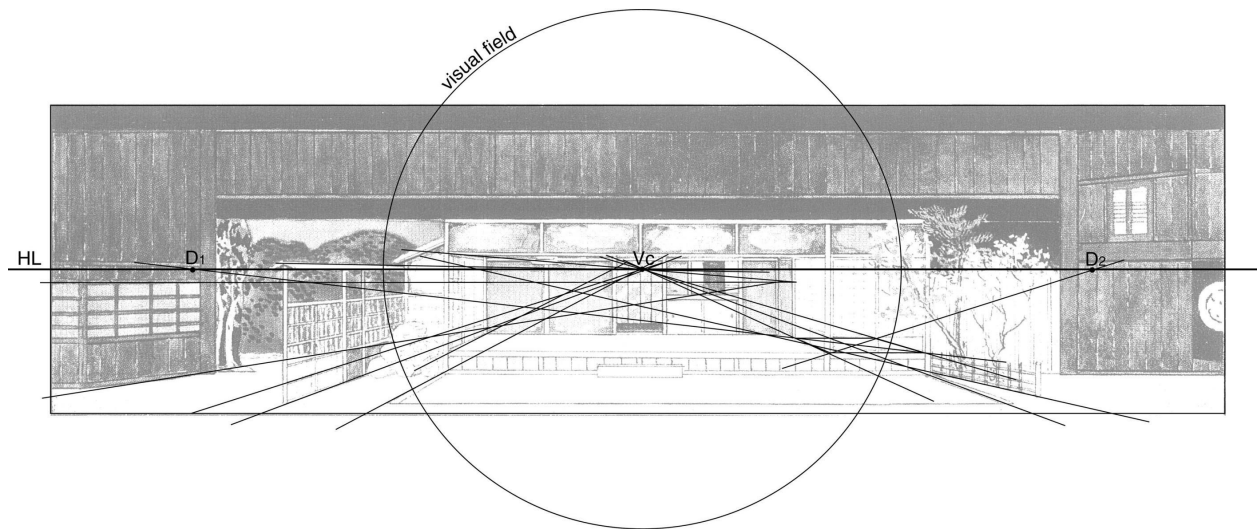


Figure 2: *Sugawara Denju Tenarai Kagami*, the scene of *Hyakushou Shiratayu Jukyo*

- **Soga Moyo-Tateshino Goshō Some** (Fig. 3)

This is a meeting place of two leading characters, one of the most popular Kabuki scenes. The city scenery is drawn in a dynamic manner using methods of perspective drawing. The relationship with *ukie*⁵, which were very popular in the 18th century, can be seen here on the expression.

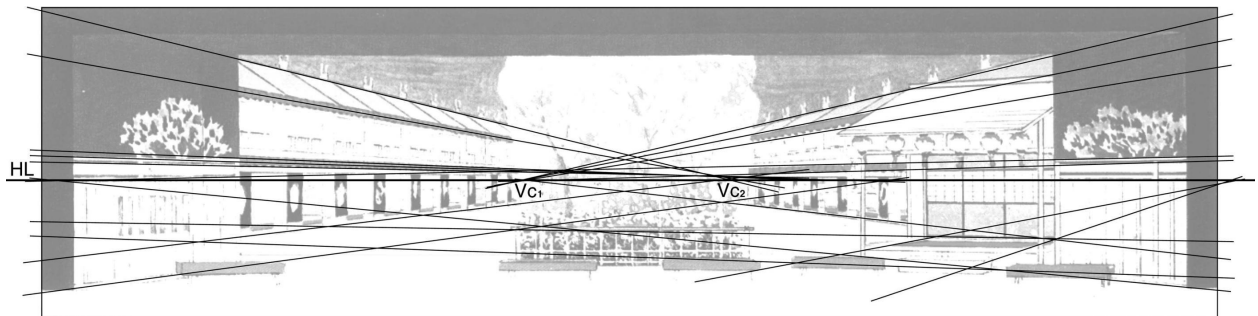


Figure 3: *Soga Moyo-Tateshino Goshō Some*, the scene of *Gojo-saka Deai*

Analysis of the drawn picture reveals two vanishing points for each row of houses along the street. However, the two vanishing points are hidden in the blooming cherry blossoms. The wooden walls on the sides of the lower stage face toward the audience seats and are drawn with an open angle. Each has a vanishing point. Furthermore, the platform is not placed with the right angle toward the stage. This is not accurately depicted scenery. The horizontal line (HL) is placed slightly below the middle point of the screen.

- **Akegarasu Yume no Awayuki** (Fig. 4)

This shows the arrangement of a courtesans room. The setting is the second floor of a guestroom. There is a hallway on the left side of the stage and snow-covered trees can be seen over the handrail. The storyteller occupies a neighbors second floor room.

⁵It was shown by the author [2] that for *ukie* works the artists utilized a Western method of linear perspective which was introduced to Japan during the mid-eighteenth century.

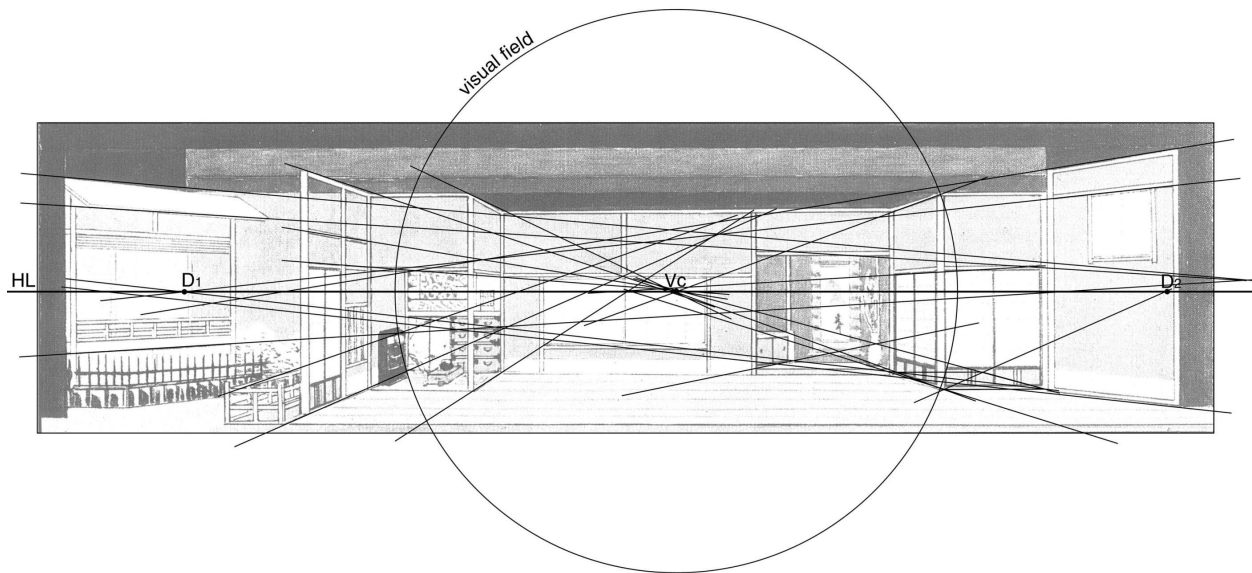


Figure 4: *Akegarasu Yume no Awayuki*, the scene of *Yamanaya Urazato no Heya*

This drawing is not based on the method of perspective accuracy. The horizontal line (HL) is placed slightly below the middle point of the stage. The right wall of the room opens toward the audience while the bedroom wall furthers back. The audience seated at the sides is able to see the stage very well; this is one of the aims of the stage design. The distance point is created by a vanishing point on the right side, so that the distance of the eye is short.

- **Imoseyama Onna Teikin** (Fig. 5)

This is the sorrowful love story of daughter and son of two feuding families living on either side of the Yoshino River. It is a tragic love story similar to *Romeo and Juliet*.

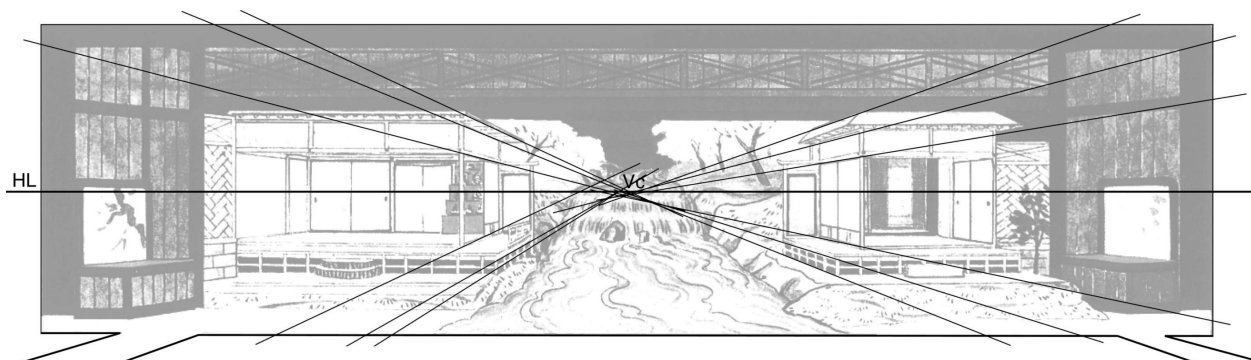


Figure 5: *Imoseyama Onna Teikin*, the scene of *Yamato Yoshinogawa Yakata*

There is a large-scale stage. A platform serves as a house on both sides of the stage and the Yoshino River with ramp decoration⁶ runs along the middle of the stage. Both sides of the *hanamichi* act as a riverbank. The audience is seated in the middle of the river that appears to be running from the stage. The lovers, separated by the great river,

⁶The down slope floor or ramp toward the audience seats. Using the method of perspective drawing to decorate the stage setting.

talk to each other from either side of the *hanamichi*. The use of the *hanamichi* lends greater depth to the stage, and the audience members seated closer to the stage more readily experiences this sense of depth.

The *dougu-cho* drawing is not accurately presented according to perspective projection. However, on the blank space of the *dougu-cho*, additional descriptions were written. These notes, based on the *joshiki*, play a role in the completed stage drawing.

The atmosphere of the drawn pictures has the following three characteristics.

- (1) A horizontal line divides the stage in half at the middle of the picture plane.
- (2) When there is one vanishing point it is placed at the middle of stage. When there are two vanishing points they are placed symmetrically at both sides of the stage.
- (3) The distance of eye is short and the visual field is very small.

The creation of a *dougu-cho* drawing begins with the vanishing point. Later, the scenery is added to the *dougu-cho*. A close-up of the scenery shows that the horizontal line on the painted drop divides the stage into halves, so that the height of eye is high. Symmetrical vanishing points pattern the background scenery, creating symbolic scenery.

5. Scene-painting and the audience

The audience seated in the front views the stage by looking upward, while the audience in the back looks down upon the stage. When observing the horizontal line of the scene painting, the height of eye does not correspond with the real view. For example, the background scenery of a field or ocean is presented so that the plain appears to rise up from the perspective of the audience seated in the front while it seems to drop down a slope from the vantage of the audience seated in the back. The distance of eye is short, so both sides of the stage are out of the visual field. Also, the use of several vanishing points allows the audience to see a wide scenery. The view is not fixed to one point, so the presented space is warped from every point of view. The stage direction of the *hanamichi* encourages the distortion of the stage. As a result, there should be a united sense of space on the stage. However, these various viewpoints produce unexpected effects that contribute to the appreciation of Kabuki. This allows the audience to see the stage as a world of fiction from everywhere in the theatre; each scene can be seen as a fragment of the story.

Usually one or two short stories of a long drama are performed at a single Kabuki show. As most audience members today do not understand the classical words that are sung, it is necessary to know the plot of the story. Kabuki is generally appreciated for its audio-visual effects, the gestures and facial expressions of the performers, and the sense of time in space that it imparts.

Conclusion

In the West the theatre was an ideal place to represent human life realistically, thus the theatre stage was built through the use of perspective drawing. In the Western theatre, the stage and the audience seats were separated so that the audience could view the stage as a picture within a frame from an objective viewpoint.

A pre-requisite of Kabuki, on the other hand, is that the audiences understand the story and appreciate the ‘picturesque’ in the stage set. An aim of Kabuki was to express the

universality of human life. The line between the audience and the stage is ambiguous in Kabuki, which lacks realistic scenery. If the audience recognizes a picture-like stage, the audience would experience a kind of illusion — as if entering the play. Kabuki audiences enjoy the play not as observers, but as participants.

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Received July 28, 2002