



“We don’t try to make a sound by stamping our feet. The tapping sound comes from lowering your feet naturally,” says Nakamura Tokizo V.
Photo: Yuichi Itabashi

An Education in the Performing Arts

The continuation and advancement of the Japanese traditional performing arts does not only take place by direct succession, from parent to child or master to apprentice. The traditional arts are also supported by human resources development programs, in which successors are recruited from the general public.

TAKASHI SASAKI

IN Japan, from historical times, various artistic skills had been passed down directly, from parent to child, or from master to apprentice. Sometimes referred to as direct transmission, this passing on of knowledge and skills is not only limited to the arts, and in the past it was taken for granted as common practice in the worlds of martial arts, academic study and craftsmanship. The traditions of various arts and crafts were carefully protected and passed down through the ages, transcending generations and eras.

In recent years, however, this system of direct transmission has come to face a significant problem: a shortage of successors.

In order to overcome problems such as this, from 1970, the Japan Arts Council started courses called Personnel Training for Successors of Traditional

Performing Arts for the purpose of fostering human resources who will carry on the traditional performing arts, recruiting successors widely from the general public. The Council is the parent organization for numerous theaters, including the National Theatre of Japan, the National Noh Theatre, the National Bunraku Theatre, the National Theatre Okinawa and the New National Theatre, Tokyo. In addition to hosting performances of traditional and contemporary Japanese stage arts at these theaters, the Council is also engaged in various initiatives for the development of human resources involved in these arts, which it regards as an important pillar of its activities. Currently, the Council is conducting successor development training courses in nine different areas, including kabuki, noh, bunraku puppet theater and other popular entertainments.

Kabuki Training

At the venue for the kabuki actors’ training course, the harsh voice of the instructor booms across the wide, wooden-floored rehearsal room.

“It’s no good trying to memorize it with your head! Move your bodies in time with the sound of the shamisen.”

“We don’t try to make a sound by stamping our

feet. The tapping sound comes from lowering your feet naturally.”

The instructor teaching this part of the kabuki actors’ course is Nakamura Tokizo V; a male actor who has gained many fans playing a graceful *tateoyama*, the lead female-role actor in kabuki. In 2010, he was awarded the Medal with Purple Ribbon for his outstanding contributions to the Japanese arts and culture. The young trainees seem undaunted by the harsh instruction of this famous actor, and not one of them appears depressed or discouraged. All of them nod sincerely, with serious looks in their eyes, focused intently on their instructor’s every move.

The Japan Arts Council recruits new applicants for its courses for the development of successors to the traditional performing arts once every two or three years depending on the course, targeting young people (who must have graduated junior high school) aged between 15 and 23. Currently, there are nine young people attending the kabuki actors’ training seminar, for what is the course’s 23rd intake. The course curriculum essentially runs from 10.00 AM to 6.00 PM on weekdays, cramming in as much content as possible. Aside from the main topic of kabuki, participants study over twenty other subjects, including practical skills in other Japanese traditional arts, such as *gidayu-bushi* (musical narratives for puppet theater) and *nagauta* (literally “long songs” – traditional music that accompanies

kabuki theater); as well as lectures in manners, how to put on traditional Japanese kimonos, and even the history of arts and entertainment. Trainees have this broad range of knowledge and skills drummed into them over an intensive period of one year and ten months.

After covering Nakamura Tokizo V’s practice

instruction, we spoke with Nakamura Kamenjo; a *kanbu* (senior)-ranked actor who is also a lecturer on the training course. Kamenjo was a trainee himself, in the course’s second intake, completing his training in 1974.

“My parents liked kabuki, so I myself came to have aspirations towards the world of kabuki from a young age, too. But if it wasn’t for this program, then I am 100% sure that someone like myself – who was born and raised in a regular family – could never have become a kabuki actor,” says Kamenjo.

Even today, the traditional system of hereditary succession remains strong not only in the world of kabuki, but also in the other traditional Japanese performing arts. Children who are born and raised in the home of a kabuki actor naturally learn the traditions and conventional practices of kabuki from a young age, and gain onstage experience as child actors. This creates an overwhelming gap between them and those raised in regular family households. Despite this, Kamenjo says that he has never considered this to be a handicap.

“I have never once felt that it was a hardship; not even during my days as a trainee, when I had to learn all the basics of kabuki in a short period of time, or when I was undergoing my introductory training under my master after I had completed the course. I think that, more than anything, it was because the joy of being able to learn about my beloved kabuki from the greatest people in the business at the time was so great,” he says with a smile.

Fifty years have now passed since the launch of the training program. Currently, past trainees account for around 30% of the kabuki actors who are active on the stage today. There are kabuki actors, like Kamenjo, who have been promoted through the ranks from *nadaishita* to *nadai*, up to the senior rank of *kanbu*; today becoming integral and indispensable members of the Japanese kabuki world.

When viewed in terms of the over 400-year-long historical tradition of kabuki, this successor development program has only just begun, but it already plays a crucial role, providing strong support for the traditions of kabuki. ■



Instructor Nakamura Kamenjo
Photo: Yuichi Itabashi