

Physical Imitations of the Deva King Statue: Performances of Kabuki in the Seventeenth Century

TAKEI Kyōzō

National Institute of Japanese Literature (Emeritus)

Translated by

Tove BJÖRK

Saitama University

Introduction

Noh and *kyōgen* 狂言, which developed in the fifteenth century, alongside kabuki and the *ningyō jōruri* 人形浄瑠璃 puppet theater (known also as *bunraku*), which developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, are generally taken to be the representative traditional performance arts of Japan. In addition, numerous street performing arts (*daidō-gei* 大道芸) and parlor performance traditions (*zashiki-gei* 座敷芸) also existed. Both of these latter arts drew upon and inspired by turns the four representative genres, and both have moreover maintained performance traditions that continue up to the present day.

This article investigates one instance of *kyōgen*'s influence on kabuki. Specifically, it discusses how the physical acting involved in the mime act “Deva King” (Niō 仁王) was incorporated into the kabuki repertoire by the specialist comedic actor Yūnan Saburobee ゆうなん三郎兵衛. This article also explores the act's relationship to the medieval *kyōgen* play of the same name, as well as its relationship to various other performance genres.

The *Kyōgen* Play *Deva King*

The *kyōgen* play *Deva King* is depicted in one of the illustrations found in the document *Kyōgen-e* 狂言絵 (*Kyōgen* Pictures; **fig. 1**). What is happening in this scene can be explained by consulting the script for the *kyōgen* play *Deva King* as it is performed today.

A small-time thug, the stock *kyōgen* character known as Suppa すっぱ, who has here lost his money gambling, pretends to be a statue of the Deva King in order to steal alms and offerings from visitors to a certain temple. The play is based on



Figure 1. Scene from the *kyōgen* play *Deva King* (Niō 仁王). From *Kyōgen-e* (*Kyōgen Pictures*), a collection of such generic illustrations. National Institute of Japanese Literature. <https://doi.org/10.20730/200017952> (image 12).

the Japanese belief that sick people can be healed by touching, on the statues of gods and deities, that particular part of the body corresponding to the site of their own illness. In the play, a man who has hurt his leg thus touches the leg of the false Deva King statue, who jumps in surprise. The man becomes suspicious and begins to feel his way up the length of this Deva King statue, moving up the leg until he reaches the crotch, which he tickles. At this point, Suppa cannot contain himself and breaks out laughing. His deceit being discovered, he is chased off the temple premises by an enraged crowd.

Figure 1 shows Suppa mimicking the Deva King with a bared upper body. Two temple-goers are tickling him with their fans, and Suppa is doing all he can not to burst out laughing. This act is the highlight of the play.

It is unclear exactly when this act was created and first performed. The program for the actor Shichidayū's 七太夫 performance in 1620 (Genna 元和 6) is preserved in the document collection *Edo Shoki Nō Bangumi Hikae* 江戸初期能番組控 (Collection of Early Modern Noh Programs, no. 6/25) at the Nogami Memorial Noh Theater Research Institute of Hōsei University. Because *kyōgen* pieces were performed as interludes to noh plays, this collection also includes *kyōgen* programs. Among these, we find *Deva King*. This shows that the play was clearly in the *kyōgen* repertoire by at least the early seventeenth century.

In addition, we can read the lines of the two temple-goers mentioned above in a number of seventeenth-century *kyōgen* scripts. In Ōkura Toraakira's 大蔵虎明 (1597–1662) *kyōgen* script book, included in the published script collection *Ōkura kaden no sho kobon nō kyōgen* 大蔵家伝之書古本能狂言 (Old Kyōgen Scripts of the Ōkura School), one of the temple-goers has the following line:

The eyes of this Deva King statue move! Very suspicious . . . I think I will try to tickle it.¹

From the pictorial evidence, in combination with the programs and script books, we can know to some extent how this act was performed in the seventeenth century, and deduce that the tickling part was indeed the highlight of the act.

The Enactment of *Deva King* in Kabuki

The *kyōgen* play *Deva King* migrated to the kabuki repertoire early on. In 1667 (Kanbun 寛文 7), the diary of Matsudaira Naonori 松平直矩 (also called Yamato no kami 大和守, 1642–1695), the kabuki-loving lord of Echigo 越後 domain (present-day Niigata Prefecture), notes in its entry for the second day of the fifth month that a banquet was held at Naonori's mansion in Edo, at which he had invited *ningyō jōruri* puppeteers to perform.

During this period, short skits performed by kabuki actors were often inserted between the acts of a puppet play, and, on the occasion of Naonori's banquet, an interval play called *Tickled Deva King* (Kosokuri Niō こそくり仁王) was performed as an interlude between the *jōruri*'s second and third acts. This record of a puppet play performance shows us that the *kyōgen* play *Deva King* had been assimilated into the kabuki repertoire already by this time.

Yūnan Saburobee and His Imitation Acts

Yūnan Saburobee was a popular comic actor, active during the second half of the seventeenth century, who was famous for his imitations. He appears more than ten times in various documents between 1657 (Meireki 明暦 3) and 1701 (Genroku 元禄 14).

According to the *ukiyo-zōshi* 浮世草子 novel *Kōshoku shiki banashi* 好色四季咄 (Amorous Rumors of the Four Seasons, Genroku 2 [1689]), “Yūnan was famous for his art of imitation, being known for his skills not only in Kyoto and Osaka, but even as far away as Edo.” In the *ukiyo-zōshi* novel *Kōshoku yurai zōroe* 好色由来揃 (Selection of Amorous Legends, c. Genroku 5 [1692]), Yūnan Saburobee is listed under “Famous Imitators,” where he is placed before Umenoka Jiroemon 梅香次郎右衛門, Kiyari Rokurobee 木やり六郎兵衛, and other celebrated performers.

Generally speaking, there are two major types of imitation. One is vocal imitation; the other is physical imitation. The art of imitation as practiced by Yūnan

¹ Ōkura, *Ōkura kaden no sho kobon nō kyōgen*, vol. 3, p. 106.

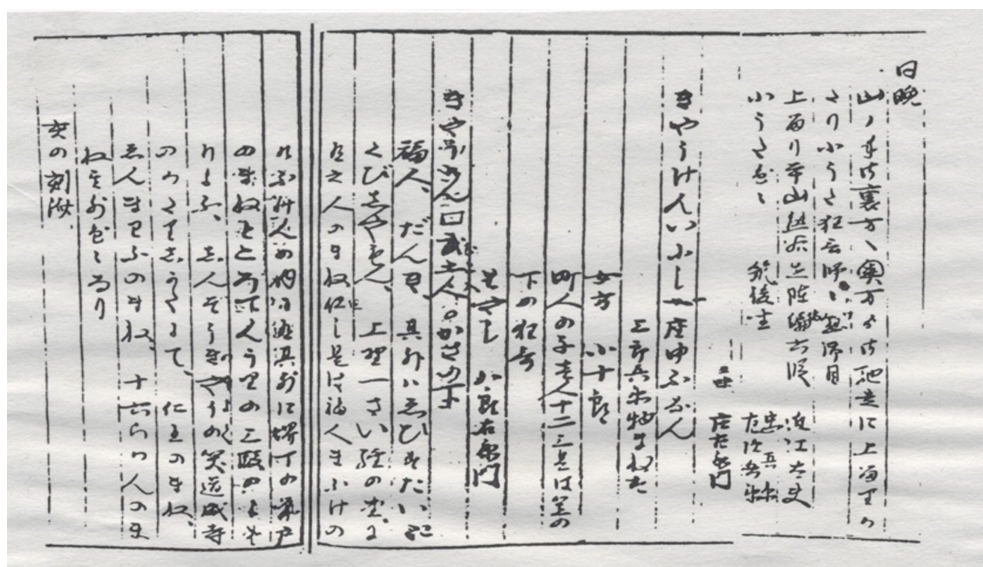


Figure 2. *Yamato no kami nikki* 大和守日記 (Diary of Yamato no kami). Northern Culture Museum, Niigata Prefecture. Photograph by author.

Saburobee is also depicted in Matsudaira Naonori's diary, in the entry for the twentieth day of the eighth month, 1662 (Kanbun 2). On this day, several actors and entertainers had been called by Naonori to his Edo mansion.

Here, let us take a closer look at the entry itself. The diary's original manuscript is presumed lost to fire, but **figure 2** shows the relevant diary page from the copy closest to the original, a late nineteenth-century manuscript housed at the Northern Culture Museum.

Here we first see the name Yūnan Saburobee, and five lines later, we learn the content of his imitations: "He imitates the calling of the barkers in front of the mouseholes of the Sakai-chō 堺丁 quarters." The Sakai-chō entertainment quarter was an area with many theaters. "Mouseholes" here refers to these theatres' small entrances, in front of which barkers would stand on small stages, advertising the contents of the various plays with small skits and boisterous calling. From this description we know that Yūnan Saburobee performed an imitation that was a vocal art. He also performed acts like "The Three Changes of the *Tokoroten* Seller's Voice" (*Tokoroten-uri no sandan ni henka suru urigoe* ところてん売りの三段に変化する売り声). *Tokoroten* 心太 is a kind of thin noodle dish eaten cold in summer, whose street peddlers would use a particular "sales jingle" in which they changed their vocal tone three times.

"The Laughter of the Newly-wed Woman" (*Nūzuma no iroiro na waraikata* 新妻の色々な笑い方) was another one of Yūnan's acts. Here it seems it was the laughter that "changed": one imagines the woman reacting to someone asking impertinently about her wedding night, to which she laughs now with embar-

rassment, now sensually, now vulgarly, all in quick sequence. This act is probably connected to the stock figure of the bordello matron feigning embarrassment, which frequently appears in early seventeenth-century kabuki skits.²

All of the above acts are vocal imitations, and indeed Yūnan Saburobee even imitated birds and the sounds of various animals. Yet he was also skilled at physical imitation, with contemporary documents describing him as a master of “all kinds of imitations.”

In the diary entry above, towards the end, we find the skits “Deva King Imitation,” “King Enma Imitation,” and “The Sixteen Arhats,” all of which involved the imitation of Buddhist statues. Yūnan Saburobee would physically imitate the poses and posture of these statues, which were frequently seen at popular temples. They were therefore familiar to spectators, who would visit such temples both as a part of their religious practice and for leisure.

Soroma Shichirobee’s “Deva King” Imitation

Pictorial evidence of how seventeenth-century kabuki actors performed “Deva King” can be found in Ihara Saikaku’s 井原西鶴 (1642–1693) *Shoen Ōkagami* 諸艶大鑑 (The Great Mirror of Beauties, Jōkyō 貞享 1 [1684]; fig. 3).

This picture shows a banquet at a bordello in the licensed pleasure quarters. Courtesans entertain the customers. In addition, male performers called *taiko-mochi* 太鼓持 (also called *bōkan* 幫間) who specialize in comic skits have been hired for the occasion. At this particular banquet, Ihara Saikaku recounts, a popular puppet-play narrator named Geki 外記 narrated the traveling section (*michiyuki* 道行) of the play *Heianjō* 平安城 (The Imperial Capital), while the puppeteer Oyama Jinzaemon おやま甚左衛門 manipulated a female puppet. This scene is depicted on the right-hand side of the picture below; the narrator Geki is the man holding a fan, and Oyama Jinzaemon is the seated man with a puppet. The puppet wears a traveling hat and a staff, indicating that it is indeed the traveling scene being performed.

Saikaku also tells us that a performer called Soroma Shichirobee そろま七郎兵衛 regaled the guests with his “Deva King” imitation; this is depicted on the left-hand side. Shichirobee is shown with a naked upper body, extending one leg forward and flexing one arm upwards. If we look closely, we see that Shichirobee has his mouth closed, while the spectators’ mouths are open. This depiction suggests the respective postures of the paired Deva King statues commonly found flanking temple entrances, the one with mouth closed, the other with mouth open. These postures are usually described with reference to the syllables *a* 阿 and *un* 吽. The “*a*” Deva King stands with an open mouth and spreads his fingers and toes wide, symbolizing outgoing energy, whereas the “*un*” Deva King presents a mouth tightly shut, with closed fists and curled toes, symbolizing incoming energy.

²Takei, *Kabuki to wa ikanaru engeki ka*, pp. 28–29.

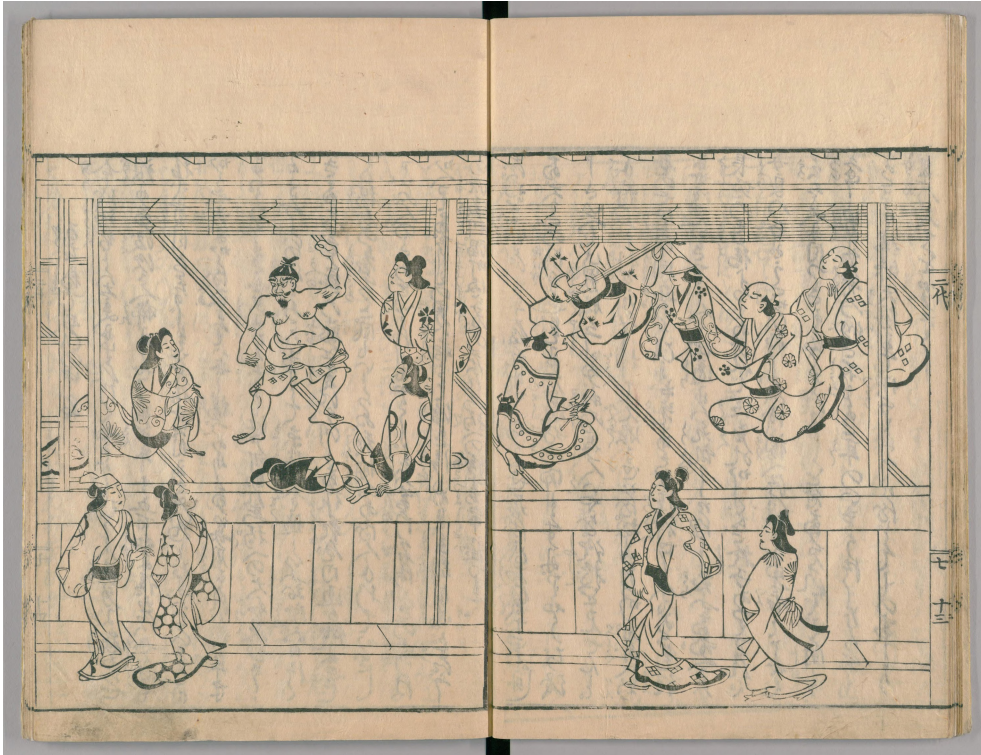


Figure 3. *Shoen Okagami* 諸艶大鑑 (The Great Mirror of Beauties, Jōkyō 1 [1684]). National Diet Library.

<https://doi.org/10.11501/2544910> (image 15).

Soroma Shichirobee appears in the document collection *Nakamura zakki* 中村雜記 (Nakamura’s Miscellaneous Notes, Genroku 16 [1703]). He is therefore clearly a historical figure and not a figment of Ihara Saikaku’s imagination. If we look closely at **figure 3**, we can observe that the fingers on Shichirobee’s left hand are missing. The many various implications of a handicapped actor imitating a Buddhist deity cannot be discussed here in detail, but let it suffice to say that this illustration can be an entry point for reevaluating how the body has been perceived in the history of Japanese performance arts.

Soroma Shichirobee performed in the parlors of the pleasure quarters, but just like Yūnan Saburobee, he was also often invited to the mansions of various domain lords; and as seen in the documents presented above, both actors included “Deva King” in their repertoire. It is likely that Shichirobee was Saburobee’s student, or that they otherwise had a reason to work closely together. In any case, male performers such as these, specializing in performances for private venues, may be considered the forerunners of the male *taiko-mochi* professional party entertainers in the pleasure quarters.

A few *taiko mochi* entertainers are still active today, and “Deva King” is still

performed by them. Therefore, we can also see in photographs how the act is performed (fig. 4).

The Deva King statue imitations performed by Yūnan Saburobee and Soroma Shichirobee were adopted into various kabuki performances in the late seventeenth century, and we can see their legacy still in plays of the kabuki repertoire today. Take, for example, *Sugawara denju tenarai kagami* 菅原伝授手習鑑 (Sugawara and the Secrets of Calligraphy, 1746), one of the most famous plays in both the puppet theater and kabuki repertoires. The names of the two main protagonists are Matsuō 松王 (“Pine King”) and Umeō 梅王 (“Plum King”), which may represent a play on the Japanese name for the Deva King: Niō (literally “two kings”).

There are numerous pictures of the enactment of “Deva King,” but I will close this



Figure 4. Tomimoto Hanpei 富本半平 II performing the “Deva King” imitation. From Fujii Sōtetsu 藤井宗哲, *Taiko mochi (hōkan) no seikatsu* たいこもち(幫間)の生活 (Yūzankaku Shuppan, 1982), frontispiece, p. ii.



Figure 5. “Naniwamaru’s Deva King Imitation” (Naniwamaru Niō no mane なには丸仁王のまね). From the illustrated *kyōgen* play book *Yamato* (provisional title). Imanishi Yūichirō, private collection.

investigation into the physical imitation of this Buddhist deity's statue by presenting a late-seventeenth century document discovered by Imanishi Yūichirō 今西祐一郎 (fig. 5).

I have previously argued that such imitations of the Deva King statue led eventually to the development of the famous stylized poses in kabuki known as *mie* 見得.³ Since then, several counter-arguments have been raised, notably in the publication *Geinō-shi kenkyū* 芸能史研究 (History of the Performing Arts) in the special issue “Kabuki no mie” 歌舞伎の見得 (Mie Poses in Kabuki), no. 223, October 2018. For those further interested in the topic, I recommend reading both publications and forming your own opinion.

References

- Ōkura Yatarō 大蔵弥太郎. *Ōkura kaden no sho kobon nō kyōgen* 大蔵家伝之書古本能狂言. Kyoto: Rinsen Shoten, 1976.
- Takei Kyōzō 武井協三. *Kabuki to wa ikanaru engeki ka* 歌舞伎とはいかなる演劇か. Yagi Shoten, 2017.
- Takei Kyōzō. “Kyōgen no Niō, Yūnan no monomane, aragoto no mie” 狂言の仁王、ゆうなんの物真似、荒事の見得. In Takei Kyōzō, *Wakashū kabuki, yarō kabuki no kenkyū* 若衆歌舞伎・野郎歌舞伎の研究, pp. 152–180. Yagi Shoten, 2000.

³Takei, “Kyōgen no Niō.”