

## *Nihon Buyo Happyokai*

### Deborah Klens-Bigman

*Nihon buyo*, Japanese classical dance, (called *nichibu*, for short, also sometimes referred to as *kabuki buyo*) is seldom recognized outside Japan as an entity separate from *kabuki* theatre. *Nichibu* has a great similarity to *kabuki* in costume, makeup, and movement. Even though most Western theatre scholars agree on its value in training *kabuki* actors, and *kabuki*'s historical debt to dance, many assume that *Nihon buyo* is merely a part of *kabuki* and has no significance in itself. Except for a few Japanese scholars, notably Gunji Masakatsu<sup>1</sup> and Fujita Hiroshi,<sup>2</sup> *Nihon buyo* has not been given its due as a genre and its own right, just as *kabuki* was long ignored as a subject for serious study. In this paper, I will examine the venue in which *Nihon buyo* most often appears outside of *kabuki*: dance recitals—*Nihon buyo happyokai*.

*Nihon buyo* emerged as concert dance around the turn of the century. The return of women to the public stages in 1891 was a strong force in its legitimization. Women had stayed active as teachers and performers at private functions during the long period from 1629 while the ban on women's public performance was in effect. Clara Whitney, a missionary to Japan from 1875 to 1900 noted in her diary that a group of women dancers entertained Westerners during President Grant's historic visit to Japan in 1879.<sup>3</sup> Since we can assume the Japanese would not have wanted to show the President shoddy or improper entertainment, this example serves to show that women's absence from the public stage did not mean total invisibility. When the ban was finally lifted as part of Japan's push toward modernization, women were ready to take their place as public stage performers.

Concert dance programs from the West, such as Anna Pavlova's tour in the early 1920s, also fed the trend to the Western-style aesthetic of separating performance elements into distinct genres. At the same time, Kawakami Otojiro and others furnished intellectual support for these ideas.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the same

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Deborah Klens Bigman earned her Ph.D. from New York University's Department of Performance Studies in 1995. She has since divided her time between research and writing on Japanese classical dance and martial arts, publishing numerous book reviews and articles. She lives and studies in New York City.

forces that introduced modern drama to Japan also pushed dance as a separate genre to the concert stage.

*Nichibu happyokai* evolved for several reasons. Recitals provided an opportunity for middle-class students to perform publicly on a regular basis. At the same time, recitals enhanced the reputation of the organizing *sensei* (teacher), the *soke* (headmaster) of the *ryu* (style) and the dance style as a whole.

Regardless of the size of the school, quality of the group or frequency of the performances, contemporary *happyokai* tend to follow a general structure: a first “congratulatory” or “blessing” type piece (for example, a *sanbaso* or *Matsu no Midori* or *Nayose no Kotobuki*, performed by a senior student or the sponsoring teacher).<sup>5</sup> A *sanbaso* is an invocatory piece with very ancient origins. In *noh*, it is performed by *kyogen* actors, usually as part of the first program of the New Year. The purpose of the dance, even in its *nichibu* versions, is to purify the stage and invoke the gods’s blessings on the performance that is to take place. *Matsu no Midori* (*Young Leaves of the Pine*) was composed as a debut piece and may also begin a *nichibu* performance. *Nayose no Kotobuki* (*A Series of Congratulatory Scenes*) is a “celebration” type piece. Audience members are aware of the significance of the opening piece and expect to see something of the above types. After the opening piece, performers generally appear in ascending rank order, beginning with the newest and/or youngest students. A “finale” featuring the teacher, special guest(s), if any, and perhaps a large number of people on stage ends the program.

Audience interest, unless the performance features many famous dancers (the *Soke Fujima ryu happyokai*, for example, features many famous *kabuki* actors), varies. Family and friends attend to watch their loved ones perform, then perhaps leave the theatre for several hours and return toward the end of the program to watch the senior students and the teacher perform.

The typical *happyokai*-goer is female, in her forties, and knows one or more of the performers. Most likely, she has studied dance herself and may continue to do so. She is very critical of what she sees, comparing the performance to her own experience. She may wear *kimono* (if she is a dancer, she may wear her group’s “official” *kimono*). She carries a purse, an *obento* (lunch) box, and a shopping bag, courtesy of the sponsoring teacher, to whom she has paid respects back stage. She will set up camp with several companions, and they will come and go from that place throughout the day.

The audience is in constant flux, circulating between dances to talk to friends, going backstage to offer congratulations to a family member, friend, or teacher, coming and going with food and drink. Most *happyokai* last six hours or longer (some as long as twelve or thirteen hours a day over a weekend). As a result, audience “rules” are similar to *kabuki* in that people bring food and beverages from home or purchase them in the theatre lobby or elsewhere and eat during the performance (unlike *kabuki*, there may be no intermission). As in *kabuki*, the most tender emotional scenes may be played on stage through a background noise of candy wrappers in the audience.

Preparation for the dancers reflects their orientation as students rather than as members of a dance company. The dancer continues to take lessons in the months leading up to the performance. She and the teacher will increasingly concentrate on the piece she plans to perform as the recital date draws near. If she has a technically difficult piece to perform (for example, *Kagami Jishi*) the dancer will opt for an extra day of wig and costume rental and obtain a slot in the *butai geiko* (stage practice). This optional dress rehearsal is the only opportunity to rehearse on stage before the performance. Generally, only those dancers who see the need for it participate, as *butai geiko* translates into extra expense for rentals, stage hands and musicians (classes now often use recorded music, but music for *happyokai* is still, nearly always, live).

As an example of contemporary Japanese *happyokai*, I am using the 40th Annual *Gosaburo Kai*, held in April 1992, as an example because I had the advantage of seeing the *butai geiko* and backstage activity as well as the performances from the audience side. The sponsoring teacher was Hanayagi Yoshigosaburo, a well-known *nichibu* teacher in Kobe, Japan. Yoshigosaburo closely supervised his entire program, resulting in exceptional artistic focus: a good, varied selection of pieces that showed the dancers to advantage and had universally high production values.

Kobe, located west of Tokyo, enjoys a sense of sophistication owing to its prominence as a sea port. The city has a large number of *geisha* due to international big business activity, and many of them study *Hanayagi ryu nichibu* with Yoshigosaburo. While no *geisha* performed at the 1992 recital, some were present in the audience, a rare occasion when *geisha* and middle class women might publicly mix. A small group of Japanese-American women were also present from Tacoma, Washington. They consider themselves students on the basis of a teaching visit Yoshigosaburo made to the area several years before. The bulk

of the audience was made up of family and friends of the many dancers who appeared.

The *40th Annual Gosaburo Kai* included a guest appearance on Saturday by the *soke* of this particular *Hanayagi ryu* branch, performances by Yoshigosaburo's son, Hanayagi Isaburo, and by his grandson, Koyama Haruki. The program included many classics of the repertory, as well as a new piece choreographed by Yoshigosaburo, *Pari Hitori* (*Alone in Paris*), a solo piece set at the turn-of-the-century. The program stretched over two days, each day's performance lasting approximately nine hours.



An American dancer performs in *geisha* style at Ichifuji-Kai's *happyokai* in New York City, 1988.

The morning of April 4, 1992 was cold and rainy. Dressed in formal kimono, Yoshigosaburo, his wife, son, son's wife, grandson and *uchi deshi* (disciple) arrived at the theatre around 9:30 a.m. The party made its way to the small *gakuya* (dressing room) closest to the stage. The *noren* (door curtain) bearing Yoshigosaburo's personal *mon* (family crest) already hung in the doorway, having been installed during the *butai geiko* the night before. There was almost no room for the group as the *gakuya* was filled with boxes of *sen'bei* (fancy snacks—in this case, cookies) and stacks of shopping bags to be given out as favors to well-wishers. Similar to *kabuki* tradition, *nichibu* dancers observe a dressing room hierarchy—the most important performers (in this case, Yoshigosaburo and his family) get the room closest to the stage. *Gakuya* hierarchy is not just a courtesy of rank: Yoshigosaburo, as *sensei*, was responsible for all the details of the performance as a Western director would be. Proximity to the stage allowed him to confer with the stage mangers, crew, dancers and musicians as needed and to more easily cope with any emergencies.

Rather than the place of quiet reflection favored by Western drama performers, the *nichibu sensei's* *gakuya* is more like a war room. Dancers came to make a formal greeting as they arrive for the performance throughout the day. Stage technicians coordinated according to Yoshigosaburo's instructions. A steady stream of visitors came to offer congratulations and small envelopes full of cash. Yoshigosaburo's wife and daughter-in-law spent the day receiving the envelopes, noting the amount, and giving boxes of *sen'bei* in return. Some amounts were quite large, and people left with several shopping bags full of boxes of cookies.

As he put on his makeup and got dressed for each dance (four pieces on Saturday), Yoshigosaburo waved, smiled, and joked with visitors between cigarettes and bowls of noodles. From the *gakuya*, dancing felt almost tangential.

The 1992 recital began with an invocatory piece, *Ayatsuri Sanbaso*. Yoshigosaburo, accompanied by some of the students, danced the *okina* section, an elaborately costumed ceremonial dance which purified the stage and invoked the gods's blessings on the performance. The second part of the piece featured Yoshigosaburo's son, Isaburo, and grandson, Haruki, in a playful variation: Haruki, dressed in a traditional *sanbaso* gold and black costume, was a puppet. The puppeteer, played by his father, Isaburo, rigged the puppet and had him dance. He untangled the strings when the puppet fell, and otherwise controlled him as he danced. Aside from its spiritual function, the significance of the three generations appearing in this dance, and the particular effect of the seven-year-old grandson

performing with his father in the role of puppeteer was not lost on the audience. The image of timelessness and stability of Yoshigosaburo's school was established in the performance of this one piece. The audience was thoroughly charmed.

Dances—large group pieces, solos, duets—rolled on throughout the day, from 10:30 a.m. to approximately 7:00 p.m. The music was especially rich and varied, going beyond the usual mix of *nagauta* (long song) and *gidayu* (narrative singing). *Yamatogaku*, a Meiji-era (1868-1912) form, sung by a large chorus of women, provided a haunting accompaniment to some pieces. *Yamatogaku's* melody line and traditional Japanese instruments, blended with Western-style harmonic singing, created an unusual and beautiful effect.

Hanayagi Isaburo elicited lively approval for his *Shunkyo Kagami Jishi*, in which a young woman is coaxed to dance with a lion puppet and becomes possessed by its spirit. Though his ruggedly handsome face didn't very well suit the role of the young woman, Yayoi, his display of emotion as she became possessed by the spirit of the lion and the show-stopping, wig-tossing finale set off shouts and camera flashes all over the auditorium (the *kakegoe* tradition, in which fans shout performers's nicknames at certain points in a performance, holds for *nichibu* as well as for *kabuki*).

Yoshigosaburo demonstrated the virtuosity for which he is justly famous. In *Ni Nin Wankyu*, he appeared as the handsome, but mentally distracted young lover of Matsuyama Tayu. As he danced, she appeared from behind the large pine tree. During a gentle and flirtatious duet, the two exchanged outer coats, metaphorically becoming the same person. Then, she disappeared, leaving the young man in a romantic daze, wondering if he only imagined her.

The new piece, *Pari Hitori*, was Yoshigosaburo's personal triumph. In two scenes, a bridge on the Seine and a café in the Bois, a turn-of-the-century Japanese woman consoled herself as she wandered through Paris. From the bridge, she admired the view of the Paris skyline. As sunset turned to dusk, the lights of the city winked on behind her. In the second scene, she emerged from the Metro station in the Bois, carefully rearranging her shawl and parasol after the experience. She came to a café, drank a little too much wine, and reminisced about her lover while leaning against a lamp post. As it became late, she realized it was time to go home, alone. She hugged her shawl more tightly around her, preparing to leave, as the lights faded.

Yoshigosaburo's original piece took risks by juxtaposing Western elements with traditional *nichibu* style. He used recorded music—a mix of turn-of-

the-century Japanese and Western, a uniquely constructed European setting and a historically accurate costume. Audience members crowded into the auditorium, buzzed excitedly throughout, and applauded wildly at the end.

The Saturday program finale featured the *soke*, another prominent dancer, and Yoshigosaburo in *Sai Kai Ha*. Like several others in the program, this dance was performed *su odori*, with the dancers in formal *kimono* instead of the *oshiroi* makeup and elaborate wigs that would ordinarily characterize the dance. *Su odori* style is an established style in *Nihon buyo* performance which allows the audience to concentrate on the dancer and choreography, rather than on a spectacular costume (it also, incidentally, saves money for wig and costume rentals).

Rather than feature a large number of dancers, this finale featured the highest-ranking dancers present. The Sunday finale was the more spectacular *Shiki no Hana*, in which women danced in “black *geisha*” style costumes and men in formal *kimono*. More than thirty people swept about the stage in this piece, including Yoshigosaburo and his son, Isaburo.

At the end of the Saturday performance, everyone was elated and exhausted, but the day was not over yet. Yoshigosaburo and his family quickly changed back into their formal clothes and rushed to a large hotel in downtown Kobe for a formal reception. The mayor was there, along with several other dignitaries. The *soke* held court in the corner, receiving congratulations from everyone present. Yoshigosaburo and his wife beamed at everyone and circulated around the room. A banner proclaimed the success of the *40th Annual Gosaburo Kai*. The party ended early, however, because the performance continued the next day.

The *Gosaburo Kai* is a significant event for this branch of *Hanayagi ryu*. The cooperation of the *soke* indicates Yoshigosaburo’s high ranking as a teacher. By appearing in the same program with *Pari Hitori*, moreover, the *soke* could be seen as giving her approval for an unusual, modern *nichibu* composition.

*Nichibu happyokai*, however, are not always as carefully controlled, nor as well produced. The unevenness in performance reflects the condition and quality of the *nichibu* school. The school’s finances as well as those of individual students usually determine the performance venue, frequency of recitals, who performs and what pieces will be performed. Japanese *happyokai* is very expensive. Rehearsals with the teacher and/or the *soke* (if the student is fortunate enough), costume and wig rental, stage crew, costumer, wig master, musicians, and any *koken* (onstage attendants) that may be required are substantial costs for

performers. In addition, extra money is given out as *goshugi* (honoraria) to all of the above individuals, as well as to *sen'pai* (senior students) and teachers who helped the dancer in any way through her dance career up to that moment. Though the dancer may save money on costume and wig rental by preferring to dance *su odori*, the *goshugi* tradition is so firmly established that failure to comply can result in difficulties, such as noisy backstage crews banging away on scenery during the performer's time on stage.<sup>6</sup>

Publicity is usually limited to the family and friends of teacher and students (the general public is not excluded, but is usually not informed in advance either). Some large *happyokai*, such as that of the Soke Fujima *ryu*, attract media attention due to the large number of *kabuki* actors who take part. This recital is always sold out well in advance, as students come from all over Japan and as far as Hawaii and the continental U.S. for the event, held at the Kabuki-za in Tokyo. The general public contents itself with excerpts on the evening news and perhaps a one-hour special on NHK Television.

*Nichibu* has been criticized for the way money changes hands throughout the hierarchies, though the same arrangement holds true for *kabuki* performers. The teachers contend that they cannot maintain their schools without the money generated by this method. *Natori* dancers<sup>7</sup> may accept engagements for money at private functions, such as weddings, with the teacher's permission, to offset the cost of recital performance, though a portion of the fee is always given to the teacher as a courtesy.

Many observers and admirers of *Nihon buyo* suggest the dependence on money contributions from students degrades the quality of the dance. Money sometimes supercedes talent. If only mediocre students with means can perform, how can gifted students in less fortunate circumstances be seen? Gunji Masakatsu especially expressed his regret that mediocrity is rampant in the *nichibu* world.<sup>8</sup> Another scholar I spoke with suggested the whole set up is "rotten." Several teachers I spoke with are also less than happy, though they see the current system as a financial necessity.

*Nihon buyo* has traveled overseas as Japanese have emigrated to start new lives abroad. Until the 1950's, most of the dance activity in the United States was concentrated on the West Coast. From that time, however, *nichibu* spread across the U.S. Today, *Nihon buyo* is mostly concentrated on both coasts and in large cities. In spite of adaptations to Western performance venues, recital performances still essentially follow the structure outlined above, with the important exceptions

of length of time for performances, and the use of recorded, rather than live, music.

Ichifuji-kai Dance Association was established in New York City by Fujima nishiki (Miyoko Watanabe) as a *Soke Fujima ryu* group in the early 1960s. Nishiki settled there following study since childhood in California and a ten-year apprenticeship with the headmaster of the style of Japan. I have studied and danced with the group since 1989, so my perspective is that of a performer and close observer of Ichifuji-kai and other *nichibu* groups in the New York City area.

At Ichifuji-Kai, recitals follow a traditional order for the appearance of performers and the dances being performed where practicable, but the overall length of the performance is only two to three hours. Audience includes family and friends, but as the group is small, it requires quite a bit of publicity to fill a 200 seat theater. Unlike Japanese *happyokai*-goers, the audience usually stays for the entire performance, and food, in keeping with Western custom, is prohibited from the auditorium. Also, as Western audiences are not familiar with the dances being performed, Artistic Director Fujima Nishiki has developed a method of explaining the dances to the audience. Acting as emcee, Nishiki Sensei appears before each dance, outlining the plot and demonstrating the illustrative *furi* (pantomime gestures) used in each piece. Nishiki Sensei feels her role may be unique in *Nihon buyo* performance, which has earned her a reputation as a gifted speaker as well as dancer.

The largest difference is in the cost to the dancers to perform. Ichifuji-Kai members who choose to perform take responsibility for a portion of the theater cost, but the bulk of the expense is covered by ticket sales. Wigs and costumes are routinely borrowed from each other, with some wigs and props rented from Nishiki Sensei for a modest fee. Group lessons are less expensive than traditional, private ones. Most importantly, the *goshugi* tradition does not exist in the US. The group attracts a variety of New Yorkers, along with some college-age Japanese students studying abroad. Most likely, they would not be able to afford to study *Nihon buyo* in Japan.

In content, however, the dances that make up Ichifuji-Kai's recitals reflect the classical *Soke Fujima ryu* repertory, and if anything are even more traditional than what one might see at a recital in Japan. Classics include *Sagi Musume* (*Heron Maiden*) and *Fuji Musume* (*Wisteria Maiden*), among others. Though Nishiki Sensei arranges the dances performed, very little in the way of new choreography is added. Dances are selected with an eye to each student's ability, the time of year, and overall length of the performance being planned. While

dancers express a preference regarding what they would like to perform, Nishiki Sensei has the final word. Costumes, wigs and makeup authentically reflect the specific dances being performed, or are done *su odori* style. The overall effect of an Ichifuji-Kai performance, though brief, is elegant and traditional.

While it owes a substantial debt to *kabuki* (and vice versa), whether East or West, *Nihon buyo happyokai* is the epitome of *Nihon buyo*. The structure of the performance illustrates the hierarchy of a school, and the quality of the performance accurately portrays the skill of the teacher and students. In Japan, a knowledgeable audience critically judges what it sees. In the US, performers have evolved other ways to inform the audience of the plots and conventions of classical dances. The embracing of tradition and innovation, and the ability to appeal to audiences of radically different backgrounds, shows *Nihon buyo* to be a genuine example of world dance.

## Notes

1. Gunji Masakatsu, *Buyo: The Classical Dance* (Tokyo: Walker/Weatherhill, 1960). This work also exists in a previous, more substantial version in Japanese. Please note Japanese names throughout this article are given family name first.

2. Fujita Hiroshi, *Nihon Buyo* (Tokyo: Gyousei, 1989).

3. Clara A.N. Whitney, *Clara's Diary: An American Girl in Meiji Japan* (Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd., 1979) 260.

4. Jonah Salz, *Otojiro Kawakami and Sada Yakko; International Reformers* (NY: Master's Thesis, New York University Department of Performance Studies, 1985) 39.

5. The problem of translating titles of *nichibu* pieces is particularly complicated, as literal translation usually sheds no light whatsoever on the nature of the dance. Where practicable, I have used interpretations by my dance teacher, Fujima Nishiki (Miyoko Watanabe) which she feels are appropriate to the spirit of the dance under discussion. In other places I have briefly summarized the plot, if there is one (some dances have little narrative content).

6. Rental of costumes, wigs and props as well as honoraria for everyone who assists at a performance is also well-established in *kabuki*. For a more thorough discussion of the financial arrangements involved, see Nakamura Matazo, *Kabuki Backstage, Onstage, an Actor's Life*, translated by Mark Oshima (Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd., 1990).

7. *Natori* indicates the dancer has taken and passed an exam administered by the *ryu*. The dancer can now take a professional name consisting of the "family name" of the *ryu* (Fujima, Hanayagi, etc.) and a "personal" name that usually reflects the student's teacher. For example, Hanayagi Yoshigosaburo's son's professional name is Hanayagi Isaburo. *Natori* dancers can accept separate engagements and can become teachers, though many prefer continued study instead.

8. Gunji Masakatsu, *Buyo: the Classical Dance* (Tokyo: Walker/Weatherhill 1960) 181-182.