

Kabuki

I took up a chance to go to Kabuki.

I'm not into Kabuki much – the substance of even the most famous plays is more or less unknown to me.

Imagine coming away from watching something and still having no idea of its storyline. Kind of tragic. Yet such was my experience when I went to see *The Godfather* as a child. As it is, I struggle with things about feuding gangs since it's hard to keep track of the shifting allegiances and conflicting interests. To make matters worse, these Italians were near impossible to tell apart. Someone I thought had died turned up later in the film. All I got from it was that the mafia will resort to using a horse's head in a vendetta.

To avoid a repeat of that, I will read up on the scenarios before going to a Kabuki performance. Then I drum into my head the names of the actors too. Kabuki actors readily change names so there's no room for slacking.

After taking my seat in the theatre, I noticed a pair of young white men sitting a few rows in front of me, both of whom sported short-cropped hair and wore white short-sleeved T-shirts even though it was the middle of winter. Upper arms as thick as thighs protruded from their sleeves.

The initial play started. A merchant from the provinces visits the red-light district in Edo and falls in love with a courtesan at first sight. Becoming her patron, he ends up paying for her release from servitude, and she betrays him in return. That's the outline. The stunningly beautiful courtesan was played by the current favourite among up-and-coming actors specialising in female roles.

Watching this, I found myself worrying over whether the two young white guys could follow the story. On the face of it there was no problem since they could listen to an English commentary through headphones, but how do you put the idea of redeeming a courtesan, for example, into English? In my mind, I had a go at delivering to them a commentary: *Um, well, a courtesan is a high class prostitute... Ah, but having said that, these prostitutes were somewhat like celebrities... Although they would hang about places known as teahouses, but of course it wasn't exactly tea that was on sale, see there was an indenture period called 'nenki'.* No, hopeless. I was losing all touch with the story itself. I could visualise the pair looking at each other with bemused expressions and shrugging their shoulders.

I tried refocusing on the events on stage, but having been distracted, I was unable to resist speculating on how each little thing might appear to them. I pictured one of the pair pointing at the

courtesan's feet. *Bob, check those out. Are those shoes or boxes she's wearing?* said one. *By the same token, Sam, what in God's name are those spikes sticking out her head like warship turrets,* replied the other. *And why do all the men have their scalps shaved down the centre? Is it something religious?* The merchant takes revenge for his awfully cold-hearted brush off by stabbing the courtesan to death, but I couldn't concentrate on this part either because these two wouldn't shut up.

The end of the play brought an intermission, following which a danced drama began. Although the two guys sat to the front of me had left at some stage, the situation was now irreparable. Bob and Sam had already got inside my head, taking control of my eyes and brain. From the perspective of Bob/Sam, *Yakko Dojoji* was a dance at the very forefront of the avant-garde. For them, a person in heavy white makeup apparently switched between male and female identities and danced the jitterbug with white-clad folk whose heads glistened a painted blue. Then, after an attack from shock troops wielding cherry blossom branches, this protagonist laid the assailants low without the least contact and finally climbed a great bell – *or was it a kettle?* – that descended from above, striking up a triumphant pose on top of it for whatever reason. *How mysterious! So fantastical!*

My problem at present is that even though months have passed since I went to Kabuki, Bob/Sam still won't leave. Occasionally, at the sight of something unfamiliar, they'll demand of me an explanation. *Woah! What's that then?* It's a real pain having to explain things like the tradition of round rice cakes at New Year, Japanese squat toilets or the *Onbashira* festival.

They've also decided I should be in short sleeves. When there's snow outside. If it carries on like this, what will they be demanding by the summer?

Me During July

1.

When peaches are in season, that's all I eat, peaches.

Peaches are delicious. That's the word that comes straight to mind, *delicious*. They exist simply to be delicious. But so quintessentially delicious are they that it actually bugs me.

On the whole, given they're nothing but that sweet, succulent flesh beneath delicate skin, aren't peaches just too well adapted to the taste of human beings? They may as well be saying, *Come on then, eat me*. It feels too good to be true, something's off.

Of course, other fruits have evolved to impart a delicious taste. Strawberries, for example – they're delicious too. What's more, to assist in their consumption, they went to the trouble of dispensing with a skin and shrinking away any bothersome seeds. The rich crimson colour only adds to their appeal. They cry out to be eaten. Even the leafy cap seems to be that way so as to make them easy to pick up and eat.

Nevertheless, I wonder if the far greater mystique surrounding a peach is because in a way it has a touch of the human being about it, what with its colour, shape and downy surface hair that confer a sort of resemblance to a baby. Might this mystique be ascribed, in fact, to a sense of guilt over eating one?

Such matters I like to ponder. Put a peach in front of me, though, and all rational thought will dissolve in an instant. As I indulge myself, my head is filled with the taste, aroma and texture of a peach, leaving only this chuckle-happy voice that goes, *Peach! Peach! Peach! Hwah-ha-ha-ha-ha*. Peaches, goodness me.

2.

Repeat the following several times a day.

First, cupping the underside with your hands, lift the peach up, bring it close to your nose and – *aah!* – breathe in the scent. Then tilt it in different directions, taking time to admire the shape and colour as though inspecting a prized tea vessel. Relish the velvety feel of the hair and the perfection of its cleft. Finally, after raising the peach high towards the heavens in gratitude, carefully replace it and make a slight bow.

Here, a word of caution for novices. No matter how soft it is, resist the temptation to brush the downy surface against your cheek. A friend of mine had her cheek swell up after carelessly pressing

a peach against it back in childhood. Incidentally, she has also managed to get her bottom lodged in a sugar tin given as a gift.

3.

Might a religion that deifies peaches be a thing? In truth, when eating one, I picture myself as part of a congregation of a thousand villagers, all of us chanting while prostrate around a giant peach.

I made a shocking discovery while doing some research. In the legend's rendition in the Edo period, Momotaro (Peach Boy) isn't born of a peach which has floated downriver. Rather, he's the offspring of an elderly couple who sleep together having received a new lease of life from eating peaches. Still, I can't confirm the existence of organised peach worship.

4.

Peaches will be out of season soon.

In an effort to come to terms with our impending separation, I'll direct some words to a peach I've placed in front of me. *It's almost time to say goodbye*, I tell it. *Don't leave me!* I beg. I might even promise to protect it for life.

What am I supposed to be protecting it from though? The blithe cashiers on supermarket checkouts, perhaps, prone to plonking something on top of a packet of peaches.

Just today, I ate another peach.

Three Remarks Of My Father

Why do you always have to interfere?

A sidepath with an iron gate connects the carport to the garden at our family home. One day I found a plastic lid from a storage box leaning against the gate. I still worked for a company at the time. Taking it for a piece of litter, I removed the lid, resulting in my father addressing me with these words.

Some years earlier, a huge toad had taken up residence in the garden. As large as two hands placed together, it was light brown in colour with black and white stripes down the sides. Grotesque. However, the toad would reappear each spring – probably it hibernated somewhere in the garden – and we formed a kind of attachment, watching on a summer evening as it sat lurking in the shadows and snatched up insects now and then with its darting tongue. My father had a particular affection for *our toad* as he called it.

His great worry was that it would make its way out on to the road via the gap at the bottom of the gate and get hit by a car. (An earlier preoccupation had been that our cat might scarper off in the event of an earthquake, and he'd suggested having it fettered with a length of string, an idea the rest of the family rejected.) The plastic lid was deployed to prevent such an outcome. And thus the above exclamation. I sort of understood his feelings, but it didn't make much sense.

The toad lived for around another three years before it was found dead in a puddle in the garden. Queasily, I scooped up the slimy corpse with both hands and buried it in the earth, my father having declared that he was afraid to touch it. Very strange.

Kotaro isn't to blame

The pet dog bit me once. I was still living at home, and it had planted itself by my feet as I ate at the dining table. The dog was ever hungry. Anytime someone had food, it would close in and sit there drooling in the hope of getting some titbit. I paid no heed as I continued with my meal until inadvertently treading on the dog's tail, causing it to jump up with a yelp and take a bite of my thigh.

The next day, my right leg was all inflamed and swollen. Pus seeped from the two distinct fang marks left in my thigh. Watching me hobble down the stairs like the walking wounded, my father made the above comment, Kotaro being the name of the dog.

Later, at the hospital, as well as getting a really painful tetanus shot, I was lectured on how we should be more diligent in brushing the dog's teeth.

When Kotaro died, my father put the dog's photo on display in the living room. For the entire 49-day mourning period, he offered incense and chanted the sutra daily.

Choux-choux

My father had this expression *choux-choux* to describe something stewed exceedingly soft and tender, but to this day I've never heard others say it. I guessed a localism, yet relatives living in the sticks said they weren't aware of it.

The term tickles my sister and me though. Its begetter may no longer be around, but we both use it all the time. *Kind of choux-choux this wouldn't you say... I love butternut squash simmered to a choux-choux texture... The skin here's gone choux-choux slightly... Choux-choux... Choux-choux... Choux-choux...*

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