

DANCE

Take a rare taste of kabuki

Vancouver-born dancer brings the Japanese form — and her teacher — to the stage

ODORI: THE WORLD OF KABUKI DANCE

When: Saturday, Sunday, 7:30 p.m.

Where: Frederic Wood Theatre, UBC

Tickets: \$25/\$20 seniors/\$15 students

Info: 604-822-2678; tomoearts.org

BY DEBORAH MEYERS

Ask a Vancouver theatregoer to name a Japanese dance form, and the answer will most likely be *butoh*, an imagist, introverted style born out of the horrors of the Second World War. That's due to the work of Kokoro Dance, which pioneered *butoh* in this city and over the years has brought many celebrated *butoh* artists to town, extending our understanding of the form's strange and awful beauty.

But *butoh* is a recent branch on the ancient family tree of Japanese dance. A rare opportunity to see a much older form is a *kabuki* dance concert presented by B.C. dancer, choreographer and actor Colleen Lanki under the auspices of her company, TomoeArts.

Born in Vancouver and trained in theatre in Toronto and Hawaii, Lanki lived and studied in Japan from 1995-2001. She has been fascinated by Japanese esthetics for as long as she can remember.

"I think it may date from a Japanese theme park I was taken to in California when I was a kid," she says, joking, but her interest deepened when she saw a single performance of Japanese *noh* theatre. "I found it mind-blowingly incomprehensible and beautiful," she says, "and I had to find out why."

She started to study *noh* theatre and attended her first *kabuki* performance. "Here was character-creation theatre at its ultimate — a stodgy, 60-year-old man playing a woman — and I was almost crying. It bypassed anything I understood culturally."

Her exploration of all things



SABRINA FURMINGER

Kabuki master Fujima Shogo joins Colleen Lanki on stage this weekend.

Japanese led her to Japan, where she met her first teacher, Yuki Fuyima.

"I barely spoke Japanese," says Lanki, "and she didn't speak a word of English, but she agreed to give me a few classes. I stayed six years. She took me on because she wanted to make sure the art survives, and to do so it must be internationalized."

The dance form that ensnared Lanki is an offshoot of *kabuki* theatre, which emerged as a theatrical entertainment in 17th-century Japan. The word *kabuki* is written in Japanese with the characters for song, dance and acting, all key performance elements. In traditional *kabuki*, all roles are performed by men; men who perform women's roles are called *onnagata*.

Kabuki dance grew out of *kabuki* theatre and shares many of its characteristics, including a focus on character, story and atmosphere. *Odori* is the primary *kabuki* dance style, a lively form that includes jumping and stamping (the latter representing the symbolic crushing of demons.) Performers wear elaborate kimonos and traditional hairstyles and makeup,

similar to geishas, who were also traditionally accomplished musicians, storytellers and dancers. *Kabuki* dance is now taught and performed as an independent art form practised by both sexes. Men and women both portray male and female characters, and a dancer can switch from male to female forms within a single dance.

The Vancouver performances will feature Lanki's current teacher, Japan-based *kabuki* master Fujima Shogo, and two male colleagues Izumi Tokuhō and Fujima Monyo. The three visiting artists will join Lanki (who uses the professional name Fujima Sayu) in four dances. The characters who will be conjured include an older woman living in her memories, a 16-year old girl, and a rough and fun-loving samurai.

Clues to the characters will be in the elaborate costumes, which are used as props but also evoke character, time of year, or the location of a dance. In one dance, there will be mountain motifs on the fan and kimono because the dance takes place in a mountainous region. How a sleeve is cut, how an *obi* is tied: These details reveal information that will be played out in the dances.

Like many traditional dance forms, *kabuki* dance training "is one-on-one, body to body," says Lanki. "You can't learn it except from a dancing body. It is a lineage of choreographic technique, but also the individual teacher's style. I have been told I have my teacher's hands, which is the best compliment I ever received."

A lack of knowledge of the form will not be a barrier, says Lanki. "Come and appreciate it for the beauty and excitement. Anything you think about it is not wrong. Each piece will be introduced, so there will be clues to help hook into each dance, and you can and should make up the rest."

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