



Sachiyo Ito, Japanese dancer, in a classical Kabuki dance.

Dreaming The Possible Dream

EDITOR'S NOTE—This is the second in a two-part series on Japanese dancers in America.

By **ERNESTINE STODELLE**

Is it too far-fetched to presume that the art of the Dance can serve as a form of cultural "communication" and provide peaceful understanding between nations hitherto indifferent or even hostile? If you ask this question of Sachiyo Ito, an accomplished exponent of Japan's Classical Kabuki Dance, she will answer that this "far-fetched" idea is her very dream, the reason why she has come to America. Listening to this diminutive Japanese, who attracts many Western eyes when she walks the streets of New York in her colorful kimonos, you, too, will begin to think that such a dream might easily come true. But should you have any lingering doubts, I advise you to see Sachiyo Ito perform, for though she speaks excellent English — she majored in English and American Literature at the Aoyama Gakuin University in Tokyo and has just received her Master's Degree in Dance Education from the Creative Arts Division of New York University — the real test of Sachiyo's desire to bring about a deeper understanding between our country and hers lies in the realm of dance. Those of us who saw her program of Kabuki Dances at Japan House this spring came away enlightened about a world-renowned form of theatre that had its beginnings nearly four hundred years ago and still flourishes in modern Japan.

The great and venerable all-male Kabuki Theatre with its femal impersonators (Oyama) includes dance just as it includes singing and the onstage appearance of musicians who play the accompaniment. The acting is both formal and realistic in its interpretation of dramas which were written primarily to thrill a pleasure-seeking populace that thronged to the theatre in search of erotic excitement. Its themes dealt with the age-old conflicts between love and infidelity, honor and knavery, courage and cowardice. To penetrate the mysteries of Kabuki through its many transformations as a theatre art is to penetrate the mysteries of an entire race, and this is why Sachiyo's faith in a cultural interchange is so convincing.

Gesturing

In the mimetic gesturing of Kabuki Dance, which is performed mostly by women outside of the Kabuki Theatre, we discover the poet, priest and perfectionist in the Japanese psyche. It takes, of course, a fine artist to make us aware of these subtle characteristics. Miss Ito, who had her training in the renowned Hanayagi School, has the gift of recreating the complicated scenarios of ancient legends and poems with such pictorial truth that the background of Japanese philosophy becomes clear.

At first glance it would seem that the wide-sleeved kimono, high-piled wig ornamented with flowers or pins, and the almost constant use of props — fans, scarves or parasols — would hinder the dancer from telling her story. But no, Sachiyo's ornate costume and effects play specific parts in her delineation of plot and character. "Urashima," for example, is a dance about a fisherman who suddenly finds himself transformed into an old man after having led a

happy life with a princess in an undersea palace. (Such legends remind us of our own Rip Van Winkle.) "Dancing Urashima," says Sachiyo, "I avoided wearing a mask of an old man, though wearing it is customary in some schools of Japanese classical dance. I wanted to see how much I could characterize the change that took place." Using small, rhythmic movements of her arms and hands, low sinking knee motions and peculiar tiltings of her head, the dancer conjured up a vivid portrait of an aged man.

Most of us are familiar with Far Eastern graphics with their sparse, decorative pen strokes depicting a single bamboo branch or flower lying diagonally across the uncluttered space of a canvas. With seemingly simple means, the Eastern artist grants a special dignity to his subject. A Kabuki dancer, likewise, personifies dignity. Unlike the Western dancer whose virtuoso technique might cover the entire stage, a Japa-

nese classical dancer remains rooted in one special area which has a significance of its own. Every gesture has its particular meaning: the upraised fingers formally held together, the downpressed palm, the head turned at a specific angle. And the shoulders . . . when they are lifted, dropped or twisted in an attitude of joy, despair or anger, the whole personality changes!

In "White Heron Maiden," a reproduction of a Kabuki dance first performed in 1762, Miss Ito was a vision in white against a screen-filled background of snowflakes. Covered by a voluminous white veil, she swayed and gestured in a milky haze of light. Complex movements of the upper body, called "mai," articulated the story of a maiden tormented by memories of unfulfilled love; while an open parasol held in her hand twirled to denote the passage of time. During this dance, the musicians sat on the side of the stage playing plaintive melo-

dies on the flute and koto, while the offstage chanting of a poem produced a mournful, unearthly atmosphere.

A cultural exchange is, of course, a two-way experience. What will Sachiyo Ito bring back to her country in terms of Western theatre? Her most startling experience was seeing the Martha Graham Dance Company, and her description of what it meant to her gives us a telling picture of what American Dance can say to foreigners: "One of the dreams I had before I came to America was to see the modern dances of Martha Graham. It was fulfilled at last. Miss Graham shows us what we do not usually see, or rather, what we try to avoid facing . . . which is one of the basic truths of human nature. This is theatre in the best sense of the word, dance-drama."

Theatre, in the "best sense of the word" is indeed an eloquent way to spread good will in the world.