The kabuki theatre of Japan, one of the world's greatest dramatic traditions, presently has an active repertory of 250 to 300 plays and dances, of which less than 20 have been translated into English. In addition, somewhat more than a dozen texts of the puppet theatre (widely known as bunraku), later adapted by kabuki, have been translated. Even taken together, this small number does not compare with the hundreds of translations of no and kyōgen plays. Our intention in these four volumes is to begin to redress this gap by bringing to the reader translations of 51 previously untranslated kabuki plays. It is the first time in over twenty years that a collection of new kabuki translations is being published.

There are many reasons for this lack of translations, including the linguistic difficulty of understanding kabuki's ever-changing colloquial vocabulary, the complexities of transposing kabuki's elaborate verbal gymnastics and declamatory meter into another language, and the problem of establishing authentic texts in a domain where, in principle, the script of each production was newly written. Even today, as our experience working on this project often demonstrated, there are likely to be significant variations among certain scripts used by different actors. Moreover, as a practical matter, many of the plays are long. Finally, translation of the composite art of kabuki must take into account music, dance, acting, and staging as well as language.

The plays translated in these four volumes were selected with several criteria in mind. Most of all, the plays chosen by the editors and translators have exciting stories and charismatic characters; they are powerfully written and are brilliantly theatrical on stage. It often was difficult to limit our selection because many other plays also deserve translation.

The plays chosen for inclusion are also representative of major playwrights, chronological periods of playwriting, play types (history, domestic, and dance dramas), and performance styles. Plays from both Edo (Tokyo) and Kamigata (Osaka and Kyoto) kabuki are included.

All the chosen plays are in the current repertory, are regularly staged, and have not been previously translated. If only certain scenes or acts from a long play are presented today, then those scenes or acts have been translated. In a few cases, long plays, with their important scenes intact, have been slightly reduced in length,
and where possible, a brief summation of the deleted passages has been provided by the translator.

We had not initially planned a four-volume effort, but as we combed kabuki’s wonderfully rich repertory and as we consulted with our translators, the number of “must translate” plays grew beyond one, or two, or even three volumes. In the end, we selected fifty-one plays that we felt deserved translation, would be interesting to read, and might even be performed in English. The translations have been written by the editors and twenty contributors from Japan, England, Canada, Australia, and the United States, each person doing one or more plays. In addition to their love for kabuki and deep knowledge of its performing traditions, the translators share one vital quality: a passionate desire to transform these plays of two and three centuries past into living theatrical English. The translators bring different viewpoints to their work: some are scholars of literature and drama, some are practitioners of kabuki music and dance, some are kabuki theatre experts. As editors, we value each translator’s unique voice and style of writing, and we hope the reader will enjoy the variety of tone and style within the series. We have, of course, made suggestions to the translators, but our major efforts have been to regularize the format and work for consistency of form.

As the series title implies, the plays are translated as if “on stage,” with stage directions indicating major scenic effects, stage action, costuming, makeup, music, and sound effects. In some cases, complex stage actions—such as stage fights—require several pages of careful description. We hope that such passages will read as clearly and interestingly as the dialogue. One translator may emphasize music and another action or scenic effects, according to the nature of the play and his or her interests. Each translation is based on the translator’s choice of a text that approximates a performance on stage today (often this is an unpublished performance script), supplemented by attending public performances and by viewing performance videotapes. Because each performance is different, a translation reflects one performance example; it cannot reflect them all.

Each play is illustrated with a woodblock print (ukiyo-e), sometimes a series of them, and several stage photographs. The ukiyo-e artist commonly included on the print the name of the actor or character and, occasionally, a poem, commentary, or
section of dialogue. These inscriptions, translated in the captions, are indicated by quotation marks.

Voice in kabuki is often sculpted into definite rhythmic measures. Narrative portions are sung or chanted by musicians on- or offstage (*takemoto* and *ôzatsuma* are two such styles). In the translations, the end of a phrase of sung or chanted lyric is indicated by a slash (/) between phrases, which we hope will suggest the original’s general structure. Some translators directly reproduce the Japanese seven-five meter (*shichigochô*) in English, while others seek only to suggest the rhythmic structure of such lines.

The theatre, city, and date of the first production are mentioned before each translation. Stage directions are given in the standard way, from the actor’s point of view: when facing the audience, right is the actor’s right and left is the actor’s left. Personal names are given in the Japanese fashion, with family name first, followed by the given name. A dozen or so Japanese terms that are generally known—kimono, obi, sake, samurai, daimyo, shamisen, and others—are not translated into English nor included in the glossary. In all other cases, translations of Japanese terms are given in the text. To facilitate reading, we have eschewed footnotes within the translations wherever possible in favor of including the pertinent information in the body of the translation, the stage directions, or the introduction. In years prior to 1873, months are given according to the lunar calendar; thus “first month 1865” means the first lunar month of 1865 (early to mid-February on the Western calendar). Dates after 1873, when the Japanese government adopted the Western calendar, are given in Western style (e.g., January 1899).

Translations are arranged in chronological order, and each translation is introduced by its translator. For each volume, the editors have written a general introduction, focusing on the historical development of kabuki drama, and have compiled a bibliography of sources and a glossary of terms. (For more detailed definitions of terms, see Samuel L. Leiter, *New Kabuki Encyclopedia: A Revised Adaptation of Kabuki Jiten* [1997].)

The editors wish to thank the many institutions, scholars, artists, and friends who have supported this undertaking. Publication of the four volumes is supported in part through a major grant to the University of Hawai‘i Press from The Nippon
Foundation, for which we are enormously grateful. The Japan Foundation provided a six-month research fellowship to James R. Brandon for study in Tokyo, from January through June 1999, to get the project underway. A grant from the University of Hawai‘i Research Council provided support for computer assistance and photo digitizing. Samuel L. Leiter received two PSC-CUNY Research Foundation grants that allowed him to work on the project in Tokyo in January 1999 and May 2000. A grant from the Asian Cultural Council assisted his research in January 1999. He also was awarded an Ethyle Wolfe Institute for the Humanities Fellowship that allowed him to spend a year working on the project free from teaching and administrative duties. Professors Torigoe Bunzō, former director, and Ito Hiroshi, current director of the Tsubouchi Memorial Theatre Museum of Waseda University (Waseda Daigaku Tsubouchi Hakase Kinen Engeki Hakubutsukan) and their staff generously opened the museum’s vast kabuki collection to us. In particular, Suzuki Yoshio, Kozuka Kumi, Terada Shima, and Ikawa Mayuko searched out and provided 229 ukiyo-e prints and stage photographs as illustrations. Asahara Tsuneo, secretary-general of the Japan Actors’ Association (Nihon Haiyū Kyōkai), kindly extended permission to use photographs under the association’s jurisdiction. Hayashi Yukio, managing director of Engeki Shuppansha, and Umemura Yutaka, chief photographer of that theatrical publishing house, kindly provided many needed photographs that we were unable to obtain elsewhere. Karashima Atsumi and Orita Kōji of the National Theatre of Japan, Miyazaki Kyoichi of the Kabuki-za, Abiko Tadashi and Nakazato Takeshi of the Shōchiku Company, and chief librarian of the Shōchiku Otani Library, Ogawa Akiko, generously helped locate and obtain research materials. Among our colleagues, we are especially indebted to professors Kei Hibino of Seikei University for being an indefatigable negotiator on our behalf and, at the University of Hawai‘i, Julie Iezzi for sharing her wide knowledge of kabuki music, Kakuko Shōji for writing English translations of many woodblock inscriptions, and Alexander Vovin for transcription assistance. Professors Kawatake Toshio, Mori Mitsuya, and Furuido Hideo; Kono Takashi of the Nihon Keizai newspaper; Konaka Yotarō, managing director of the Japan P.E.N. Club; and Fujita Hiroshi, general-secretary of the Japan Theatre Association (Nihon Engeki Kyōkai), have been staunch
supporters of the project, opening many doors for us. Patricia Crosby, our executive editor, and Ann Ludeman, our production editor, have been pillars of support and understanding throughout this arduous project, and we cannot thank them enough for all their help. And we are, as ever, indebted to our wives, Reiko Mochinaga Brandon and Marcia Leiter, for their limitless patience and support.

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