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:
  o 17th century art form often likened in it's importance to Japanese cultural history as the plays and performances of Shakespeare in the West
  o Developed by O-Kuni, a young female dancer on the dry river beds of Kyoto, Japan
  o Twice banned by the government, kabuki's popularity was revived in it's third incarnation as professional, male actor dominated entertainment
  o Like soap operas there are stories of valiant heroism and selflessness, treachery and murder

• Relevant kabuki theater terminology:
  o Kabuki – centuries-old, traditional live theater style from Japan
  o Bunraku – style of Japanese puppetry on which many kabuki plays, characters and designs are based.
  o Samurai – male characters
  o Onnagata – female characters (literally meaning "man playing woman")
  o Priest – general kabuki character movement, mainly male
  o Oni -- demons
  o Koken – stage hands cloaked and masked in black (for the effect of invisibility)
  o Ki – oak blocks used percussively to underscore character movement and stage action
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- **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
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- **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 Boshī** (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, check, nose and brow flair in blacks, blues, purples and reds

- Final opportunity for Q&A and dismissal