

Japanese Kabuki Theater

Master Class Lesson Plan, by Kent Williams

OBJECTIVE: Provide a multi-cultural learning experience through the introduction of the traditional Japanese *kabuki* style of theater in an engaging, hands-on workshop in which students explore the use of paper fans, character movement, costuming and *kabuki* makeup and culminating in a student mini-performance.

MASTER CLASS: *single hour*

- Students are asked to remove shoes and sit in a group on the floor in front of the teaching artist...boys to one side and girls to the other, explaining that the boys will now be addressed as **samurai** and the girls as **onnagata**. Whereas *samurai* applies as a term for all male characters, good or bad, *onnagata* refers to all female characters. The teaching artist explains that *onnagata* actually means “man playing woman” and that all *kabuki* actors are male, the girls will play the female roles in today’s workshop.
- The teaching artist gives a brief overview of the theater style:
 - 17th century art form often likened in it’s importance to Japanese cultural history as the plays and performances of Shakespeare in the West
 - Developed by O-Kuni, a young female dancer on the dry river beds of Kyoto, Japan
 - Twice banned by the government, *kabuki*’s popularity was revived in it’s third incarnation as professional, male actor dominated entertainment
 - Like soap operas there are stories of valiant heroism and selflessness, treachery and murder
- Relevant *kabuki* theater terminology:
 - **Kabuki** – centuries-old, traditional live theater style from Japan
 - **Bunraku** – style of Japanese puppetry on which many *kabuki* plays, characters and designs are based.
 - **Samurai** – male characters
 - **Onnagata** – female characters (literally meaning “man playing woman”)
 - **Priest** – general *kabuki* character movement, mainly male
 - **Oni** -- demons
 - **Koken** – stage hands cloaked and masked in black (for the effect of invisibility)
 - **Ki** – oak blocks used percussively to underscore character movement and stage action

Japanese Kabuki Theater

Master Class Lesson Plan, by Kent Williams

- **Chanter** – the narrator who speaks throughout the play using a higher pitched, intense vocal affectation
- **Kumadori** – theatrical makeup
- **Kimono** – the traditional robe-like garments made of silk or cotton.
- **Hakima** – *samurai* pants
- **Obi** – sash, varying in lengths and widths
- **Katana** – Japanese sword; large fans are used to demonstrate swordsmanship
- Paper fans are passed among the group, and the teaching artist guides everyone through the practice of popping the fan open one-handed and, in a follow-the-leader style, demonstrates various emotions and actions with the fans:
 - **Laughter** – shoulder pulsing or arm pulsing depending upon the character.
 - **Sorrow** – stylized weeping gesture
 - **Terror** – quivering and looking away while using the fan as a shield
 - **Rage** – aggressive series of roars directed at characters and over audience
 - **Death Rattle** – dramatic, full-body stage death
- 2-4 students are asked to volunteer to try on the traditional *kimono*, *hakima* and *obi* costume pieces while the teaching artist describes:
 - Use of sleeves as pockets and in flirtatious posturing
 - Color symbolism
 - **Red** – bridal in costuming and passionate or aggressive in *samurai kumadori* (makeup)
 - **White** – funereal, not bridal; ghosts
 - **Blue** – stylish in costuming but evil in *kumadori*; blue lines on the face indicate jealousy and deviousness
 - **Brown** – oni
 - **Pink** -- youth
 - Proper character movement while in costume
- Remaining students are then asked to rise and separate in to sides of the room: *samurai* and *onnagata*. Joined by the costumed volunteers students all learn and practice various character movement styles, again in a follow-the-leader format, while incorporating the paper fans:
 - *Samurai* – extreme male (leading male, warrior roles), characterized by wide, sweeping strides and sharp, angular head movement

Japanese Kabuki Theater

Master Class Lesson Plan, by Kent Williams

- *Onnagata* – extreme female (ingénue, princess roles), characterized by soft, fluid head and hand gestures and a gliding shuffle so as to appear delicate and shy
- Priest – standard *kabuki* character movement, mainly male, characterized by a balanced, erect posture with sliding parallel foot placement
- *Koken* – stage hands dressed and hooded in black, for the effect of invisibility
- Students then learn a simple routine from a traditional Japanese folktale such as:
 - *Momotaro* (The Peach Boy) – a hero's quest with fantasy animals
 - *Issun Boshi* (The One-Inch Boy) – Japanese *Tom Thumb* hero tale
 - *Jiro* (The Boy Who Drew Cats) – ghost story
 - *Yuki Onna* (The Snow Bride) – ghost story; girls are villains
 - *Ota Hime* (The Sea Princess) – beautiful, haunting love story
 - segment from a kabuki style version of *Sleeping Beauty* – only somewhat familiar
- With time remaining, traditional *kumadori* makeup may be demonstrated on 1-3 student faces:
 - *Samurai* – characterized by a strong brow with red flare for passion and determination as well as red nose, cheek and eye flair for the same. Serious, downward curved mouth
 - *Onnagata* – delicate and spare; characterized by red-lined eyes (as opposed to black eyeliner), small mouth and a raised, simple brow to convey youth and innocence
 - *Oni* – demon or monster with brown, red, or ghostly bluish-white face and outrageous eye, cheek, nose and brow flair in blacks, blues, purples and reds
- Final opportunity for Q&A and dismissal