

JAMES BRANDON (1927-2015)

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James Brandon, a foremost western scholar of Asian theatre and a pioneer in bringing the performance of Japan, Southeast-, and South-Asian theatre into American academia, died in Honolulu, Hawaii on September 19, 2015. His legacy includes his important translations, scholarly writings, theatre practice, and impact on students who teach and perform around the globe. His books, edited volumes, articles, and *Asian Theatre Journal*—which he founded and became the foremost scholarly publication on Asian performance—have greatly expanded understanding of Asian theatre history and practice. His projects since 2000 chronicled both the 400-year history of *kabuki* by providing scripts, and rethought the history of the form in the twentieth century—showing *kabuki's* support of imperialism in the early decades and its re-conceptualized as "classical theatre" only after 1945. In addition to his copious work on Japanese theatre, Brandon helped launch Anglophone scholarship on Southeast Asian theatre, and made forays into Sanskrit drama and aesthetics.

His model was studying performance practice with master artists, carefully collecting data, translating central texts in a stage-friendly mode, and then analyzing the socio-cultural dynamics of a work. This yielded strong performance practice plus in-depth written analysis. When a production was mounted he would often hold a conference where other scholars would cast light on the text/genre. In his translations he explored the full power of a theatre like *kabuki* or *wayang* noting its music, costume, and staging. Attention to performance practice made his work theatrical not just literary in focus. His impact on tertiary education about Asian performance is clear in the US and Asia, where his students have taught and practiced since the 1970s. Following his model, they have helped internationalize undergraduate and graduate programs in theatre. Meanwhile, as a director and playwright, Brandon opened to Hawaii's actors and audiences worlds of theatre previously little known.

Entering the Field

A farm boy from Minnesota, Brandon fell in love with theatre in high school in Mazomanie, Wisconsin. He finished a BA (1948) and MA (1949) from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. After a short stint at the University of Connecticut, he was drafted into the army as the Korean War exploded. Posted to Korea and Japan as a sergeant (1950-52), he sought out theatre during R&R leave in Japan. Two days before his tour of duty ended he saw a *kabuki* performance: "I could not believe the power of the voices, the fun and excitement (Jortner and Foley 2011: 343). On GI Bill Funding he returned to Wisconsin for his PhD (1955), then entered the U. S. Foreign Service as a cultural affairs officer in Jakarta (1955-57), viewing performances regularly. Assigned as a cultural affairs and a language officer to Tokyo (1957-1960), he studied Japanese language two years. One of his teachers was Reiko Mochinaga, who would become an important textile artist, curator and costume designer, as well as Brandon's spouse (1961). His *kabuki* viewing in this period led to friendships with the great stars, such as Onoe Baiko (1915-1995), Onoe Kuroemon (1922-2003), and Nakamura Matagorō (1914-2009). Brandon began translating plays with plans for producing them. In 1961 he took a job at Michigan State University (MSU) and introduced students to material beyond the normal Euro-American theatre canon. In 1963 he directed *The Subscription List* and *The Zen Substitute*, two *kabuki* dance plays based on *nō* and *kyōgen* prototypes, respectively, using scripts he translated with Tamako Niwa (Brandon and Niwa 1966).

Next he turned toward Southeast Asia. With a grant from the Ford Foundation he traveled (1963-64) throughout the region and soon published *Theatre in Southeast Asia* (1967), which remains a foundational text on Southeast Asian dance and drama. The extensive data he collected in the then recently

independent nations, before the full force of the Southeast Asian War, created a baseline for studies of Southeast Asian theatres to the present. He organized his work thematically across the region, noting patterns that divided 1) court and ritual theatres, 2) popular urban genres of the colonial period, and 3) twentieth century, western-influenced spoken drama.

Brandon translated Javanese *wayang lakon* (scripts) and with, funding from the John D. Rockefeller 3rd Fund. He brought Central Javanese *wayang*-expert Pandam Guritno to produce *Death of Karna* (1965) with MSU students including Roger Long who in 1968 would follow Brandon in his move to the University of Hawaii (UH). *Death of Karna* along with two plays that Brandon, Pandam, and Long documented were published in *On Thrones of Gold: Three Javanese Shadow Puppet Plays* (1970, 1993), a clear introduction to the form, history, and philosophy of one of Southeast Asia's major performance genres.

Hawaii

In Hawaii over a quarter of the citizens are of Japanese or part Japanese (*hapa*) descent, creating a strong base of support for Asian production practice. Earl Ernst who had become versed in *kabuki* when he served as censor during the American Occupation of Japan, had established a graduate program in Asian theatre (Brandon 2011b). From 1972-1985, Brandon led this program; next he served as department chair (1985-88); and thereafter continued to teach Japanese theatre, theory, and performance practice until his retirement in 2000. He lectured for short periods as a visiting professor at New York University (1983), Justus Liebig Universität in West Germany (1990), Portland State University (Summer 1996), and Harvard University (2005).

At UH he garnered strong support for Asian productions, the PhD program flourished with many international students funded through the East-West Center, an organization founded in 1960 to promote international educational exchange. Other students entered the MFA program to specialize in Asian performance. Local, national, and international students mixed in Brandon's productions that were highlights of the season. Projects extended over two semesters to allow immersive learning. Brandon, additionally, found funding to take these performances around the state, across the US (1975, 1979, 1991), and to Japan (1989).

Brandon's *kabuki* performances (some scripts included in his *Kabuki: Five Classic Plays* (1975;1992) favored the strong *aragoto* style of Edo (Tokyo) which is exemplified in the Danjūrō acting lineage. Brandon prized it "because the form is so clear, precise, and powerful," and felt it was valuable "to use these styles for ourselves"—to develop American theatre in new directions (Jortner and Foley 2011: 346). His flamboyant *kabuki* productions highlighted scenes where the values of *giri* (duty) were always at odds with *ninjō* (human feeling). While he staged many *kabuki*, he did not follow the Japanese practice of showing highlights from different plays in a single program, but rather used the Western practice of a unified narrative.

Though his works were translations, the practice of *kabuki*, in which different playwrights penned different acts in the same work and many playwrights wrote new scripts on the same characters and theme (*sekai* or "dramatic world"), meant that plays had many incarnations, with specific lineages adopting new *kata* (acting techniques). This meant for Brandon that translations allowed a relatively high degree of creative license for him as translator-adaptor-director. He selected the text/scenes/*kata* he wanted for the Hawaiian audiences. His productions garnered awards at the American College Theatre Festival (*Scarlet Princess of Edo*, 1975 and *Road to Tokyo*, 1991), multiple local Hawaii theatre awards, and other honors. Though his scholarship was instrumental in his national and international awards—such as the Uchimura Prize from the International Theatre Institute of UNESCO (1997), Order of the Rising Sun, Gold Rays with Rosette from the Government of Japan (1994), John D. Rockefeller 3rd Award of the Asian Cultural Council (1988), and so on—it was his combined excellence in practice and scholarship which distinguished his work.

Brandon valued the "bigness" that *aragoto* models offered; they invited performers to think and act "outside the box" which psychological acting presented. Movement, vocal patterns, and text gave his performers specific techniques to expand their acting skills: striking poses were orchestrated to shamisen and chant, accented by drums and clacks of the percussive *tsuke* woodblock instrument. Many of his works were the great classics as staged in the second half of the twentieth century, including *Sukeroku* (1970, 1995), *Narukami the Thunder God* (1974, 1987), the aforementioned *Scarlet Princess of Edo* (1975), and *The Forty-seven Samurai* (1979). He also wrote and developed his own new plays creatively growing out of *kabuki* prototypes. Among such works were *Road to Kyoto* (with Kathy Foley, 1977) and the previously noted *Road to Tokyo* (with Brian Shaunessy, 1991), both of which were inspired by *Shank's Mare*, an Edo era popular novel by Jippensha Ikku which the source of multiple *kabuki* plays about two travelers and their comic adventures on the Edo-Kyoto road. The pieces also had echoes the Bing Crosby-Bob Hope "Road" movies which Brandon had watched in his youth. Such works were an opportunity to spoof stock scenes of *kabuki*—lovers on a *michiyuki* (journey) walking through the night planning their love suicide: a samurai preparing to commit *seppuku*, splitting open his stomach; and so on. Scenes of samurai pathos from the classics, were reduced to lovely bathos when deaths were averted at the last moment through encounters with these commoner heroes who laughed at the posing. Other new creations included a *kabuki* adaptation *Mikado*, of Gilbert and Sullivan's *Mikado* (with four co-authors) in 1996; his play of Japanese hauntings about an eponymous blind story-singer, *Hoichi: Dark Tale of the Heike* (1981); and his history play about Japanese Christian martyrs (*Cross and the Sword*, 1986).

Brandon's works were sometimes collaborations with Japanese masters as guest artists such as Matagorō, but Brandon also relied consistently on the expertise in the Gertrude Tsutumi (Onoe Kikunobu), the Hawaii-based *nihon buyō* (*kabuki* classical dance) teacher who in 2015 was named an U. S. National Endowment for the Arts Heritage Fellow. Some students would study with her consistently between productions and became strong exponents of *kabuki* dance. Chie Yamada trained music students in the melodic instrument, shamisen, with Ric Trimillos from the University of Hawaii ethnomusicology program providing additional musical support. Brandon also did Japanese modern drama (*shingeki*) translations: he translated Arashi Sawako's *Hurray for the Japanese* (1981) and translated and directed *Animal Hunter* by Kobo Abe (1977).

His directing of 22 productions went beyond *kabuki*. For example, the Sanskrit drama *Vision of Vasavadatta* (1974) was a collaborated with Shanta Ghandi and resulted in a book co-edited with Rachael Van M. Baumer *Sanskrit Drama in Performance* (1981, 1990). The project explored the aesthetic theory of the *Natya Sastra* putting *rasa* theory into practice. The theoretical writings of Zeami also drew him: he emphasized in his teaching the counterpoints of *yūgen* (ephemeral beauty) and *monomae* (imitation) in *nō*. Brandon's collaborations with *kyōgen* Living National Treasure Nomura Mansaku (b. 1931) in 1975 and 1988-89 put these Japanese ideas on stage. The 1989 Mansaku workshop resulted in *Buaku the Bold* and *Yobikoe*, (called *Tricked by the Rhythm*), which toured to the National Nō Theatre in Tokyo (1989) as well as playing in Hawaii. Mansaku's son Nomura Shirō of Kanze school of *nō* helped mount *Matsukase* (called *Pining Wind*) which was presented by moonlight the Buddhist Jodo Mission in Lahaina, Hawaii (1989). The essay collection *Nō and Kyōgen in the Contemporary World* (Brandon 1997a) was the result of the conference to accompany these 1989 performances, and papers emphasized new and experimental intercultural works. Mansaku praised the project, "What was the most gratifying was the ultimate realization that: 'Yes, it's OK for Americans to perform *kyōgen*'" (quoted in Brandon 1997a: 181).

In Britain in the last decade the idea of practice based research emerged as a theme in tertiary arts education, but any one who studied with James Brandon since 1961 was continually involved in a rich journey in which research-teaching-and demonstration through performance were seamlessly interwoven. Rather than the problem sometimes seen in the research university where the researcher moves deep into a specialization, outpacing students and the public and developing work only accessible to the specialists, Brandon's work was like the "big vehicle" of Mahayana Buddhism—everyone (undergraduates, graduate students, scholars, and audiences) was carried along. Brandon found that his writing, translating, and

producing created materials for teaching: "It was so exciting because there was so much to do ... Every time we did something it was new"(Jortner and Foley 2011: 353).

His work in *nihon buyo* led to deep understanding that ongoing practice was the key to mastery: "The training progresses over ten to fifteen years . . . continual growth ... is the most important thing" (Foley and Jortner 2011: 350). His project-based work solidified his scholarly understandings. Of course American music and dance departments were exploring in similar directions: at UCLA Mantle Hood was calling for bi-musicality in music research and Allegra Fuller Snyder was putting in place a program in Dance Ethnology that involved Asian master teachers. In Hawaii in the music department Barbara Smith and Ricardo Trimillos were promoting the teaching of Pacific and Asian genres and Judy Van Zile and Adrienne Kaeppler were implementing comparable dance training. Brandon, however, was a pioneer in theatre and with a few other stalwarts in the American Theatre Association such as A. C. Scott, Joe Whitey, and Andrew Tsubaki, he was pushing theatre to consider itself a global art (see Brandon 2011a). In Hawaii Asian theatre became an integral part of both theatre at the university and the local theatre scene.

Uncovering Twentieth Century *Kabuki* History

Brandon did more than production-translation-contextualization projects. He edited *Cambridge Guide to Asian Theatre* (1993), writing Japanese and overview sections as he brought a team of top scholars together. He edited bibliographies (1980), wrote a theatre guidebook (1976), helped on a dictionary of theatre terms (Brandon, Trapido, Langhan 1985), translated the novel *Kabuki Dancer* (1994), and authored a score of books and eighty articles. He took on topics from large-scale translation (Brandon and Leiter 2002-2003, 2004), to Shakespeare in his Japanese manifestation (1997b, 2001, 2010), to World War II histories (2006, 2008), to intercultural theatre (1988).

Kabuki Plays Onstage (in four volumes ed. 2002-2003, with selections there from in *Masterpieces of Kabuki: Eighteen Plays on Stage* [2004]) was co-edited with the important scholar Samuel L. Leiter. This ambitious undertaking orchestrated many of the Anglophone scholars working on *kabuki*: fifty-one additional plays of the current 300 works in the *kabuki* repertoire became available in English. The introductions placed scripts in their politico-cultural contexts, exhibiting the constant changes within the form. Extensive stage directions based on current practice allowed the reader to envision each play.

As he compiled this work, Brandon asked himself why generating new scripts had stopped in the twentieth century. Investigating, of course, he found that play writing had continued though WW II. However, the fascist content of such creations was an inconvenient truth in 1945. Brandon became the detective digging through archives of both the American Occupation censors and Shikoku, the company responsible for *kabuki* in present Japan. At an Association of Asian Performance meeting in 2007, I remember him saying this work of going through WW II archives and interviewing now aged censors had been one of his most exciting projects of his life. Previous work had been a creative translation-adaptation of texts. Now, however, he was re-envisioning the history of *kabuki* and questioning the versions delivered to him when he started in the 1950s

It was not the American censors who had killed *kabuki* as an evolving art. In "Myth and Reality: *Kabuki* during the American Censorship (2006) he took on how and when the canon had been set. In *Kabuki's Forgotten War* (2008, named "outstanding academic book of the year" in the *Journal of the American Library Association* in 2009), he reveals the wealth of plays ("overnight pickles") that responded to support militarism of the Japanese war efforts. Brandon demonstrated how *kabuki* morphed from a nationalistic, imperialist theatre content that responded to and reflected contemporary events in the first half of the twentieth century to the "classical" and "unchanging" repertoire presented in the post WWII period. Who killed *kabuki* as an up-to-the-minute popular art and why? Brandon asserted that Shikoku did it in the Occupation: the profound conservatism of the *kabuki* establishment was attuned to upholding

the older ideology and so rejected American democratization and embraced the feudal ethos by rejecting new plays.

In one conversation that I had with Brandon when I was his student in the late 1970s, Brandon pointed out the importance of writing about these forms: "You write the book: you are the authority"—James Brandon wrote the books and will probably remain the authority for a long time.

Students to Teachers

Brandon's teaching will live on in the work of his students. He impacted a number of actors and directors who were important in the Asian American theatre movement of the 1980s to the present (Carol Honda, Ron Nakahara, Mel Gionson are a few examples), he taught American and international scholars who have taught in Asia impacting the development of theatre teaching there, for example Roger Long who taught for a period at Universiti Sains Malaysia-Penang, Ghulam Sawar Yousof who did groundbreaking work on *mak yong* and *wayang kelantan* and is a force in tertiary theatre studies in Malaysia currently teaching at Universiti Malaya, and Surapone Virulrak who helped develop the first PhD in traditional performing arts of Thailand at Chulalongkorn University. Japanese scholars include Junko Sakata who works on *kyōgen*, Michiko Ueno Herr who has facilitated a number of international workshops with the National Bunraku Theatre, and Yukihiro Goto, an expert on Suzuki work who teaches at San Francisco State University. Brandon's American students are spread across the U. S. and teach at all levels from community colleges to research universities, for example Elizabeth Wichmann-Walczak, current director of the Asian Theatre PhD at UH. His students nominated him for the national ATHE award for outstanding teaching, which he won in 1994.

Many wrote upon hearing of his death, stating, for example: "We stand in his very large shadow, never forgetting his immense scholarship of East and West, his constant being of sharing with everyone, his vision of history applied to the now, the amazing director, ..." (Douglas Rosentrater, Professor of Bucks County Community College, email to AAP Listserv Sept. 21, 2015). Another wrote: "Your students continue your legacy, help us to live up to your achievements and passion for Asian theatre." (David Furumoto, Professor at University of Wisconsin-Madison, jamesrbrandon.muchloved.com, Sept. 29, 2015 accessed Nov. 1, 2015).

Brandon also made deep impacts on those who did not have the opportunity to study with him but who he mentored: Kevin Wetmore, Professor at Loyola Marymount in Los Angeles wrote an email to the AAP Listserv (Sept. 21, 2015) about being a graduate student attending a conference:

I was presenting on Christianity's influence on *shingeki*, . . . I felt . . . a fraud and was sitting alone at a table . . . What followed was an hour of conversation that has stayed with me since. I knew who he was, as I owned all of the books he had published up to that point. His interest was genuine, not just polite. The talk turned to academic publishers and I mentioned sending a book proposal to one and he feigned indignation: "When you have a great topic, why would you shoot so low?" His encouragement meant a lot, . . .

John Emigh, Professor Emeritus of Brown University had a similar experience which he shared in an email on the AAP Listserv (Sept. 21, 2015):

My first memory of Jim is . . . in an ATA [American Theatre Association] conference; I was recently returned from Bali and . . . hadn't even started to write up my research. There was Jim at the head of the table, . . . wondering that the academic world thought "Asian Theatre" was such a narrow field of specialization when those of us assembled had the remarkable histories, cultures, and performed lives of over 2 billion people and their ancestors to keep us busy,

engaged, and in a perpetual state of discovery. ... and to be able to share this journey and the riches found along the way with our students—through scholarship and in practice, on the stage. "And meanwhile our fellow 'specialists,'" he went on, with growing delight, "have to content themselves with teaching Milton year after year, finding what pleasure they may in an unexplored nuance here, a new reading or unexplored historical fact there."

As I write this piece I recollect serving as an assistant director on a scene of Brandon's *Chūshingura* in spring 1979. In one scene, Enya Hangen has been ordered to commit *seppuku*. Tension builds as he awaits Yuranosuke, foremost among his forty-seven samurai, hoping the retainer will arrive before Hangen must kill himself. Yuranosuke rushes as Hangen makes the final thrust. In his dying breath the master admonishes, "Remember me!" Yuronosuke responds: "I swear!" (see Brandon 1982: 194), then through long years he works to bring all forty-seven *ronin* (masterless samurai) together to complete that pledge. Brandon entrusted his students with a mission: in schools and theatres across the world we "remember" with our work, promoting full understanding of non-western theatre in all its complexity and richness.

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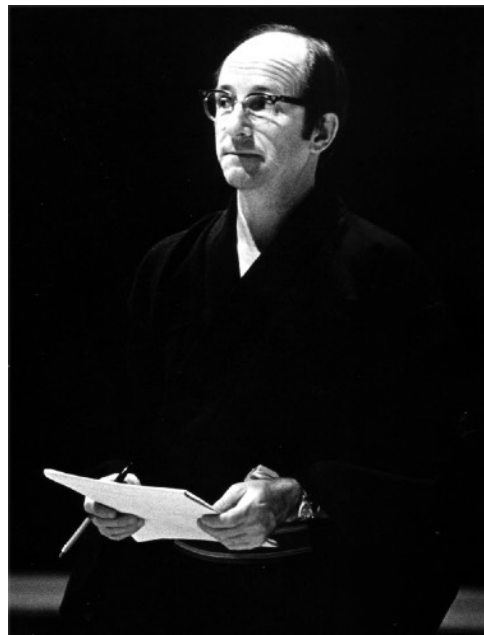
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