In contemporary Japan, kabuki enjoys the status and government patronage of a valued national heritage. Enconced in a National Theater, guided by Living National Treasures, with television appearances, international tours and worldwide acclaim, its existence, if not its popularity, has been assured for some time to come. But kabuki has not long been the recipient of governmental largess. During its more vibrant days it was criticized as decadent, even criminal, and, while barely tolerated, subjected to restrictions and economically disadvantageous situations which only the hardest and most popular of entertainments could have survived.

Many analyses of the peculiar status of kabuki in Tokugawa Japan attribute it to tolerance by the bakufu in spite of its superficially critical form of expression. Presumably it was tolerated because it did not challenge any of the basic tenets of Tokugawa rule. While there is a good deal of truth in this explanation (and it is certainly true that chōnin culture, at least by the Genroku period, had begun to adopt, in fact eagerly embrace, many of the samurai ideals), there were elements of the chōnin lifestyle and ideology which inevitably contradicted those of the samurai and worked slowly, albeit unspoken and (perhaps to many) unconsciously, toward the upheaval of Tokugawa social order and a more modern form of government and society in Japan. I think these elements can be clearly seen in the conception of individual action as illustrated in the quintessential dramatic efflorescence of chōnin culture, kabuki.

Historians of culture and of drama have often wondered at the variety and number of government edicts and activities designed to control, curtail, or suppress kabuki throughout all its stages of growth and development. But even more surprising to many has been the relative laxity with which they were enforced, and the relative ease with which the popular theater industry as a whole, if not in every case, avoided prosecution for breaking government injunctions and any ill effects from their own energetic willfulness. Regulations concerning theater hours, design, furnishings, use, edicts controlling costumes and equipment, laws about the content and performance of plays, and restrictions on the movements and lifestyle of actors and their fraternization, or worse, with members of the upper classes of society: all were broken with considerable frequency, occasional audacity, and consistent impunity.

A number of possible explanations for this somewhat surprising leniency on the part of the bakufu have been advanced. The most frequently encountered is the rationalization given by the bakufu itself for allowing the existence of popular theater. According to this view, the kabuki theater, together with the specifically designated pleasure quarter (kurēwa 魚町, but surely kabuki belongs to the “pleasure quarters” in the broadest sense of this term), was grudgingly tolerated by the morally conservative, Confucian-influenced bakufu as a reprehensible and insidious institution which was, nevertheless (regardless of the moral qualifications of the shōgunate to administer the government and set a good example for all Japanese people), a necessary instrument for the pacification of the townsmen and the diversion of their surplus energies from socially more harmful activities.

This may contribute to our understanding of why kabuki was not completely suppressed, despite its contravention of officially sanctioned Confucian ethics. Nevertheless it leaves one wondering why the bakufu permitted such a large number of relatively flagrant violations of i attempts to control this dangerous threat to public morals. By steering kabuki away from politically sensitive topics and isolating it physically and socially, the bakufu had hoped to reduce its evil effects on sol citizens. The enormous popularity of kabuki, the individual whimp of shōguns, or perhaps practical limits on the government’s ability to enforce its own regulations are possible, but at best only partial, explanation. Thus many historians have arrived at the conclusion that kabuki was tolerated because it did not pose a fundamental threat to Tokugawa social and political order.

To find an example of this type of thinking we may turn to Ka-Shōchī’s History of Japanese Literature. Commenting on the paucity of intellectual content exhibited by kabuki plays, the limitations of dialogu and the lack of universal appeal or applicability (all of these characteristic of intellectual interest and severely restricts the plot’s rationalization and thus the externalization of emotion.

This limitation of dialogue to an expression of specific emotions under specific circumstances robs the plot of intellectual interest and severely restricts characterization. The character of Ōboishi Yuranosuke 大島由良之助, the leader of the faithful forty-seven rōnin, is not of a complexity that requires him to re-examine the purpose of revenge. Sugawara Michizane 菅原道真 [in Sugawara denjū tenarai no kagami 菅原伝授手習鏡] and Yoshitsune [in Yoshitsune senbonzakura 義経千本桜] have no personalities as such but are merely cases of misfortune. The faithful retainers who frequently appear in kabuki are often torn between their duty to their lord and their personal feelings—but not one of them is moved by this personal emotional experience to criticize or re-examine the existing social order. The strain between the exterior rational order and the interior emotional needs never leads to the interiorization of the rational order, nor to the rationalization and thus the externalization of emotion. No confrontation arises between interpretations of the law derived from differing personal and emotional experience.¹

Of the villainous "heroes" of the later, more decadent kabuki, Kato writes:

"Kabuki at its peak produced heroes that were in effect egotistical villains who considered the ends justified any means. The definition of villainy depended on existing ethical values. In other words, the villain did not criticize or embody a criticism of the traditional social order but accepted it; his role was to produce a strong sensual stimulation within the given social and moral framework."  

Or again, of Tsurya Namboku’s 鶴屋南北 masterpiece of decadence, Tôkaidō Yotsuya kaidan 東海道四谷怪談, Kato writes, "The story is unconcerned with the overall conditions of society and remains completely a purely personal matter of those involved."  

Donald Shively, one of the earliest Western scholars to examine the nature and effect of government regulation on kabuki informs us that while the historical plays, or jidaimono 時代物, depict the events of an earlier era, they depict a moral system and feudal psychology ideally characteristic of the Tokugawa samurai class. Furthermore,  

[both the history and domestic dramas [sensamono 世話物] assume inevitable capitulation to the ethical code which governed society. Characters entangle themselves in nets of loyalties and obligations which come into conflict with unexpected personal desires or sympathetic impulses. The code tolerates no generosity of interpretation. The hero transgresses, fully resigned to pay with his life. The fairness of the code remains unquestioned."  

The basic assumption of these and other scholars is that the apparently reprobate nature of kabuki along with its numerous excesses and frequent violation of government proscriptions were overlooked by a morally and financially conservative political leadership because the popular theater not only refrained from contravening the underlying moral values of the ruling class, but in fact strengthened and propagated these values among the potentially hostile chûnin.  

Aside from a number of apparent contradictions at the level of moral behavior, I believe the validity of such an argument concerning the underlying nature of the kabuki theater is somewhat called into question when one compares the form of theater patronized, and (under Tokugawa rule) largely monopolized, by the military aristocracy, namely the nô, with the kabuki of the townspeople. While kabuki borrowed heavily on the nô repertoire as it matured, the basic conceptions about action and the role which individual action plays in society and in history found in these two dramatic forms are fundamentally different. Kabuki represents a radically different view of the human condition and of history from that exhibited by nô. It is also instructive to examine the jôruri, or puppet theater, in this context. By definition a hybrid form of dramatic performance, jôruri exhibits many features characteristic of the medieval mind-set despite its development as a popular urban entertainment and the extremely important influence which kabuki exerted during the course of this development.

Let us begin, then, by looking at the manner in which individual action is conceived of and represented in these various forms of theater. In particular we shall view actions which emanate from a conscious process of decision making which in turn leads a character to purposive action of dramatic significance. Nô, being the earliest of these forms of drama to develop, demands our attention first.  

The action of a typical nô play is divided into two parts. In the first part the waki 職, usually a traveller (often a Buddhist priest on a pilgrimage), visits a site of historical or poetic significance, and encounters there a character, the shite 込仕, who relates a tragic tale which occurred at that very place; the shite then requests prayers for the repose of the soul of one who has died a violent or untimely death, and whose story has just been related. In performance the second part of the play is often separated from the first by an interlude which allows the shite to change from the costume of the maejite 前仕仕, or shite of the first half who relates the story, to that of the nochijite 後仕仕, or shite of the second half. In the second part the shite reappears in the guise of the ghost of the character whose death was so movingly related in the first part. The waki realizes that the shite has now assumed his her true form and recognizes this identity. The play ends with a moving reenactment of the action central to the play, and the disappearance of the ghost accompanied by pleas for endless prayers. A chorus often participates in the retelling of events, taking over descriptive and narrative passages from shite and waki both, sometimes speaking in their voices, sometimes as narrators.  

Plays structured in this manner are known as fukushiki mugen nô. 复式夢幻 or bipartite dream plays, the entire performance being in many cases interpreted as a dream seen by the waki.  

The emotional intensity and reserved beauty of these plays can be very moving, and the structure is unquestionably very dramatic, often reaching a feverish pitch near the end as the nochijite reenacts a battle in frenzied dance. But what of the action of the play, and, more importantly, the portrayal of action in these plays? Four important characteristics make themselves apparent. 1) The activity of greatest theatrical and narrative interest is recalled or retold within the framework of the play. 2) Little, if any, attention is given to the decision to act and the manner in which that decision was made. 3) The narrative immediacy of the retelling is undercut by the participation of the chorus in the activity of narration. 4) The most important philosophical and aesthetic movement of the play is the recognition by the waki of the identity of maejite and nochijite.

Before proceeding to elucidate and illustrate these points it will be
convenient to distinguish between two distinct narrative lines. The first involves the encounter between *waki* and *shite* and may be conveniently referred to as the diegetic action. The diegetic action of *fukushiki mugen nô* usually consists of the *waki's* encounter with the *shite*, the *shite's* narration of a bit of local and personal history, and the disappearance of the *shite*. But the tale retold and reenacted by the *shite* during the second part is usually a complete narrative itself, accompanied by appropriate gestures and movements on stage, and this may be referred to as the inner narrative. It is this inner narrative which constitutes the main interest of the piece, and from which the name of the play is almost invariably taken.

While structurally, ideologically and, perhaps most importantly, aesthetically important to the play as a whole, the diegetic action in which the *waki* and *shite* meet is of relatively little narrative interest. Emotional and dramatic intensity is focused on the inner action of the play. And yet, curiously enough, though certainly in keeping with the designation "dream play," this action does not take place before our eyes on stage. The antagonist or enemy of the *shite* never appears on stage in this type of play. Instead action which, in the diegetic time frame of pilgrim and ghost, has taken place wholly in the past is recounted and to a certain extent reenacted by the *shite*, with occasional assistance from *waki* and chorus. For these characters the action has no power to effect a significant change in their current circumstances; there are no longer dangers to overcome, trials to bear, decisions to make. The actions of the *shite*, however brave, honorable, poignant, or otherwise noteworthy, have the inevitability of history, and yet are one step removed from the diegetic consciousness of the stage figures, and yet another step removed from that of the audience seeing, not men or women in conflict, or the illusion thereof, but actors playing characters in static relationship who recount an old tale. Individual acts of a significant nature which depend on one's own will are not directly perceptible or capable of immediate apprehension in the performance, but are filtered through layers of memory and time, losing the affective quality of realistic sharp focus and taking on the gossamer sheen of aesthetic remove. The individual actor is enervated, removed from life and robbed of the power to materially affect his or her own destiny; the *shite* can only beg that prayers be said, and hope that the encounter will remain for more than a brief moment in the memory of those who have shared it.

To illustrate the effects of this separation of narrative and action let us look at *Kumasaka* 熊坂 by the playwright Zenchiku Ujinobu 金津谷寺町. A priest on pilgrimage from the Capital meets a local priest who begs his prayers for one who has died. The local priest turns out to be the robber Kumasaka no Chôhan 熊坂長範, killed by Ushiwakamaru 牛若丸 (Minamoto no Yoshitsune in his youth) when his band attacked the caravan of the gold trafficker Kichiji of the Third Ward 三条の吉次. When the *waki* (priest on pilgrimage) sees the *nochijire* (priest) appear in *Kumasaka*'s form, the *waki* says, "If you are Kumasaka himself, tell me the story of those days." Whereupon Kumasaka replies.

There was a merchant, a trafficker in gold called Kichiji of the Third Ward. Each year he brought together a great store, and loading it in bales carried it up country. And thinking to waylay him I summoned divers trusty men...5

As can be seen from this passage, little attention is paid to the played by the decision and will to act. The inner action of the play: occasioned by a decision mentioned only in passing. "And thinking: waylay him I summoned divers trusty men..." This is the only decision referred to in this description of Kumasaka's encounter w Ushiwakamaru, the only act of will, and yet it receives no attention. Like most action in *nô* plays, this decision proceeds naturally: ineluctably from the nature of the character: no development of character is evidenced, and no possibility of change in character admitted. The is determined not by force of will in conscious decision, but by instinct and nature. One other decision bearing on the course of this play mentioned, this in the diegetic action. Following a brief poem, the *waki* opens this play with the lines, "I am a priest from the Capital. I have never seen the East country, and now I am minded to go there on pilgrimage." This is the willful act of a priest, and leads to the encounter with Kumasaka's ghost, thereby giving occasion for this play. Yet this decision has nothing to do with the inner action of the play; furthermore all attention is deflected from it by crediting it to a simple whim of a priest ("and now I am minded to go there"). Moreover, it is removed from the possibility of direct perception by being placed in the drama past and related as having taken place before the action of the play even began. Once again no explanation need be given, as the decision (to on a pilgrimage) arises naturally and inevitably from the (static) nature of the character (a priest).

The inner action of *Kumasaka* is an highly dramatic and potent exciting encounter. But it is reenacted by the *nochijire* without benefit of an antagonist, and the narrative immediacy and authenticity is further undercut by the convention of sharing the narration among the *waki*, *shite*, and chorus. It is particularly interesting that the *waki*, to whom the story is being related and who should be ignorant of its narrative course (according to the premises of the play), is not behindhand in interjecting bits and pieces of the narration, and taking over from the *shite* at various points. The sources of action and meaning are effectively divorced.

To illustrate the effects of this separation of narrative and action let us look at *Kumasaka* 熊坂 by the playwright Zenchiku Ujinobu 金津谷寺町. A priest on pilgrimage from the Capital meets a local priest who begs his prayers for one who has died. The local priest turns out to be the robber Kumasaka no Chôhan 熊坂長範, killed by Ushiwakamaru 牛若丸 (Minamoto no Yoshitsune in his youth) when his band attacked the caravan of the gold trafficker Kichiji of the Third Ward 三条の吉次. When the *waki* (priest on pilgrimage) sees the *nochijire* appear in *Kumasaka*'s form, the *waki* says, "If you are Kumasaka himself, tell me the story of those days." Whereupon Kumasaka replies.

There was a merchant, a trafficker in gold called Kichiji of the Third Ward. Each year he brought together a great store, and loading it in bales carried his feet clanked on the boards of the bridge.

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6Ibid., p. 92.
Ushiwaka: And even before he saw him Ushiwaka gave a whoop of joy. "Some one has come," he cried, and hitching his cloak over his shoulder Took his stand at the bridge-side.

Benkei: Benkei discerned him and would have spoken.... But when he looked, lo! it was a woman's form! Then, because he had left the World, with troubled mind he hurried on.

Ushiwaka: Then Ushiwaka said, "I will make game of him," and as Benkei passed Kicked at the button of his halberd so that it jerked into the air.

Benkei: Ah! fool, I will teach you a lesson!

Chorus: Then Benkei while he retrieved his halberd Cried out in anger, "You shall soon feel the strength of my arm," and fell fiercely upon him. But the boy, not a jot alarmed. Stood his ground" have not been etherealized; don't they present a more cohesive view of purpose and action?

Let us then momentarily leave the rarefied atmosphere of the mugen nō and turn to genzai-mono. Surely one would expect tales of Yoshitsune and Benkei to be full of action and adventure, so we shall turn to Eboshi-ori 烏帽子折 by Miyamasu 宮増 (sixteenth century). This is in fact a genzai-mono version of the events portrayed in Kumasaka (formerly titled Genzai Kumasaka 現在熊坂) and therefore should provide an excellent contrast to what we have just discussed. Here we have no wandering priests or malignant ghosts. What then occasions the action of the play? Surprisingly it is once again a perfunctory decision made before the action of the play begins, and is based entirely on natural instinct as determined by our expectations of a two-dimensional character. In this case the merchant Kichiji begins the play with a poem; then follows,

I am Sanjō no Kichiji. I have now amassed a great store of treasure and with my brother Kichiroku am going to take it down to the East. Ho! Kichiroku, let us get together our bundles and start now.3

Even the decisions of the hero Ushiwaka are similarly perfunctory. He spots a messenger from the Palace of Rokuhara 六波羅殿 who has been sent to fetch him back to the Capital and immediately responds, "I must not let him know me. I will cut my hair and wear an eboshi, so that people may think I am an Eastern boy."9 And when he hears later that robbers are planning to attack Kichiji’s caravan that night, his reaction is equally predictable:

Kichiji: We have heard that robbers may be coming tonight. We were wondering what we should do...

Ushiwaka: Let them come in what force they will; yet if one scout soldier go to meet them, they will not stand their ground, though they be fifty mounted men.10

And what result arises from these decisions? In many cases it leads directly to a straightforward continuation of narrative. Take for example the decision to stand and fight against the robbers:

Chorus: And while he spake, evening passed to darkness. "Now is the time," he cried, "to show the world those arts of war that for many months and years upon the Mountain of Kurama I have rehearsed."

Then he opened the double-doors and waited there for the slow incoming of white waves.

1Ibid., p. 118.
3Ibid., p. 102.
4Ibid., p. 104.
5Ibid., p. 110.
There follows then a recounting, in the form of Kumasaka’s questions and the brigand’s answers, of the battle which has just taken place. In other cases the result is much the same. Let us take for example Ushiwaka’s decision to disguise himself as an Easterner. This leads him to seek out a hatmaker who, upon hearing Ushiwaka’s order for a special style of hat, proceeds to recount a “fine story about these left-folded eboshi and the luck they bring.”12 Ushiwaka’s presentation of a sword in payment for the newly made hat leads the hatmaker’s wife to tell the story of the presentation of this same sword by Ushiwaka’s father to Tokiwa-gozen when Ushiwaka, and the way in which the hatmaker’s wife herself had carried it to Tokiwa-gozen. This in turn climaxes in the recognition by the hatmaker of his wife as Lady Akoya, his aunt, by Ushiwaka. Thus, even in a genzai-mono purported to portray events actually in place on enactment of highly theatrical scenes (miseba)... The techniques, plots, even entire plays from joruri without the slightest reference to each of Kumasaka’s followers by name. This is the same technique used by the priest and Kumasaka when they recount the tale Kabuki is, above all, an actor’s theater. It originated in the mass-dance and recognition which bears remarkable resemblance to the narrative for Tojuro and in fact had spent two decades writing love suicides for the hatmaker, incorporates within its narrative a complete tale of retelling Tojuro. Chikamatsu wrote more than thirty kabuki plays referring to each of Kumasaka’s followers by name. This is the same technique used by the priest and Kumasaka when they recount the tale of his attack in the dream play of that name.

Even in the genzai-mono we see that once again decisions arise from the attributes which the characters are assumed to possess even before the start of the play. No wrestling with a decision, no belaboring thought, no development of character is necessary. The actions, like the characteristics, are determined beforehand and ultimately lead to the proper recognition of a given state of affairs, which is, for the most part, recounted in the course of the play.

And what of the joruri puppet plays, so popular among the townspeople of Osaka? Surely the sewamono, such as Chikamatsu Monzaemon’s Office, is a highly abstracted and cerebral play where it could be adequately

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12Ibid., p. 111.
controlled without fear of impinging directly on the spectator or upsetting the social order. Action of the kabuki stage is performed, not simply recounted.

And thus we see in kabuki a shift of emphasis from the word to the act. As with most forms of drama, both nō and kabuki seem to have allowed some considerable liberty in the words spoken on stage during the early part of their development. Both, too, developed in literate cultures in which various influences of the fixed and written word and of the literary heritage were inevitably felt. But nō, encouraged by a range of social and historical factors, succumbed much more quickly to the lure of a fixed text and written words. Though not printed until much later, authorial attributions of nō plays go back at least to the time of Kan’ami 角川弥 (1333-84), and, given the highly allusive nature of even these early plays, we can be certain of a high degree of “textual” stability. Subject matter was often literary, and narrative quite frequently replaced action. Joruri developed as a mere adjunct to narrative art and, as the puppets could not speak, was never able entirely to escape the tyranny of the word, even in its imitation of kabuki dance pieces. Kabuki was dominated by the actor. Early skits relied entirely on improvised dialogue. But even as kabuki learned narrative complexity from joruri and nō, it retained great fluidity in verbal expression. It was common for the kabuki equivalent of a playwright to merely outline a plot for the actors and allow them to improvise their own lines. Of course the lines could and did change from day to day, and even the plays of the best known writers, such as Tsuroya Namboku and Kawasaki Mokumaru 河竹夏弥, were subject to the whims of the actors. Needless to say, these writers had to tailor their efforts to the desires of the leading stars right from the start, but even in so doing did not have the final say when it came to performance.

The genzai-mono of nō, as we have seen, purported to enact events as though they were happening on stage. And yet these events were invariably borrowed from the past. Kabuki was relentlessly modern. The earliest skits exhibited no historical consciousness whatsoever, and scenes from contemporary life were the exclusive material of kabuki for its first few decades. Even when the kabuki theater embarked on wholesale adoption of historical pieces from the joruri theater, it did so with a twist. No attempt at thorough-going historical authenticity was made; these representations of historical events were peppered with contemporary references, habits, styles, and customs. And in most cases the leading characters were given double identities which defied logic and any sense of historicity, and brought them solidly into the modern world. History, once the exclusive property of noble and samurai was appropriated and reduced to the comfortable and familiar world of the chōnin.

Moreover, kabuki relied very heavily on confrontation. Of course we can find confrontation in nō as well. Before Zeami 世阿弥 perfected the bipartite dream play, Kan’ami had written plays which climaxed in the confrontation of two characters. But these conflicts were usually conducted verbally, not physically. In later plays, as we have seen, the antagonist was completely removed from the stage, precluding any direct confrontation, and all that remained was a memory of what had taken place. Kabuki threw on stage confrontations of every kind, from reserved contests of will and determination to elaborately choreographed battle scenes in exotic locations and struggles against gods and animals of all sorts, real and imaginary. The delight in these scenes was so great that many of them were extracted from the plays in which they first appeared and became separate performance pieces in their own right, almost completely divorced from the plot which had generated them. The “Eighteen Kabuki Plays” 歌舞伎十八番 of the Ichikawa family include a high percentage of these pieces, such as “Elephant Tug” (Zōhiki 象引き), “Sukeroku 助六,” “Fuwa 不破,” “The Subscription List” (Kanjinchō 勧進帳), “Oshimodoshi 押寇,” “Kan’u 関羽,” “Kamahige 風髪,” and “Shibaraku 鳴” (Just a Moment!), the ultimate in delightful, but plotless, confrontation.

Furthermore, the dramatic tension of many, if not most, kabuki plays is concentrated on the act and moment of decision making. The role of giri and ninjō, the contradictory demands of society and self, has been discussed at great length elsewhere and need not be further elaborated here except to point out that the result of cultivating this tension dramatically was to center the drama on the choice of the individual between these conflicting demands. While the consequences were never much in doubt, the individual was nevertheless granted the ability to chose his own destiny and accept with dignity whatever resulted from that choice. And while we find few passages of soliloquy which represent this, the new commercial culture permeated this art form. As with most forms of drama, both no and kabuki seem to have many of them were extracted from the plays in which they first appeared and became separate performance pieces in their own right, almost completely divorced from the plot which had generated them. The “Eighteen Kabuki Plays” 歌舞伎十八番 of the Ichikawa family include a high percentage of these pieces, such as “Elephant Tug” (Zōhiki 象引き), “Sukeroku 助六,” “Fuwa 不破,” “The Subscription List” (Kanjinchō 勧進帳), “Oshimodoshi 押寇,” “Kan’u 関羽,” “Kamahige 風髪,” and “Shibaraku 鳴” (Just a Moment!), the ultimate in delightful, but plotless, confrontation.

That kabuki developed in the thriving business world of Japan’s great cities is well known. Yet it may be instructive even so to look at how thoroughly the new commercial culture permeated this art form. Kabuki never enjoyed the privilege of aristocratic patronage to any significant degree. In its infancy it evolved from itinerant dances performed in exchange for alms to a rather crude method for advertising the wares of prostitution houses. Despite repeated government efforts to dissociate “legitimate” kabuki from prostitution, including the well known bans on female. and then young male. performers. it continued to enjoy an intimate relationship with the culture of the pleasure quarters. In fact this relationship was inadvertently strengthened by official attempts to isolate these institutions from the mainstream of society and the center of urban life, by placing the two outside the city center, but in close physical proximity to each other.

In Tokugawa Japan, the pleasure quarters were the epitome of wasteful consumption. According to traditional views, this portion of
society not only failed to produce anything of value, its sole purpose
to dissipate and destroy the wealth, energy, and talents of those too
weak to resist its temptations. Nor was this destruction quiet and
unobtrusive; extravagance was the order of the day. A customer made a
name for himself in this world by spending freely and spreading his
bounty widely among the social pariahs who inhabited this realm. Many
a man was brought to financial ruin through his interest in such activities.

And yet the appeal seemed irresistible. For this was one of the few
preserves in which class and rank counted for nought. In fact, because of
government restrictions, on entering the pleasure quarters samurai were
usually eager to hide the social status they so proudly displayed outside
the gates of Yoshiwara. Within the gates money, or at least the squandering
thereof, reigned supreme, creating a commercial utopia in which
consumption seemed to exist for its own sake. Within the gates not only
was it impossible to rely on the deeds of noble, brave, or mighty ancestors,
the position of any individual in the elaborate hierarchy required constant
expenditure to maintain. No act, however extravagant, insured a lasting
position; only the hierarchy remained relatively stable, the inhabitants
shifting rapidly up and down the ladder of success and fame like quotations
on the stock market.

This was the universe of kabuki. This inspired its early skits, showing
how to approach, woo, and treat a courtesan. This provided the roles,
scenes and incidents for domestic dramas, the inspiration for Chikamatsu’s
masterpieces. This invaded the historical dramas, based on the medieval
fascination for the remembrance of mighty deeds in battle, in the most
peculiarly anachronistic way, transforming them into remarkably modern
works. The kabuki theater was, for the bakufu, a nightmare of conspicuous
consumption, indulging in and exhorting to extravagance, as spectators
reveled in displays of splendor and sensual delights which sent the
imagination soaring. Commercial sponsors sent gifts prominently
displaying their brand. The hanamichi was at times littered with
the products of commercial trade. Not only did the actors indulge their
own fantasies in the most extravagant silks and brocades for their own
costumes, their whimsies set the fashion for the day, generating a constant
demand for new styles among the well-to-do ladies of the metropolis.
The popularity of actors spawned a very lucrative sector of the printing
business, which specialized in prints of currently popular actors and
particularly moving scenes. These rapidly went out of fashion as one play
replaced another, generating yet another flurry of consumption
activity. Actors too were ranked according to their ability to generate
box-office receipts, and had to work constantly to maintain their popularity
with the public, ever on the lookout for new fads, new styles, the latest
jargon.

The isolation of the pleasure and theater districts was a qualified
success. It allowed the government to exercise some modicum of control
over access, prevent the worst and most egregious abuses from getting
out of hand, and, in the case of kabuki, to restrain the most blatant
attempts of the theaters to capitalize on inherent interest in contemporary
political events. But at the same time it was this very isolation from the
nexus of traditional social and familial ties, the designation of these
areas as a preserve relatively free from conventional morality, which
gave free rein to commercial forces already actively at work shaping the
sub-culture of these domains. It is as though the bakufu unwittingly
incubated within its very bosom the egg of the monster which was to
devour it, for with its emphasis on the individual as self-conscious actor
its recognition of the possibility of success through purposive individual
action, and its vision of human activity as consumption, kabuki presented
an uncannily accurate vision of the condition of the modern individual.

Surely this was one of the most important reasons for the continued
success and popularity of kabuki during the first two or three decades of
the Meiji period. It required but a small and superficial adjustment to
represent on its stage the ideals and aspirations of the new era, politically
and sociologically so different from the preceding centuries. And had it
not been for attempts on the part of the new regime to enlist the resources
of this flamboyant vision in the Ministry of Education, it would surely
have fared even better than it did until gradually pushed aside by the
march of technology in the employ of capitalism which created the
ultimate in modern mass entertainment, the cinema.

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**EMJ NETWORK ANNUAL BUSINESS MEETING**

The Early Modern Japan Network will hold its annual business meeting
in conjunction with the Association for Asian Studies meeting in Boston.
We have reserved the Vineyard/Yarmouth room of the Boston Marriott
Hotel from 6:30 to 8:30 on Friday, March 25, 1994. All AAS members
are invited. We have not arranged for a catered dinner, hoping instead
to conclude business quickly and dine outside the hotel. **If you are
interested in dining as a group, please contact Mark Ravina, the EMJ
secretary/treasurer.**