

know something of the background of the popular theatre in Japan.

During the old Japanese regime actors were included in the census under the heading of live-stock, a designation much resented by pious Buddhist farmers with a high regard for animals. Indeed, the general opinion regarding actors seemed to be that their proper animal-grouping was something between a skittish monkey and the more debauched species of tom-cat.

Curiously enough, the founders of the Japanese popular theatre, or Kabuki, were two women, named O-Kuni and O-Tsu. O-Kuni, being a priestess by trade, was naturally a good girl and remained faithful to her husband and the priests of the temple which employed her.

O-Tsu, on the other hand, second leading lady of Japan's first popular troupe, was what might be called a good sort, with a strong affirmative reaction to characteristic male queries. It is not surprising then that the unlicensed activities of these ladies soon attracted the notice of the authorities. The Tokugawa Government, deploring the loss of revenue resulting from unregistered backstage performances of actresses, thereupon prohibited women from exhibiting themselves on platforms or stages.

But the show had to go on; and some one had to play female parts, particularly in the favourite scenes where the conscientious samurai killed off his wife and her spare parts before going to the wars. So producers looked round for comely young men with the required inclination and aptitude. There was a surprising response from types who had hitherto blushed unseen behind haystacks or in less conservative monasteries.

Thus originated the Kabuki tradition of "Onna-Kata," or male actors taking the part of females. They were known as Wakashu, and began to perform in Kyoto, the old Imperial capital, under the famous producer Dansuke.

So skilfully did these lovely young men portray the graceful turns, side-twists, and knock-knee trot of the lady of fashion that ambitious young damsels, eager to qualify for matriculation at the

higher-class frolic quarters, became regular Kabuki patrons in order to learn how to comport themselves gracefully and seductively. And, as we shall see, the popularity of these male actresses brought more than mere box-office returns.

Japanese laugh affably over the way we do things back to front. A foreign practice that has amused them more than others is the one that prompts elderly but enterprising gentlemen to hang around backstage entrances. In Japan, obviously because of respect for the Onna-Kata tradition of male actors, this sort of thing is done only by wealthy widows and prosperous geisha. The enraptured ladies first win their way into the heart of a female impersonator by sending him a gift of flavoured seaweed or a carton of raw fish, and then pick him up after the show to take him to supper, or elsewhere.

When the New Order got well under way, the custom was frowned upon, but it did not bring down official wrath until the famous Tsuneko case in 1938. Tsuneko was an alluring geisha of rather jealous disposition who had bestowed her heart and seaweed on Zaemon, a note male-female. Arriving one evening at the stage door, she was pained to discover that another lady had got there first. Tsuneko, spurred on by a base passion, forgot the seven rules of gentle persuasiveness, and struck her rival harshly and frequently with a heavy parasol.

Tsuneko's side of the argument was taken up and supported by the *Yomiuri Daily* (circulation 1,000,000), while the rival found enthusiastic, though numerically inferior, support in the *Teido Daily* (circulation 250,000). It was not, however, until leading critics and stage managers, violently controversial in their reactions to the Tsuneko case, began taking up space which should have been used for reporting the final annihilation of China, that officialdom stepped in and forbade further backstage penetrations.

The official repertoire restricted subjects from which playwrights might draw inspiration. Boy-meets-girl-wacko! themes were definitely out, as the militarists wanted to direct their ardent young men into more warlike channels.