# RECONSTRUCTION OF THE NATIONAL THEATRE OF JAPAN AND KABUKI: CONTEMPORARY INTERDEPENDENCIES AND PROSPECTIVE CHALLENGES

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***Abstract***
*In pursuit of its mission to preserve traditional Japanese performing arts, the first National Theatre of Japan predominantly showcased Kabuki performances since its establishment in 1966. This article examines the proposed redevelopment concept for this theatre within the context of the current landscape of Kabuki productions. It sheds light on the Japanese government's inclination to diminish its role in the future National Theatre's construction scheduled to open in 2029, opting to realize it as a Private Partnership Project. This strategic shift underscores a focus on the tourist appeal of the rebuilt theatre while concurrently preserving its interdependent relationship with Shōchiku in Kabuki productions.*

***Keywords:*** Japanese National Theatre, Kabuki production, Japanese Cultural Policy.
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## *1. Introduction*

In late October 2023, Tokyo's last free-standing theatre structure, the National Theatre, ceased operations. The closure marked the beginning of its planned demolition to make way for a multistory multifunctional structure with a built-in theatre. Japan is running six separate national theatres. These institutions share the common goal of preservation, promotion, and revitalization of traditional and promotion of contemporary performing arts and music theatre, as well as the training of future artistic talent. They comprise of the National Theatre opened in 1966, the National Engei Hall opened in 1979, the National Noh Theatre opened in 1983, the National Bunraku Theatre opened in 1984, the New National Theatre opened in 1997 and the National Theatre Okinawa opened in 2004. Except the National Bunraku Theatre in Osaka and the National Theatre Okinawa they are located in the metropolis of Tokyo.

This article discusses the first National Theatre established in Japan that is located in Chiyoda-ku, opposite the Imperial Palace. It focusses on Kabuki, because, in accordance with its function of preserving and promoting Japanese traditional performing arts, this theatre primarily stages Kabuki. It takes stock of the Kabuki

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productions at the National Theatre and looks at its relationship to the biggest producer of Kabuki production, Shōchiku Co. Ltd. It furthermore deals with the redevelopment concept of the National Theatre in order to discern its impact on the world of Kabuki as well as which conceptual elements will persist in the forthcoming National Theatre, scheduled to open in 2029. Prior to describing the organizational structure and the achievements of the National Theatre in Kabuki until its closure, an overview of the present state of Kabuki productions is given.

## *2. Kabuki productions today – the role of Shōchiku Co. Ltd.*

In his 2014 essay "Material and cultural ownership of traditional theatre (Contemporary inheritance of its special style)," Noda Manabu states that Japanese traditional theatre is as foreign to ordinary Japanese people as any other foreign culture (Noda, 2014: 22). He thus points out the challenge inherent in preserving traditional theatre, and thus also Kabuki, namely the limited appeal of this perofrming art beyond the devoted community of Kabuki fans. Therefore, it is difficult for producersd of Kabuki to ensure profitable productions. This situation also explains why traditional theatre consists of just a small part in the performing arts market. For example, in fiscal 2019 Kabuki and noh comprised of a niche of just 12,9 %, theatre performances of 26,8 % while musicals accounted for the biggest part of the market with 38,9 % (PIA Research Institute, 2020: n.p.). In this small section of the performing arts market, Kabuki productions are dominated by the film and theatre production company Shōchiku Co. Ltd. (list 1).[2] The company was founded in 1903 in Kyoto by two young theatre entrepreneurs, the twin brothers Shirai Matsujirō (1877–1951) and Ōtani Takejirō (1877–1969). By means of re-organizing and rationalizing its productions and at the same time by guaranteeing its affiliated actors regular performances on stage and thus a regular income, the production company got hold of all Kabuki actors and all Kabuki theatres by the 1930s. Therefore, Shōchiku is uncontested in Kabuki productions ever since,[3] but it is also certain that Kabuki would not have survived without the continuous engagement of this company.

[2] In fiscal 2005 Kabuki performances produced by Shōchiku comprised of 51 % of alle production, while those at the National Theatre encompassed 11,9 % (Nihon Geinō Jitsuenka Dantai Kyōgikai, 2007: 99).

[3] With the exception of the actors of the Zenshinza troupe that was founded in 1931 and stages Kabuki and drama as an independent theatre company, today about 300 Kabuki actors perform in Shōchiku's Kabuki productions (Nihon Haiyū Kyōkai et al, 2023: 247–252).

**Table 1. Forms of Kabuki productions**

| | |
|---|---|
| Performances produced by Shochiku and held at Shochiku-affiliated theatres | Produced by Shōchiku |
| Performances presented by other commercial theatres | |
| Performances independently produced by the Japan Arts Council and held at the National Theatre of Japan | Involvement of Shōchiku through its affiliated actors and theatres |
| Performances organized by public organizations such as regional tours by the Japan Association of Public Cultural Facilities (*Kōbunkyō)* and the Agency for Cultural Affairs (ACA) | |
| Independent performances by individual actors such as performances produced by Kabuki actors' offices and other organizations | |
| Training and research performances held mainly by young Kabuki actors to present the results of their research and training | |
| Kabuki performances by the Zenshinza company including affiliated performances | |
| Other produced performances and events | |

Source:Nihon Geinō Jitsuenka Dantai Kyōgikai, 2007: 79

Henceforth, a dual framework characterizes contemporary Kabuki production. On the one hand there are the performances produced for profit by Shōchiku and on the other hand those produced by the National Theatre of Japan. This duality is also due organizational and operational structure of the National Theatre.

## *3. Kabuki productions at the National Theatre*

### *3.1 The history of the National Theatre*

Looking at the history of the National Theatre, since the 1870s there had been many and varied concepts and initiatives for the implemantation of a national theatre in Japan. In the course of modernization and industrialization and on the way to a modern nation state, influential politicians and theatre people considered a national theatre based on the Western model. Organizations such as the Theatre Reform Society (*Engeki kairyōkai*) founded in 1886 pushed this idea forward and propagated the reform of Kabuki theater in terms of content and staging. The reformers first and foremost aimed at a Western theatre building as representative symbol of a modernized Japanese nation state. In the end, none of these plans were supported by the government and the plany by a committee established to found a national theater at the initiative of industrialists and theatre enthusiastthis never materialized. Contrarily, Western-style theater buildings, such as the first Kabukiza (1898) and the Imperial Theatre (1911), were constructed, while the management

and production of Kabuki persisted under private commercial companies (Bergmann, 2018: 91–136). The idea of a national theatre was given new impetus during the time of the Taishō democracy. Initiatives taken to found a national theatre by actors, authors, theater scholars and politicians, in particular the National Literary Society (*Kokumin bungeikai*) founded in 1919 were not realized. A Committee to Propose the Establishment of a National Theatre (*Kokuritsu gekijō setchi teian iinkai*) established in 1936 did not bear any fruit either (Bergmann, 2018: 183-211).


**Image 1. The currently closed National Theatre in Tokyo. Foto Japan Arts Council**

The lack of support by the Japanese government for all these incentives shows that since the Meiji restoration Japanese cultural policy focused solely on the preservation of cultural heritage and was not seriously concerned about promoting theatre. On the contrary, rather than supporting this performing art, Kabuki had been regarded by the state as a useless amusement and actors as good-for-nothings (Kamiyama, 2023: 10). This focus on preservation of tangible artworks in cultural policy continued after World War II. The preservation of traditional theater, as well as other artifacts, has been largely entrusted to the private sector, as noted by sociologist Ogino Masahiro:

*Especially after the war, the Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties emphasizes that efforts must be made to preserve national treasures and important cultural properties. However, the state does not necessarily own and directly control national treasures and important cultural properties. In other words, in*

*Japan, the private sector, not the state, directly preserves cultural properties* (Ogino, 1997: 104).

Therefore, performing arts solely relied on ticket income and commercial production companies. After World War II and during the 1950s and 1960s Kabuki actors increasingly turned to film and subsequently TV productions. These genres offered a departure from the traditional world of Kabuki, characterized by a hierarchical structure wherein an actor's familial lineage within the Kabuki acting tradition dictated the career trajectory, often superseding considerations of acting talent. Furthermore, emerging genres such as commercial performance programs featuring popular singers emerged as competitors to Kabuki, particularly gaining prominence from the 1960s onward. During this period, even the prestigious Kabukiza theatre in Tokyo experienced a transformation, with approximately one-third of its performances being presented by popular singers and film celebrities. In response to and as a strategic measure to captivate audiences, Shōchiku shifted its focus to exclusively showcasing highlight acts from popular plays, termed *midori kyōgen*. The company also staged newly written plays based on historical novel series, thereby aligning with evolving audience preferences and diversifying the Kabuki repertoire. As a result, entire classical plays were seldomly performed and more and more voices demanding the preservation of traditional plays occurred. Already in the 1950s, the theatre director and producer Takechi Tetsuji (1912–1988) had appealed to politicians to implement means to limit Shōchiku's hegemony in Kabuki productions by establishing a national theatre for Kabuki (Ōzasa, 1998: 690–691). Prominent theatre scholars such as Kawatake Shigetoshi (1889–1967) advocated the construction of a national theatre to preserve traditional Kabuki, claiming that Kabuki was being watered down by other genres and threatened by experimental directing and new interpretations (Ishihara, 1969: 116; Tokunaga, 2010: 131). The serious pursuit of establishing a national theatre gained momentum only subsequent to the inclusion of traditional performing arts under the purview of the National Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties of 1950. Finally, in March 1956, the Preparatory Council for the Construction of a National Theatre was formally instituted. By 1958, the location for the construction site had been determined, and construction of the theatre building commenced in 1963 (Kamiyama, 2023: 10).

According to the National Theatre Law enacted in June 1966, the purpose of the theatre was to preserve, promote and develop traditional performing arts, to produce traditional theatre in its original classical form, to train the next generation of actors and musicians, to do research and to engage in audience development. In 1965 Kabuki had been designated as intangible cultural property. This was ten years later than the designation of traditional music such as *gagaku* and the puppet theatre *bunraku* (1955), eight years later than the classic theatre genres noh and *kyōgen* (1957) and just one and a half year before the opening of the first National Theatre (Iwabuchi, 1960, 13–16). It should be noted that only the designation of

Kabuki as an intangible cultural property legally justified its production at the National Theatre. The National Theatre Corporation, responsible for managing the theatre, was established in July 1966. Its chairman and board of directors were appointed by the Ministry of Education. All personnel costs of the theatre, except those for actors, were covered by the government. The production costs of the National Theatre were to be financed from box office income and other revenue earned independently by the National Theatre mainly from renting out the theatre or from income from the adjacent parking lot (Ishihara, 1969: 237–248). Since 1990 the National Theatre in Hayatochō is managed by the *Nihon Geijutsu Bunka Shinkō Kyōkai* (*National Association for the Promotion of Arts and Culture*) officially translated into English as the Japan Arts Council. This legal entity was established through a partial revision of the National Theater Law. The Japan Arts Council[4] is affiliated with the Agency for Cultural Affairs (*Bunkachō*) in the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (*Monbu Kagakushō*). The Japan Arts Council is in charge of the rebuilding project of the National Theatre (Organization, 2022). Until its closure in October 2023 the National Theatre had staged mainly Kabuki as well as regional performing arts (*minzoku geinō*).

### *3.2 Kabuki productions at the National Theatre*

Kabuki production at the National Theatre comprise of either plays that are restored to their original and whole form (*tōshi kyōgen*) or revivals of whole or parts of plays that are no longer in the active repertory (*fukkatsu kyōgen*) (Thornbury, 2002: 161). It also stages newly written plays and offers special presentations such as introductions to Kabuki for high school students in June and July every year. Other than in Shōchiku theatres where generally two programs a day are performed for 25 days a month, the productions at the National Theatre consist of one performance a day, starting either at noon or in the late afternoon.

[4] The Japan Arts Council (*Nihon geijutsu bunka shinkō kyōkai*) is managed and operated by a staff of about 400 under the leadership of an executive board, which consists of a president, executive directors (three persons), and auditors (two persons).The Board of Councilors consisting of up to 20 persons of high academic standing authorized by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, is set up to provide advice and suggestions to the president on important issues concerning the management of the Council. An Evaluation Committee under the Board of Councilors evaluates operations of the Council, and reports results to the Board of Councilors. Furthermore, the Council consults expert committees such as Japan Arts Fund Management Committee, National Theatre Production Committee, National Theatre Research Projects Committee, National Theatre Successors Training Program Committee and so forth on matters requiring specialized advice and suggestions. The expert committees are consisted of individuals of high academic standing (Organization, 2022).

To master the challenges of Kabuki productions that are characterized by traditioanal hierachical structures among the actors and acting families, the National Theatre hired people who had been formerly involved in Shōchiku productions such as theatre critic, scholar, and producer Kagayama Naozō (1909–1978). Kabuki historians and scholars as the above-mentioned Kawatake Shigetoshi and Gunji Masakatsu (1913–1998) also got involved with great enthusiasm. As no resident company had been established, still today all Kabuki actors are recruited from Shōchiku which holds of the majority of Kabuki actors. In the early days of the National Theatre also actors from the film and theatre production company Tōhō Co. Ltd. that also had contracted a small number of Kabuki actors in the 1960s until the 1980s performed at the new national venue. The producer Orita Kōji who had been involved in Kabuki production since the foundation of the National Theatre recalls the tedious negotiations with all the agents involved such as actors, academics, critics, Shōchiku and the board of directors:

*There had been meetings with the chairman of the board of directors. The opinions of the production office and the opinions of academics and critics were always at odds with each other, and the discussions were often heated, but these conflicts were also important for the National Theatre. The pain of repeated meetings to obtain the approval of the main actors (kanbu haiyū) was, in retrospect, a valuable experience. After getting the approval of the actors and at the same time that of the production company, finally the approval of the theatre's director and the board was necessary before we could disclose the information to the public.* (Hattori, 2020*:* 3165-3180).

In sum, Orita valuated these negotiations helpful for the National Theatre which broke new ground in the field of Kabuki production as a state-run cultural institution staging full-length, multi-act Kabuki plays. With the exception of the National Theatre such plays are rarely performed at other Kabuki theatres managed by Shōchiku. However, *midori* programs became an acceptable mode of presentation also at the National Theatre, as such a programming serves contemporary audience and contributes to a financially secure operating base of the theatre (Thornbury, 2002: 172). Nevertheless, until December 2019, fewer than 30% of its programs incorporated a combination of two or three segments from different plays. Therefore, the National Theatre evidently adhered to its initial objective of presenting revivals and complete plays (Kabuki kōen dēta bēsu, n.d.).[5]

[5] According to the Kabuki data base provided by the Japan Actors' Association (*Nihon haiyū kyōkai*) and the Organization for the Preservation of Kabuki (*Dentō Kabuki Hozonkai*) from November 1966 until December 2019, there had been 414 plays performed at the Grand Hall of the National Theatre. 16 % of the programs consisted of two plays, 11 % of combinations of three plays, most often in New Year performances (Kabuki kōen dēta bēsu, n.d.).

In terms of audience development of the National Theatre lectures, program notes, earphone guides, and special programs for beginners during the month of July and August are employed to make its classical performances more accessible to foreign, young, and uninitiated spectators. However, the gap between the specialist knowledge required by aficionado audiences and the ignorance of conventions of first-time viewers, domestic and foreign, is widening continuously. The average admission rate to the National Theatre between 1980 and 2019 continued to be between 50 % to 60%.[6]

## *4. Achievements and shortcomings of the National Theatre*

Since the times of the planning of the National Theatre during the 1950s, the lack of young Kabuki actors to carry on this performing art had been a severe problem, because there were simply not enough actors to fill the ranks of maids, courtesans, samurai, policemen, priests, and other side parts that add to the grandeur of Kabuki productions. To solve this problem a training program for Kabuki actors was launched at the National Theatre in 1970 (Klens, 1994: 233). The Organization for the Preservation of Kabuki (*Dentō Kabuki Hozonkai*) provides its teachers. This association had already been established in 1965 by senior Kabuki actors[7] in response to Shōchiku's concept of *midori* programs. It aimed at training young actors and passing on comprehensive acting expertise beyond the repertoire of commercial Kabuki. In the following years the training program at the National Theatre was extended to the training of musicians (*nagauta* and *Takemoto*) as well as backstage music and sound effects of Kabuki (*geza ongaku*). All graduates of the three-year long actor's programs are apprenticed to Kabuki actors affiliated with Shōchiku. Today, about 30 % of Kabuki actors active on stage are graduates of this training program (Nihon Geijutsu Bunka Shinkōkai, 2022: 3). Therefore, Shōchiku clearly profits from the training program in terms of recruiting actors. However, in the hierarchical Kabuki world, hereditary succession of long-established acting families dominates the distribution of roles and promotion to stardom (Leiter, 2013: 228). Therefore, only three actors[8] among all graduates of the acting program had been promoted to the group of star actors (*kanbu haiyū*), that account for less than one third of the circa 300 Kabuki actors active on stage today. Without doubt, the training programs at the National Theatre play an

[6] Data about the admission rate have been obtained via mail correspondence with Kazuma Atsuhito of the Planning and Coordination Division, Agency for Cultural Affairs, 20 January December 2023.

[7] Only actors with more than twenty years of stage experience were entitled to become a member of the association.

[8] The three graduates from the training program of the National Theatre who belong to the core group of Kabuki actors are Nakamura Kamenojō III (*1955), Nakamura Baika IV (*1950) and Ichikawa Emiya II (*1955). Some of the graduates have passed the exam to be promoted from *nadai-shita* to *nadai* ranks meaning to be promoted to roles with text.

extremely important role in the transmission of traditional performing arts. But, as a matter of fact, the problem of recruiting new actors is crucial. Even before the COVID19 pandemic hit in 2020, the participants in the program declined year after year. In 2023 only one actor graduated from the program (Nihon Geijutsu Bunka Shinkōkai, 2023: 72).

**Image 2. Audience of the Grand Hall of the National Theatre.**
**Foto Japan Arts Council**

The productions at the National Theatre never posed a serious competition to the commercially driven *midori*-productions by Shōchiku, because its programs feature revivals of almost-forgotten works and primarily stage complete plays which sometimes are less appealing to large audiences. In sum, the National Theatre provides the framework for Kabuki productions such as the producer, the theatre building, the stage, its technical staff, and props for performances, while Shōchiku provides the actors. Furthermore, it organizes and supplies the facilities for the Kabuki training programs. However, with no resident Kabuki troupe the Kabuki production depends on actors affiliated with Shōchiku. In fact, Kabuki productions at the National Theatre are framed and limited by the commercial structures that Shōchiku had established since the beginning of the 20$^{th}$ century. Mutual trust between the company and the actors is one of the pillars of this structures and implicate that actors would grant preference for avting on a stage owned by Shōchiku rather than opting for a performance at the National Theatre. Therefore, it could be concluded that Kabuki is preserved by Shōchiku with the assistance of the National Theatre. Over the years this constallation had developped into a mutual interdependence with more and more graduates of the National Theatre acting program performing in Shochiku Kabuki productions.

Besides this for a national theatre unique interdependence between a commercial production company and the Nationa Theatre, its building had been subject to criticism since its opening. The atmosphere of the main building "is stark verging on sterile" and "the theatre's somber exterior is reflected inside" as Barbara Thornbury put it straight (Thornbury, 2002: 170). The multifunctional stage of the National Theatre's large house has continuously been criticized, because its *hanamichi*, a runway that passes from the rear of the theatre to the stage right at the level of the spectators' heads is not framed by spectators, as it is usually the case in Kabuki theatres. The *hanamichi* significantly contributes to the close connection and interaction between audience and actors and therefore is an important factor in traditional Kabuki, to which the National Theatre is dedicated. In addition, the location of the National Theatre next to a major six-lane road opposite the Imperial Palace and next to the Supreme Court is considered a disadvantage, because it is quite close to other governmental buildings, but far from the bustling city centers such as Ginza and Shibuya, therefore offering little opportunity to enjoy a coffee or dinner before or after the shows at the National Theatre.

However, all these critics concerning the building, the stage structure as well as the location of the theatre do not account for the dismantling of the theatre and its reconstruction. Th reason is the ailing of the building itself. Built in 1966, the it requires renovation and its stage technology needs to be modernized. For this reason, in 2007 the government initially decided to renovate the theatre building. This renovation had been scheduled for the years between 2017 and 2020. The reopening was planned just in time for the 2020 Olympics in Tokyo. As this original plan did not materialize, it was abandoned by the government in favor of the demolition of the National Theatre and the redevelopment of the whole site of approximately 31,000 square meters in total.

## *5. The redevelopment project of the National Theatre*

The concept of the future National Theatre scheduled to open in 2029 is dedicated to strengthen the creation and promotion of traditional performing arts, to establish it as a center for culture and tourism and to blend the new facility with its surrounding area. One focus is on bolstering cultural tourism. According to the Japan Arts Council the new theatre will be positioned as a cultural tourism center. It will include an interactive exhibition and a hotel, and restaurants, cafes, and shops should attract local residents as well as foreign tourists. Cooperation with cultural facilities around the Imperial Palace are also planned (Bunkachō, 2022: 2–3). In this way, according to the Japan Arts Council all the above-mentioned critics concerning its isolated locality have been considered and should lead to a more open public space easy to access for everyone.

The new building is to be realized through a Private Finance Partnership (PFI) project.[9] Such partnerships aim at lowering the cost of construction and operation through the ingenuity of the private sector, and at the same time, should help to lower the overall cost for the public sector. In case of the National Theatre project, this PFI will include facility development, maintenance, management, and operation. In addition to a hotel that contributes to cultural tourism, offices, restaurants, cafes, stores, etc. are envisioned as private revenue-generating facilities. For examples fixed-term land lease rights, etc. are considered as additional projects to the PFI project. According to the Japan Arts Council the organization as a PFI and thus the participation of private companies should bring about an improved service for visitors in general, the improvement of ticket sales as well as innovative visitor programs and sightseeing tours. Furthermore, the Japan Arts Council expects to benefit from the knowhow of partner companies regarding outreach programs such as exhibitions, events, theatre tours etc. Regarding the management of the future National Theatre the Japan Arts Council will continue to be responsible for the core operations of the theatre, such as its theatre productions. It is planned to outsource the theatre's maintenance[10] and administrative work[11] to the private sector, just as it had been done in the past, but on an individual basis under the new plan (Bunkachō, 2022: 3).

According to the planning concept the training regimens for traditional performing arts, particularly those pertaining to the instruction of Kabuki actors and musicians, will undergo no fundamental alterations.[12]

[9] In 1999, the Act on Promotion of Private Finance Initiative (PFI) had been enacted, resulting in a rapid spread of PFI for the construction of facilities because it was easy to implement for both the public and private sectors. Since the cabinet approval of restructuring fiscal management in 2001, especially regional cultural policy tended to make use of private sector initiatives such as PFI in the construction or in the management of cultural facilities. In fact, in 2018 the top genre of facilities regarding PFI implementation had been culture and education (Watanabe, 2012: n.p. part 4.)

[10] These comprise of periodic inspection and maintenance of buildings and stages, operation monitoring and daily inspection and maintenance of building facilities, cleaning, and repair work, etc.

[11] These tasks include security, visitor services, ticket sales, performance records, booklet production and delivery, administrative support for the promotion association, food and beverage sales, fan services, etc.

[12] The content of this paragraph has also been verified in interviews with Kirikae Yoshiyuki, Deputy Director of the National Theatre Renewal Headquarters of the Japan Arts Council on 10 February 2023 and Kazuma Atsuhito, Subject Specialist of the Planning and Coordination Division, Agency for Cultural Affairs, on 19 December 2022.

## *6. Critical points of the rebuilding project of the National Theatre*

Examining the proposed plans for the new theatre building, it becomes apparent that its primary objective is to leverage traditional performing arts, specifically Kabuki, to enhance cultural tourism. This aligns with the policy that the Japanese government has been pursuing over the past decade in emphasizing the significance and potential of cultural tourism in Japan. Simultaneously, the government seeks to maximize private involvement to mitigate the construction and operational costs of the new building that is to accommodate the new theatre.

Notwithstanding prior critiques asserting that the proscenium arch-style stage with an audience extending from the front, is unsuitable for the intimate and interactive nature of Kabuki performances with the audience, the upcoming theatre is slated to incorporate a similar multifunctional stage. Until the closing of the National Theatre in October 2023 the majority of the performances had been Kabuki and also the newly built theatre is dedicated mainly to the promotion and preservation of Kabuki, besides other traditional performing arts. Therefore, it would befit the new National Theatre to be equipped with a stage mechanism not found in other theatres, such as a permanently installed double *hanamichi* or a revolving stage with a double tray that can be moved separately to the left and right. Such a stage would enhance the possibilities for spectacular set changes and acting, not only in Kabuki performances. Furthermore, the structure of Kabuki productions at the future National Theatre will not be changed. This will cement its dependency on Shōchiku actors. The Japan Art Council does not consider a revision of the current Kabuki actor training program, despite the constantly declining number of participants in these programs. Testimonials from trainees who dropped out of this program show that the strictness of the training and the limited prospects of career in Kabuki, partly due to the traditional hierarchical structures that favor the sons (*onzōshi*) of long-established acting families, have diminished the attractiveness of the program. Little account is taken of this problem in the current planning. As a result, it seems that the Japan Arts Council is overlooking the contemporary challenges confronting Kabuki. Moreover, members of the Organization for the Preservation of Kabuki assume a significant portion of the training responsibilities at the National Theatre that means a substantial additional workload on top of their performing on stage. Beyond these challenges within the National Theatre's training program, the early death of a couple of Kabuki stars in recent years left a void in the mentorship and training of emerging actors

## *7. Conclusions*

In conclusion, let alone the deplorable fact of the disappearance of the last free-standing theatre in Tokyo and given the situation of Kabuki as described above, the preservation and promotion of this genre, both in its traditional and in its

innovative contemporary form, necessitate not only more financial commitment but also a more determined involvement by the Japanese government. However, the plans for the reconstruction of the National Theatre under the Public-Private Partnership (PPP) structure seem to diminish governmental engagement. The new proposals for the National Theatre neglect the issues plaguing Kabuki. Analogous to the initial building of the National Theatre in 1966, again emphasis is placed more on the building than on the substantive content, namely future Kabuki productions. The new structure of the National Theatre might result in an increased vulnerability of the production and the preservation of Kabuki to commercialism. Even with the future National Theatre, the private company Shōchiku Co. Ltd. takes the main financial burden and risk of preserving Kabuki as before. Nonetheless, as a commercial enterprise it needs to fill its theatres by attracting an audience beyond the aging kabuki fan community. Therefore, innovative productions by actors affiliated with Shōchiku in collaboration with contemporary playwrights and directors have become increasingly significant in number and importance since the 2000s. Kabuki continues to engage in creative activities aimed at reaching younger generations, such as adaptations of manga and video games on the kabuki stage. These trends reduce the performances of and training in traditional Kabuki on Shochiku stages. Furthermore, the preservation of traditional Kabuki, which predominantly appeals to an older and dwindling generation of fans, presents an additional challenge. Looking at the diminishing interest in the acting program at the National Theatre, it also seems insufficient to rely solely on the sons of established acting families to address the problem of the shortage of young Kabuki actors.

In conclusion, it would be desirable, if the Japan Art Council and the Japanese government would establish a National Theatre dedicated to facilitating both traditional and innovative Kabuki performances, thereby addressing the challenges associated with preserving this traditional art form. An avenue worth exploring involves forging a novel partnership between the National Theatre and Shōchiku, characterized by innovation rather than interdependence. To realize its objectives, the reconstruction of the National Theatre demands more than the promotion of cultural tourism and traditional Kabuki productions along well-trodden paths. It necessitates the presence of qualified personnel and a commitment to financing productions, even when their financial profit may be questionable, in line with the mandate of a public theatre that earnestly fulfills its role. According to the Japan Council of Performers Rights and Performing Arts Organization, a public theatre (*kōkyō gekijō*) is an autonomous institution that receives ongoing subsidies for operational expenses. Its primary purpose is the creation, performance, and dissemination of performing arts, with the aim of making them accessible to the general public and contributing to the realms of arts, culture, and recreation (Geidankyō et al, 2003: iv). The National Theatre deviates from this definition due to its reliance on Shōchiku in Kabuki production and lacking a resident Kabuki company.

The second round of bidding for the National Theatre's reconstruction in June 2023 has yielded no result (Hosokawa 2023: n. p.) as no company opted to join the PFI project. As of May 2024, the future of the first National Theatre and its Kabuki production is uncertain as no new bidding round has been announced.

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