From its beginnings in the seventeenth century, kabuki was intended for a broad audience. Although they often bore a didactic message, the plays' exaggerated, stylized expressions of emotion, choreographed action sequences, and spectacular costumes and staging were what audiences came to see.

The word “kabuki” actually derives from a verb meaning “to incline” and suggests behavior that tilts away from propriety and rectitude. The name fit well; in its earliest forms kabuki was performed by prostitutes and consisted of only brief sketches, songs, and sensual dances. But by 1770, when the earliest prints in this exhibition were produced, kabuki had reached its mature phase: women and boys had been banned from the stage and scripts replaced adlibbed material creating a dramatic tradition fit for the formal playhouses in the theater district. All roles were played by men. Women were often played by *Onnagata*, actors specializing in female roles. Many *onnagata* maintained a cross-gender identity off stage; by law, however, even they had to shave the fronts of their heads as a sign of maturity, so on stage they wore a small piece of cloth to cover the bald spot.

The years between about 1680 and 1725 were a watershed period in the history of kabuki. During this period, the Edo actor Ichikawa Danjūrō I introduced a robust style of acting filled with complex verbal gymnastics and bold physical displays. The general term for this style is *aragoto*, which roughly translates to “rough stuff.” At the same time, in the Kamigata area (Kyoto and Osaka), Sakata Tojuro (1647–1709) developed a relatively realistic style of acting for the male lead that became increasingly used in the playing of love scenes. This style came to be called *wagoto* ("soft stuff").

For the burgeoning woodblock print industry in the Edo period (1615–1868)Kabuki was an ideal topic and was one of the mainstays prints depicting the *ukiyo*, the “floating world,” of sensual pleasure and popular entertainment. From time to time, the government imposed sanctions and restrictions on theater and printmaking, but the popular stage and popular printmaking reinforced each other and captured the imagination of the Edo public, and so both flourished.

THEATERS

In the early days of kabuki, the all-female cast performed on open-air stages wherever open land was available, usually the dry riverbeds in summer. By the time of the prints in this exhibition, there were three great theaters in Edo along with smaller ones that were allowed to operate on a more limited basis. They were lined up along a street in the Saruwakachō neighborhood. The major playhouses could hold audiences of up to a thousand people, divided between the more expensive box seats on the sides and the cheap seats on the ground in between. There were even seats upon the stage at one side. The stage itself was broad and shallow with an attached side stage on the right. The *hanamichi*, a runway, extended obliquely from the left, through the gallery, to a curtained exit near the back of the theater on the same side. It provided for especially dramatic entrances when an actor might pause on the way to the stage, strike a pose, and utter a particularly dramatic line. The *hanamichi* also allowed the crowd closer glimpses of famous actors.

STYLIZATION

There has always been a strong tradition of stylization in kabuki. The performances are built around conventional patterns of movement, posing, costuming, and vocalization called "*kata.*" One of the most dramatic of the *kata* is the *mie*, in which an actor freezes in a dramatic pose for several seconds to mark the culmination of an intensely emotional scene, often crossing his eyes. Productions include various types of musical accompaniment, not only for dance sequences but also for key dramatic interludes. The principal ensemble of musicians sits at the rear of the stage in stepped rows. Another, smaller ensemble sits unseen off stage and adds dramatic musical punctuation and stylized sound effects. During a *mie*, for example, one of the musicians rhythmically beats wooden clappers on a board. Spectacular costumes and dramatic make-up heighten the actors' moods and emotional intensity.

STAGED VIOLENCE

Stylized violence was a standard of the kabuki stage. Kabuki's many plays of revenge assure frequent bloody confrontations. However, even the love stories in kabuki, which are inevitably tragic, frequently culminate in the violence of doomed lovers committing suicide together. The performances were far from realistic, however. Instead, fight scenes were choreographed like dance sequences. Important props, such as the swords of the heroes, were sometimes monstrously oversized. Print designers often represented scenes of violence in static, stylized poses such as they might have appeared on the stage. But there are also prints in which the actors seem to have been transported from the theater to the actual sites of the story. These prints give the artist the opportunity to incorporate settings (like an architecturally accurate rooftop or a rolling landscape) which could not be accommodated by a stage.

ACTORS UP CLOSE

Starting around 1770, kabuki print designers began to pay much greater attention to the realities of the theater. Most dramatically, actors became recognizable by their facial features. Earlier kabuki images did not try to portray the actual physical features of the actor. Instead characters were suggested with an idealized images of the roles being played. The actor was identified with an inscription or by showing the crest that the actor wore, so only generic face and body types appeared in prints. However, as kabuki became more popular, and its actors became the equivalent of Hollywood stars, print-buying fans eagerly bought newer kinds of images that focused on the appearances and lives of the actors. This undoubtedly helped give rise to “big-head” prints, portrait-like images of courtesans and actors. Most of the artists who produced these close-ups maintained a certain level of idealization in balancing actors’ features with the expectations of the roles they played. They did not, for example, reveal the aging of the *onnagata.* The great exception was the artist Toshusai Sharaku, who seemed much less willing to flatter and produced images sometimes described as caricatures. Perhaps he went too far; his career lasted only eleven months.

THE SUPERNATURAL

While the ghost story was not a category of play in kabuki, supernatural beings, especially ghosts, were often important characters. Ghosts often demanded and exacted vengeance. Certain animals, especially foxes, were also believed to be able to transform themselves into human beings, often taking the guise of beautiful women or handsome men and then breaking human hearts. Animal spirits might also take possession of human bodies. Deities from Buddhist and folk beliefs also sometimes made appearances in plays; most commonly they were frightening beings such as the God of Thunder. Stage machinery allowed such beings to fly, and apparitions were made to appear and disappear through concealed openings, all of which delighted theatergoers. Prints often retreated from theatrical conventions and showed such beings as they might appear in an illustrated book or handscroll.