

A Historical Walk Around Kyoto

Photo: Kao-mise performance held in 2010



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Minami-za: the Kabuki Theater

The Minami-za is the grand Japanese-style building with gold ornaments and large red lanterns in downtown Kyoto famous for being the oldest Kabuki theater of southern Japan.

What is Kabuki?

Kabuki is a style of dance-drama well-known for colorful costumes and energetic performances. The word *kabuki* originally meant odd or wild and it started in the dry riverbed of the Kamogawa more than 400 years ago. You can see a statue of the founder, Izumo no Okuni, kitty-corner from the theater.

What's inside the Minami-za?

The current Minami-za was rebuilt in a Japanese-revivalist style in 1929. You can see how the theater looks like a large Japanese temple. The interior has over 1,000 seats and a large elegant-style roof above the stage. In addition, there is an elevated walkway, or *hanamichi*, that goes from the back wall, through the audience, to the stage. Many important Kabuki scenes are performed on the *hanamichi*. In addition to the walkway, later trap doors in the stage floor and flying wires in the ceiling were added to make performances in the Minami-za some of the best live stage experiences in Japan since the early 17th century.

What is a performance like?

Special moments in a Kabuki performance are given more energy by a *mie*, or pose, where an actor fixes the audience with a furious stare –often with crossed-eyes! You can feel the atmosphere of the theater change during a *mie* and audience members will spontaneously shout, “Mattemashita!” (“That’s what I’ve been waiting for!”)

When is the best time to go?

Every December is the *Kao-mise*: the biggest event of the Kabuki season. *Kao-mise* means to see the faces of the actors, but many in the crowd of guests –women in their finest kimono, men in their best suits– are also out to see and be seen.

If you have a chance to watch Kabuki, with its wild actors, strange white-and-red face-makeup, and dramatic poses, be prepared for one of the best experiences of Japanese culture and don’t forget your opera glasses!

By Chad Kreutzinger