FOUR TYPES OF CLASSICAL DRAMA EXIST IN Japan: No (lyrical drama), Kyogen (comic drama performed as an interlude and supplementary entertainment in between No acts), Ningyo Joururi (puppet drama), and Kabuki.

No and Kyogen were established during Japan’s Middle Ages, while Ningyo Joururi and Kabuki were established during the Modern Age. As classic drama genres, they are entirely disparate from the modern drama, yet they continue to exist together in the present.

These four drama genres have numerous common features. First, unlike in modern drama, in classic drama actors are prohibited from using facial expressions to communicate the human emotional dynamic. Or, more accurately, it is simply impossible. No and Kyogen actors must don masks, Kabuki actors must cover their faces with heavy makeup known as kumadori, and Ningyo Joururi “actors” use puppets. These masks, heavy makeup, and puppets eliminate natural human facial expressions. If facial expressions cannot be used, how do the players convey the story?

A special method of communication was developed, which constitutes the second commonality between the genres. The characters’ intent had to be conveyed through the overall tension of the actors’ body, their breath in particular. In addition, an abstract space was constructed unique to each type of drama. Acting became highly stylized. For example, in No and Kyogen, crying is expressed by bringing the hand to the front of the face with the plane of the hand perpendicular to the face, whereas in Ningyo Joururi and Kabuki, crying is expressed by covering the face with the hem or sleeve of the costume. Such stylization increased the purity of the actor’s bodily communication and the depth of the actor-audience interaction, resulting in a method entirely different from modern drama.

Third, all four genres originated as rituals dedicated to Shinto gods. Just as Sumo wrestling began as a religious ritual and is therefore subject to various Shinto taboos unknown to sports, so must the classic dramas retain their historical roots. For example, women are banned from acting in these classic dra-
mas; female parts acted out by male actors. Furthermore, women are not allowed to participate in any other way in classic drama other than as members of the audience.

Fourth, the patrimony of the form itself rather than the narrative constitutes the foundation of these classic dramas. Whereas it is up to the director’s preference whether to present Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* wearing traditional garb or jeans, there are no such alternative presentations allowed in *No, Kyogen, Ningyo Joururi, and Kabuki*. The mode of dress, movement, and movement all have format, and should one diverge from the format, the result is neither regardless of whether one followed the script faithfully or not.

The above four common elements are the most important features that distinguish the four classic dramas. As a result, a methodology completely disparate from that of modern drama has emerged. If modern drama consists of recreating aspects of reality, then classic drama consists of expressing otherworldliness. This fact is just as *New York Times* theater critic Brooks Atkinson have indicated when *Kabuki* was first performed in New York City.

Now, what meaning exactly does this unique methodology have in the 21st Century?

**A CULTURAL GALAPAGOS ARCHIPELAGO**

Over the course of two thousand years, numerous foreign cultures have come ashore on this archipelago of the Far East: Korea, China, India, Southeast Asian countries, the Netherlands, and Portugal are some examples. However, while Japan has been under the influence of these foreign cultures, Japan has managed to create a unique culture, of which the classic dramas only constitute partially. Individually, these have built on the “imported” culture, as the basic materials to which were added elements of Japan’s own unique culture. The Japanese archipelago has a long history of isolationism with no cultural outlet to the north; thus it has historically been not a pass point but a dead end. There, numerous cultures have accumulated and simultaneously evolved into unique forms. The world’s cultures have fossilized and remained there.

As proof, the four common features discussed above are all connected to the origins of Europe’s thespian plays. Greek tragedies and Indian classical plays both implemented masks and heavy makeup; Shakespeare’s *Ophelia and Desdemona* were at first both performed by men.

What the West and the world have forgotten remains in this archipelago of the Far East. Tokyo is a capital of the theatrical and cultural Galapagos. Neither at London nor New York are we able to perceive the history of theater, yet at Tokyo it is possible. Perhaps this fact alludes to the possibility that Tokyo becomes the 21st century’s starting point for theater.

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