CHAPTER 2

THEORY INTO PERFORMANCE

*Transgressing Genders: Toward an Intercultural Feminist Theory of Gender Performance*

**Japanese Kabuki Scholars**

Japanese scholars identify onnagata performance as an essential feature of kabuki theatre. There are many published studies of famous onnagata, their performance histories, and their stylization techniques. There is rarely a general book or article on kabuki that does not refer to the onnagata as a unique feature of kabuki. Scholars proudly compare the onnagata tradition to the ancient Greek practice of male actors in female roles, to Shakespeare’s boy actors in female roles, and to the Beijing Opera’s *dan* (female role specialist). The art of the kabuki onnagata is venerated as a Japanese tradition that may be ranked alongside other great cultural expressions of the world. The onnagata is a cultural icon bound to a past that is deeply cherished.

Japanese scholars writing on onnagata history generally refer to the traditions of early folk theatre in which men dressed as female characters. Sometimes they cite a connection to early performance traditions of *Shirabyōshi* (women who performed entertainments while dressed in male attire). In his comprehensive studies of early performance traditions connected to kabuki, Gunji Masakatsu discusses the early performance and folk entertainment traditions. He mentions the frequent separation of the sexes into all female and all male troupes, laying the groundwork for the practice of gender role playing. The nō, the classical mask theatre, set a tradition for men playing female roles. Female shamans and female prostitute performers are sometimes mentioned as precursors because they performed in male-like attire. Still, scholars most frequently turn directly to Okuni and her kabuki as the starting point for the art of kabuki gender roles.¹
Several volumes focus on the history and creation of the art of onnagata: notably Fujita Hiroshi’s *Onnagata no Keizu* (Onnagata Geneology) and Adachi Naoru’s *Kabuki Gekijō Onnagata Fūzoku Saiken* (A Study of Kabuki Onnagata Customs and Manners). These authors outline the early history of onnagata performance in kabuki and then provide short biographies of famous Edo period onnagata. Both Fujita and Adachi speculate about the continued existence of onnagata and discuss reasons why men play these roles in kabuki. Fujita observes, “When onnagata decay, kabuki will decay, and when kabuki becomes extinct, onnagata will be extinct . . .”2 His point is that the onnagata, a man playing onnagata gender roles, is essential for kabuki to be kabuki. Something about the onnagata makes kabuki work. At the same time, he believes that onnagata can exist only within the kabuki context. That is, onnagata can live only in one particular time and space environment: a kabuki performance.

Other scholarly works focus on individual onnagata and their stage lives—for example, Watanabe Tamotsu’s *Onnagata no Unmei* (Fate of an Onnagata), in which Watanabe describes the onnagata art and philosophy of contemporary Nakamura Utaemon VI (1917–2001); or *Sandaimei Sawamura Tanosuke* (Sawamura Tanosuke III), by the group Kabuki Wa Tomodachi (Kabuki Friends), a collection of essays on the life and art of the famous Meiji period onnagata, Sawamura Tanosuke III and his descendents. Takahashi Hiroko’s *Sandaime Utaemon no Onnagata Gei* (Utaemon III’s Onnagata Art) looks at an unusual Edo period tachiyaku who was famous for his onnagata roles. In a different vein, Toita Yasuji’s *Onnagata no Subete* (Everything about Onnagata) is a collection of essays about his favorite onnagata performers and their performances, as well as an outline of onnagata history. Toita’s background in performance criticism and theatre politics adds a social dimension to his writing. He offers his personal sense of how onnagata function in the kabuki world.

It is rare for critics or scholars to conjecture on how political, economic, and social forces of the Edo period shaped onnagata performance. Baba Masashi is one of the few authors who analyzes onnagata roles in the social context of their scenes and plays. In *Onna no Serifu* (Female Lines), he focuses on the texts of several famous onnagata speeches, reading them in the light of the onnagata role’s social status in the play. First, he details the historical and social context of each role. Then, he explains how, in performance, the onnagata role exceeds the expected behavior for a female role in the context of the drama.3

Some Japanese Kabuki scholars, such as Watanabe Tamotsu, have focused on single aspects of onnagata performance. In *Musume Dōjōji* (The Maiden of Dōjō Temple), he traces the history of this famous dance through star onnagata performers, and his *Onnagata Hyakushi* (One Hundred Images of