THEATER—EAST AND WEST

HISTORY REIGNED ON TOKYO’S STAGE

By CARL GILBERT

On March 5, the nine leading theaters of Tokyo, including the Kabuki-za, closed their gates for a period of one year as an emergency measure caused by the war. The following pages, written by a German denizen of Tokyo, who is an enthusiast of the Nippon stage, present an analysis of Tokyo’s stage and theater-goers during the last months prior to the closing.—K.M.

RECENTLY, in the Tokyo Shimbun, the Japanese Bureau of Information published a statistical study of the Japanese theater which revealed the surprising fact that the great majority of Japanese theatrical troupes were performing Kabuki or at any rate historical plays, or a mixture of historical and modern plays; and that only a very few troupes performed modern plays exclusively. Even more surprising is the fact that at least half of the Japanese movie production is devoted to historical subjects.

In January 1944, Tokyo’s two largest theaters—the Kabuki and the Meiji—showed performances by classical Kabuki troupes; in addition to this, the Kotobuki Theater in Hongocho and smaller theaters in Asakusa and Shinjuku as well as a theater in Yokohama played nothing but Kabuki and always to full houses. Moreover, the Bunraku puppet theater from Osaka, whose plays are closely related to Kabuki, were performed in Tokyo at the Embujo Theater in December. Thus there can be no denying the immense popularity of the Kabuki plays, the classical form of Japanese drama.

At the demand of the public, the Kabuki as well as the puppet stage always perform the same limited repertoire of classical tragedies with unvarying success. Some of the most famous of these dramas are Chushingura (the story of the Forty-Seven Ronins); the story of Igami Genta from The Thousand Cherry Trees of Yoshitsune; Terakoya (The Village School); Kanjincho (The story of Yoshitsune and Benkei at the barrier of Ataka); and the story of Moritsuna’s sacrifice. In 1943, one of the greatest screen successes was a version of Chushingura entitled Genroku Chushingura. In 1944 another new version of Chushingura is being produced, this time called Rokyoku Chushingura. This film is destined to be shown with the same success to packed houses.

The popular Japanese art of storytelling with samisen accompaniment takes the same subjects as do the puppet and Kabuki shows. The heroes of these tragedies and tales are in turn the same heroes whom every Japanese knows from his school primer. Moreover, the moral world is the same as that taught in Japanese moral primers. The favorite of the classical Japanese tragedy is the history of the struggle for power between the two noble clans of the Genji and the Heikes in the fourteenth century, a struggle which lasted for more than fifty years. A new edition of the classic work on this struggle, the Heike Monogatari, was recently published. It is the centuries-old “best seller” of Japan. Kabuki and puppet stage alike have taken a number of grandiose tragedies from this material.

Those who often go to see this type of play or movie will be struck by the “modernness” and “topicality” of the spiritual contents of this material. For these classical feudal tragedies of Japan always point in a negative sense to the tragedy of defeat and the uselessness of hoping for mercy at the hands of the enemy, and in a positive sense to the absolute value of doing one’s duty, of loyalty, and of sacrificing one’s life.

In the tragedy Moritsuna, the brothers Moritsuna and Takatsuna find themselves in opposite camps owing to a series of unfortunate events. Moritsuna’s twelve-year-old son returns from his first battle with Takatsuna’s son Koshiro, who is also twelve years old, as a prisoner. Moritsuna’s lord orders him not to harm Koshiro but to hold him captive, as he hopes that Takatsuna’s
love for his son will force him to capitulate. Moritsuna, however, secretly requests his mother to persuade Koshiro to commit *seppuku* (honorable suicide by his own sword). His object is to save his brother Takatsu na from the possible shame and disgrace of a capitulation which, according to the Japanese sense of honor, would at the same time stain the honor of the whole family. He is also influenced by the thought that, as long as Koshiro is in captivity, Takatsu na might be weakened in his loyalty to his lord.

Koshiro declares himself willing to die but expresses the childish wish to see his father and mother once again. At this moment news is brought that Takatsu na with a small band of warriors has attacked the mighty army of Tokimasa, Moritsuna's lord. Moritsuna feels that Takatsu na has lost his reason over his love for his son and is going to his certain death. Then it is reported that Takatsu na has been defeated. Lord Tokimasa appears with his suite and claims that he has captured Takatsu na's head. He orders Moritsuna to identify the head of his brother. While Moritsuna, grief-stricken, is about to carry out this sad duty, little Koshiro rushes forward as soon as the head is uncovered, and with the words “Father, I follow you into death!” he falls upon his own sword. Thereupon Moritsuna confirms that it is his brother's head, and his lord leaves satisfied.

However, it is not Takatsu na's head at all. Koshiro had immediately realized this and had killed himself to cover up the deception and to save his father. His dying words are: “Will Father win his war now?” Moritsuna is conquered by the heroism of the boy Koshiro. He decides to commit suicide to atone for his disloyalty toward his lord as soon as his brother Takatsu na is ready to do battle again.

This tragedy is so significant because it contains the two poles of death as a sacrifice and death of atonement in the Japanese moral code. Death as a sacrifice is the supreme fulfillment of life; death as atonement the redemption from shameful guilt.

In the story of the Forty-Seven Ronins, these men avenge the death of their lord on the guilty one. But since the latter is a great noble, they give themselves up to the law after having done their duty. The law demands their death on the gallows; the people demand their acquittal for their loyalty. The sentence pronounced by the ruler is—honorable suicide. The Forty-Seven Ronins accept this sentence with deep gratitude, for it is only thus that they can acquire supreme fulfillment: the death of sacrifice for their lord. Not until they all commit harakiri together at the grave of their lord do they become an example of *bushido*. Had they remained alive, there would have been no fulfillment. That is the way the Japanese people still feel. This is the sole explanation for the tremendous popularity of every performance of *Chushingura*.

The modern Japanese plays have not yet been able to produce anything equal to these classical tragedies. Now and again, recent war films have shown a similar spirit as, for example, the screen tragedy *Tank Captain Nishizuma*, which depicts the career of a Japanese officer and shows him in his unflinching sense of duty, his example to his men, and his final death of sacrifice. Most modern plays and films, however, are too obviously determined by political didactics.

In his book *Inside Asia*, the American journalist John Gunther stated that the Japanese had no sense of humor. This is not true. The Japanese have a very pronounced sense of humor which is expressed, among other things, in their humorous tales (*rakugo*), which are told by special storytellers and enjoy great popularity. Nevertheless, John Gunther unconsciously came near to discovering an essential characteristic of the Japanese people—their positive attitude toward the tragic.

The President of the Japanese Actors' Association, Ichimura Uzaemon, recently told me that the Japanese had never taken any particular trouble to acquaint the Anglo-Saxon peoples with their classical tragedies, as they felt this to be futile, since the English and the Americans regard the culture of a people from a purely materialistic point of view. Matsumoto Koshiro, the seventy-four-year-old unexcelled Kabuki actor, who throughout November and December played the role of Benkei in *Kanjicho* to the applause of packed houses, explained to me that it was typical of the Japanese people that even now, in the midst of war, they demand to see not light comedies but their classical tragedies, and that these very tragedies are reinforcing the people's will to fight. The Japanese nation does not require new instruction on the spirit of sacrifice and loyalty by means of these
tragedies, Matsumoto Koshiro continued, but it corresponds to the innermost and deepest longings of the Japanese people to see these tragedies again and again, tragedies which represent, so to speak, a mirror of the Japanese soul, of the Yamato damashi, and which, Matsumoto Koshiro concluded, help to supply the Japanese people with the strength for new work and new battles.

My good friend the Japanese patron of the theater, Yokoyama Yui, emphasized in a conversation we had not long ago that the Japanese shows himself to be so strong in time of need and so composed in danger because, from his earliest youth, he is constantly familiarized with tragedy, with the idea of death. Unfortunately, he said, a part of the Japanese nation had been led astray by the shallow, superficial Anglo-Saxon culture to think that, as long as there was life, every other question could be solved. But this, according to him, was entirely wrong: only death could solve all questions, and only the death of sacrifice could give complete redemption.

The Japanese classical tragedy shows the death of sacrifice to be the most beautiful and noble experience of the Japanese people. It presents the death of the mother for the sake of her child, that of the child for the sake of its parents, that of the wife for her husband, that of the friend for his friend, and that of the subjects for their ruler. The supreme fulfillment for the individual Japanese is still the death of sacrifice. The heroes of Attu, Tarawa, and Makin have through their sacrifice in the present war become deities of the nation. This path of sacrifice has been walked and taught by the heroes of Japanese history of all times; it is the "divine path." To give expression to this is the supreme task of Japanese art.

In one of the classical Kabuki dramas the words occur: "Life lasts but one generation; the name outlasts a thousand generations." Schiller expressed it in the words: "He who would live in song must perish in life." Today the Japanese soldier is sacrificing his life as a hero as he has been taught by his primer, his history, and his art, so that through him the nation may live on truly victorious and his name may not fade in a thousand generations.

That is the great lesson imparted by the classical tragedy of the Kabuki and puppet theater to the Japanese people.

THE PARIS THEATER SEASON

For centuries Paris has been one of the chief centers of Europe's theatrical art. The following article, written by a Swiss author living in Paris, shows how this tradition is being carried on and what effects four years of war have had on the Paris stage.—K.M.

TWO GREAT MEN

The Paris winter season of 1943-44 was characterized by the death of two of the most outstanding personalities in the theatrical world of France—André Antoine and Jean Giraudoux.

Antoine, the patriarch of the modern French stage, died early in November in Brittany, were he had retired a few years ago. In spite of his eighty-six years, he had remained young in spirit and kept his love of argument to the last. On the day of his death, he married the woman who had been a loyal companion to him for thirty-five years. At the same time, the Paris theater which has borne his name since 1897 brought out a cycle of gala performances for the "Triumph of Antoine," for which four of his one-act plays from the former repertoire of the Théâtre Libre were dug up. Sacha Guitry had arranged these benefit performances in Antoine's honor, for the latter was living more or less in poverty, as had been the case almost throughout his career of sixty years. As his biographer put it: "He knew only one purpose in life—art, and only one financial result—the deficit." He was a representative of that idealism, that moving spirit of the theater, which wrecked it again and again out of its routine.

Of even greater consequence to the French theater was the death on January 31, 1944, of Jean Giraudoux. Giraudoux, whose comedy Amphitryon 38 was produced all over the world, was one of the best-known and most effective dramatic authors of France and a brilliant example of Gallic wit and humor. Born in 1882 as the son of an engineer, he traveled, mostly on foot, all over