



MAKING UP IS HARD TO DO

KABUKI IS ONE OF JAPAN'S OLDEST ART FORMS, BUT IT'S BEING REJUVENATED BY THE ARRIVAL OF HOT YOUNG STAR EBIZO ICHIKAWA THE 11TH. TIFFANY GODOY MEETS THE MAN BEHIND THE MAKEUP

The name Ebizo Ichikawa has just been passed on to an eleventh heir.

If you are not up on your Japanese traditional culture, this may not mean much to you. But in the world of kabuki, particularly where kabuki's oldest and most distinguished dynasty is concerned, this is major. Similar to the succession of a royal title from one generation to the next, the stage names of a great kabuki acting family are passed on, but only when an actor attains a certain level of skill. Since Shinosuke Ichikawa earned the new name Ebizo, performances have been packing in the crowds and Ebizo has found himself at the heart of a cultural frenzy.

Sure, good looks are part of Ebizo's allure. So is having the name of the most well-known kabuki family. But there is no denying this tabloid dream boy's star power, even in the Japan of today, where modern media has cast a shadow over a cultural art form that dates back to the 17th century.

This October, Louis Vuitton will cosponsor the first-ever name-succession performance of kabuki conducted in Europe. This is doubly exceptional because for the first time in 150 years, an Ichikawa father and son, Danjuro Ichikawa the 12th and Ebizo Ichikawa the 11th, will appear together on the same stage. Contemporary kabuki remains true to its traditional roots, both in the staging of the plays and in the tightly woven hierarchy of acting families that occupy the kabuki world. But for this serious young actor who began his career at age 8, Paris represents a new start both in creating his own identity and in reestablishing the family business's relevance to a new generation.

When I met him backstage during an intermission at a performance in Osaka that was part of a three-month tour leading up to Paris, he could speak only in a whisper—an effort to save his voice for the seven-day-a-week and roughly ten-hour-a-day schedule. Seated front-row that night were geisha—with painted white faces, ruby lips, and glittering kimono regalia—who had made a special pilgrimage from Kyoto. It was a glimpse into an

isolated society where time has stood still. But this was just another day for the 26-year-old Ebizo, whose life straddles tradition and modernity. If for the last hundred of its four-hundred-year history kabuki has been a rarefied affair, frequented mostly by an older elite, Ebizo the 11th may prove to be the one who will bring the old-guard kabuki establishment into contemporary popular culture. **Tiffany Godoy**

TIFFANY GODOY You have said that you knew from a very young age what you were born into with the Ichikawa family, and in fact, when you were a teenager, you briefly considered leaving kabuki. Why was this? What would you do if you weren't a kabuki actor?

EBIZO ICHIKAWA As a teenage boy, I felt some resistance to and concern about the idea that I had to make a decision on a profession to pursue for the rest of my life. Having been born into the most important family in the Japanese traditional kabuki community was probably another reason I felt that way. If I chose another course in life, I would probably have become a physician, or I might have even become a homeless person...

TG I saw some of the process leading to the name succession on a much publicized Japanese TV special. I remember you standing outside, wearing almost nothing and pouring freezing well water over yourself, and also consulting with a Buddhist priest. It made me think that kabuki is not just about performing, but is a very mental and spiritual discipline and also a way of life. **EI** I believe that physical strength creates mental strength and vice versa. I find this very important. I think that making efforts to follow each step in the mental discipline process can lead me to better performances, and that it takes a robust body to put it into action. **TG** Being born into a kabuki family seems to be like being born into royalty—a life that is predestined with certain expectations and traditions. Being the youngest member of a family with the longest legacy in kabuki, do you feel there are expectations of you on both a personal and professional level, and do you see them as a challenge or a burden?

EI I feel strong expectations from people around me, and it places on me both a challenge and a burden, but unexpectedly, I rather enjoy this.

TG You have also said that you are at the beginning of a long road to become Ebizo. Does becoming Ebizo mean perfecting the performance of a certain role made famous by one of your ancestors and making it your own, or is it in fact slowly trying to change tradition by introducing something new to kabuki?

EI I think that becoming Ebizo means both to me. I am eager to inherit the traditions from many generations of ancestors, while I rereview everything about kabuki, including its new, future directions.

TG For Western people, perhaps the strongest image of kabuki is the costumes and makeup. In fact, your family originated the style of exaggerated movement, makeup, and costume that so many people link with kabuki. For you, what are the elements of kabuki that you would like audiences in Paris to understand and appreciate? What expectations do you have of this performance?

EI I hope that my performances will be able to remind modern people of aesthetics that they may tend to forget today. I am looking forward to performing the play *Toribeyama Shinju* in

Paris because the play is based on a story about Kyoto. To me, Kyoto and Paris seem to be similar to each other, and I would be happy if I could get this ambience across to the audience through my performance.

TG On a recent visit to the Louis Vuitton atelier in Paris, you noticed in their museum a ukiyo-e postcard featuring your family crest. This led to your father and the studio collaborating on the design on a one-of-a-kind trunk for you.

EI I was so happy! I will carry it with me on my travels around the world.

TG The elements of form, movement, color, and sound are integral parts of a performance. Again, on the television special in honor of your succession, I noticed the exquisite way that you move when you apply your stage makeup. I wonder how much of this is training and how much of it is your nature? It seems that a majority of your time is spent training. Is this true?

EI I can't say either. I find that both natural talent and perspiration to acquire skills are important.

TG Like drama in Elizabethan England, kabuki is performed by an all-male cast. Actors specialize in the *tachiyaku* (male roles) or the *onnagata* (female roles), yet you play both. Do you feel more comfortable playing one or the other?

EI I am interested in accepting the various challenges of playing both *tachiyaku* and *onnagata*.

TG What, if any, connections do you feel kabuki has to Western theater where often it is the ambition of an actor to eventually direct? Is this an ambition for a kabuki actor, or is being an actor the finest way to make an imprint on the performance of a play? Is there a particular Western actor or work that you admire or have studied?

EI I think that an actor may do what he wants to do in order to be a good actor. If he can excel in being both director and actor, he may as well pursue both, but if he falls between two stools by pursuing both, he may as well drop either one of them since neither can be done well. I prefer to refrain from making any comments about Western theater, as I don't know very much about it.

TG It seems that with all of the publicity focused on the succession event, kabuki's popularity, and in particular your popularity, is booming. Who do you feel are the primary viewers of kabuki today? Can you identify with the current audience, or in fact, do you see it as your role—or do you desire—to try to broaden kabuki's appeal by also appearing in TV dramas and films?

EI I think that kabuki today has an audience that can be roughly divided into two groups: one is a group of people that knows a lot about kabuki, and the other is a group of people that hardly knows about it. I think that this bipolarization of the audience poses a very difficult issue to handle. We should also communicate the attractions of kabuki to the group in between. I think that in order to maintain the traditions of kabuki today and tomorrow, we need to compel as wide an audience as possible to visit the theater, so they can enjoy kabuki and love it. I am committed to doing everything I can to help the kabuki community meet these challenges.

Ebizo Ichikawa in Osaka, July 2004
Photography Yuriko Takagi