

Sae Nanaogi

Dance to Play Kabuki

Interview by Julia Varley

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Could you explain about the family and school structure within which you have been learning dance in Japan.

SAE: My mother is a dance teacher in the Nanaogi school. When I was a child I saw rehearsals in the dance studio and I learnt Japanese Dance naturally. At first I was taught by my mother, but as it is not good for parents to teach their own children because they tend to spoil them, my mother took me along to her teachers. When I was at high school and I was studying for my entrance exams at university, I started going to the studio of the former head of the Nanaogi school, who died about four years ago. As a child I hated dance, because it was in my family, and I rebelled against it. But without realising it, I still somehow learnt dance until I finally recognised that I actually did like it.

The Nanaogi dance school began at the end of the 19th century with the opening of Yokohama as a port to the West. The founder of the school was a dance teacher for women within the Samurai mansions. One of the leaders of the modern Japanese state which was opening itself to the West, was a close friend of hers and he told her that from now on things were going to be happening in Yokohama. He advised her to start teaching dance there. It was said at that time that Japan should travel across the seven seas with seven black ships to build the new Japanese state and he suggested that the Nanaogi school should conquer the world with seven fans (Nanaogi means seven fans).

Do you feel that Nanaogi is a particularly open school?

SAE: It is probably the exact opposite. As it is so recently founded it clings to its classics very much and is very strict in its way of doing things. But anyone can come and study there. Originally, because Yokohama was a port, many students of the Nanaogi school were *geisha* from the pleasure quarters of Yokohama.

A master bestows the name of the school to the pupil consid-

ered worthy of it. When were you allowed to take the name Nanaogi?

SAE: When I was 14. I was very nervous because of the test. To seal the bond between the master of the school and the new name holder there is an exchange of drink, a toast with a cup. I had the feeling that I could no longer escape. In my teens and early twenties I wished I had a more recognised name from schools like Hanayagi or Bondo because Nanaogi is not a famous dance school.

Now do you feel you are carrying the name from a position of independence?

SAE: I am lucky because my teacher is very free. As long as I maintain the classics of the Nanaogi school, I am allowed to participate in new creations in Japan, to come to ISTA (International School of Theatre Anthropology) and to collaborate with other artists. I have to be careful so that my teacher will not be angry with me, but with the understanding that I am a Nanaogi school dancer and knowing that I value this, I have a great deal of freedom.

In Japan are women more easily connected with dance and men with theatre?

SAE: Kabuki theatre is exclusively male and Noh theatre is almost exclusively male, but modern theatre is just like theatre in Europe, and there are women on stage. Although I liked Kabuki more than I liked dance and I entered a particular university to follow their Kabuki course, there is no way I could become a Kabuki actress. I could study Kabuki at university because there was a Kabuki club there and that is also when I started to study dance seriously. In Japan a woman can work in Kabuki as an amateur but not as a professional. The only way I

could play Kabuki would be to be reborn as a man. I think that really as a woman it is impossible to play Kabuki, because of the weight of the costumes and wigs and because of the length of the performances. The techniques of Kabuki today are the creation of the men who have been doing this kind of performance for a very long time. The men can be *onnagata*, female impersonators, but it is impossible for women to play the male roles with all the wigs and costumes. A woman has difficulties in dominating and giving life to the costumes because of their size and because of the different structure of the body.

I have seen you play in a vigorous style, much stronger than some men ...

SAE: It is probably because of my four years of experience with Kabuki in my particular university.

Japanese Dance originates from Kabuki. As women were not allowed on stage some of them started learning the dances belonging to Kabuki and practised them in their homes or in clubs. These women became so good at the dances that actors from Kabuki would go to them to learn. Dance schools were founded and eventually separated from the theatre establishing their own dance form today known as the classical style Nihon Buyo (Japan Dance).

Do you feel that today a woman can bring her own strength into the performing arts only through dance? Is dance the only way into the Kabuki world for you?

SAE: In Japan the dance world is the only world for a woman. Gradually I have become known as a dancer who can also speak lines on stage and as I have this capacity for Kabuki dance, I want to be able to master it further.

Is your collaboration with Kanichi Hanayagi, one of the masters from the renowned Hanayagi dance school, your way of getting closer to what you wanted when you practised Kabuki?

SAE: Yes. Working with Kanichi means working with someone who has the experience of the Kabuki stage and of its different way of delivering text. He worked as an *onnagata* for many years. Nihon Buyo dancers do Kabuki dance, but their way of speaking lines is totally different. The way of filling out the text, and the give and take on stage is different from that of Nihon Buyo. It is often said that Nihon Buyo dancers are bad at plays. In Kabuki you hold back or come right in with a line in a way that builds the scene. Even with a line that is spoken to the rhythm of the shamisen (a string instrument) the actor's way of shaping the line is what makes it interesting.

My collaboration with Kanichi started in a time when I found his advice helpful for getting over some difficulties with the present head of the Nanaogi school, who is only forty-eight. When this young dancer became head of the school there were difficulties because of the discordance between what he was saying and how he would teach. Being very stubborn, I would point this out, making comparisons with what the previous head of the school had said. Kanichi helped me understand what the new head meant and made it possible for me to accept him.

Can you imagine a situation where you might go against the new head of the school?

SAE: Now I do not want to rebel against him. I accept his authority in the Nanaogi school, but I comment on a lot of smaller matters. Since Nanaogi is a very small school I am very close to the head. We are so few and everybody has to get along. Now I think

I am very lucky to be part of a small school like Nanaogi rather than a large one like Hanayagi.

You were invited to perform and teach together with Kanichi in Scilla, a small town in the south of Italy, for a session of the University of Eurasian Theatre. On the last day you were outside on the streets performing and I could see you were enjoying it. You improvised with Kanichi. Many spectators were surprised by your skill and by your readiness to perform in such an unusual situation. You were probably going against all the rules you had learnt as a child. How was this experience for you?

SAE: Kanichi wants to make Japanese Dance more known and I am ready to help him in this. For this outdoor performance, Kanichi told me what to do and I did it. I like to dance. I was as surprised as anybody that I could do what I did. It was a discovery. Kanichi's position in the dance world is difficult as there are great expectations from his work. His mother is a very important dancer in the Hanayagi school and in Japan. But when Kanichi does a work demonstration abroad he reminds me of the Kanichi from the days when he was still a Kabuki actor and not the dancer of today burdened by responsibilities. This makes me happy and gives me the courage to confront the same unusual situations.

During your work at ISTA you have met other forms of theatre and dance, what has this meant for you?

SAE: I have been heavily influenced by coming to ISTA. The reaction of the audience is very different in Japan. Abroad I was worried that I was not communicating from the stage because the audience did not understand. I found it hard to get used to



Sae Nanaogi (right) and Augusto Omolú in *Four Poems for Sanjukta*, an ISTA production, Portugal 1998.
Photo: Fiora Bemporad

dance without being inserted into a traditional frame. I remember in Copenhagen, I was very surprised by the experience of performing in the ex-power station. The Japanese ensemble performed one night and Sanjukta Panigrahi from India the next evening. Even in the same place and with more or less the same audience, I was surprised by the difference. I asked myself why the atmosphere of the performances was so different. I felt it depended on the ability

of the actors to project their energy and I really felt Sanjukta's power. During these years of exchange with other artists I have learned a different way of studying. I feel ashamed that I have to learn the value of the Japanese classics from foreigners.

Has your way of teaching changed?

SAE: My students are all young and with the exception of three of them, they are all

actors. They are learning Nihon Buyo as part of their training and so as a teacher I value the kind of things I have learnt through ISTA: becoming the role and how to express something through dance. It is much more a kind of dancer's training for actors than a professional dancer training in the Nanaogi school. I want to have a dance studio that allows for dance to be fun and enjoyable. In the old days dance teaching was very strict and it was part of learning etiquette. But now the only part of etiquette I apply is sitting down in the formal style for a longer time than usual.

In Japan every teacher's studio is different and it reflects the personality and age of the teachers and students, and to some extent it depends on the atmosphere of the particular school. There are very strict places and there are friendly places. All the teaching is individual, there are students you have to be very strict with and others you have to flatter to get them to do things. There is very little to say in general about the method of teaching.

You said that when you were about fourteen you were quite a rebel, how does your rebellion express itself today when you are more experienced?

SAE: My rebellion is both a strong and a weak point. My fighting spirit and the desire not to be outdone by others could be good, but at the same time it means I lack flexibility. Because of my strong will I cannot do very sexy roles!

I would like to learn as many Kabuki roles as possible. Nihon Buyo dancers dance till they are eighty or ninety, so what I want to do now is to learn and perform dances using costumes rather than formal kimono while I still can. I want to dance with costumes while I am still young, because I want to learn to wear and use them on stage.

The costume is very important for certain roles. Performing in full costume and remembering that experience is the foundation for doing the dance without the costume and gives the ability to project the costume even without wearing it. For example, I might be asked to perform the Spider Woman - the character representing the spirit of a spider which has a long and heavy wig - with an ordinary kimono. That is only possible if I have done the dance with the costume and wig and I know how the dance is supposed to be, so that my body remembers. When I get older I will be able to dance without the costume, but with the incorporated experience of it.

What do you think is the importance of theatre and dance in Japan today?

SAE: Young people in Japan are very group orientated. They like fashion. Everybody wears exactly the same thing and you can't pick anyone out. They copy each other. Since last year the cotton kimono, called *yukata*, has become fashionable. Young people following mass culture are now wearing a kimono. Many of them don't know how to wear it properly, they place the wrong side in, or put it on in a funny way. But maybe this is an indication of a return to Japanese roots. Even if they are all modern on the surface, maybe this fashion could create a connection with traditional performing arts. I hope that if they like wearing traditional Japanese clothing this might encourage them to wear it properly and with proper footwear, and maybe this will connect to a desire to move properly. And then again this might encourage people to come and learn dance.

What do you think is at the heart of your being a dancer today?

SAE: I want to dance. I would like to have in the audience just one person glad to have seen the performance, to have offered her or his time to come to the theatre.

Now that I have more experience I can think more coolly and clearly about the roles and the dances I am playing: this is important to me.

How does family life go together with your profession?

SAE: I am very lucky, my husband is very easy. He does not work in art. He comes to see my performances as much as he can. I have forced him to enjoy watching dance. Dance is my whole life now and after thirty-five years it would be difficult to quit.

Translated from Japanese by Mark Oshima

SAE NANAOGI (Japan), whose real name is Yasuyo Yamazaki, was born in 1960. She has been dancing Nihon Buyo since she was a child and is now a teacher of the Nanaogi school. Since 1994 she has collaborated with ISTA (International School of Theatre Anthropology).