

[Subscribe via RSS](#)

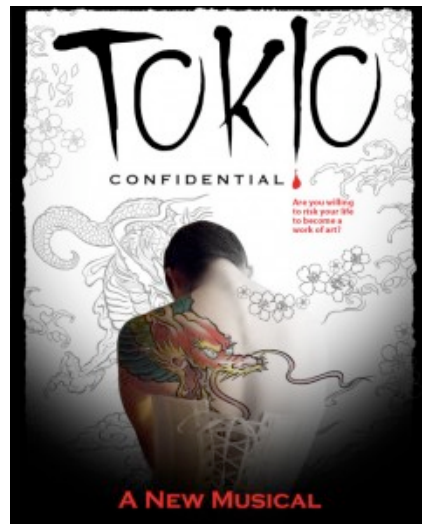
[TDF STAGES: A THEATRE MAGAZINE](#)

tdf STAGES



A Little Bit Noh, A Little Bit Musical Theatre

by Mark Blankenship



“Tokio Confidential’s” unlikely combination of styles

You see all kinds of theatre in New York, but you don’t see that much Noh, the classical Japanese form that uses ritualized music, movement, and costumes to depict warriors, ghosts, and other epic folk. Playwrights like Brecht and O’Neill have been intoxicated by Noh and incorporated elements of it into their own work, and beginning on Sunday, audiences will have a chance to see how Noh blends with a traditional musical.

Presented at Atlantic Stage 2, *Tokio Confidential* might seem familiar and strange all at once. On one hand, it tells the relatable story of Isabella Archer (Jill Paice), a Civil War widow who tries to overcome her grief by traveling to Japan. Thanks to a surprising relationship with a tattoo artist and a personal decision to turn her body into art, she undergoes a physical and spiritual transformation that releases her from the past. Give or take a tattooing scene, this story should resonate with fans of everything from *Gypsy* to *Hairspray* to *Grease*.

But then again, there are no warrior ghosts haunting the kids at Rydell High, and the songs in *Hairspray* don’t suggest the lush, contemplative style of Japanese music. That’s what makes *Tokio Confidential* so striking.

For composer-lyricist Eric Schorr, the two genres make sense together. “I’m fond of saying that Noh is one of the oldest forms of musical theatre because it combines singing or chant, text, and dance,” he says.

When he started this project, Schorr knew he wanted to write about the political history of Japanese tattooing, which was banned in the 19th century. His research led him to Noh, which changed his conception of his work.

“I didn’t want to write a literal Noh play, but it was really the thematic elements that were very attractive to me,” he says. “The whole notion of release of attachment is very Noh, and that’s what the whole play is about, really. It’s about the notion of being attached to someone or something, and to get to Nirvana in a Buddhist sense, you have to release yourself from these earthly attachments. And Isabella is attached to her husband for a long time after he’s dead.”

Traditional Noh, however, has very rigid rules about everything from how long lines of dialogue can be to what kind of music can be played at a particular time. Schorr also wanted the flexibility of a Western musical, where the only “rule” is that a show needs to be good.

The trademarks of both forms are apparent in a scene where Isabella encounters Ulysses S. Grant in Japan. The ghost of her warrior husband (the Civil War veteran) shows up to confront the future president, everyone sings, and in the end, Isabella makes a life-altering decision. It’s neither a Noh scene nor a musical number. It’s a little of both.

“It’s a tricky moment in our show,” says Jill Paice, who plays Isabella. “Even the last time we rehearsed that scene, we made some more changes. In my mind, Isabella’s anger conjures up this memory of her husband, who then takes over and speaks to General Grant for her.”

Paice, who has starred in traditional musicals like *Curtains* and *The Woman in White*, adds that the show has required a different type acting than she’s used to. “At first it was a little uncomfortable because it’s very slow [in some places], and we’re not even taking it as slow as we could be,” she says. “I know my first entrance just used to feel agonizingly slow, this walk across the stage. It was coming to terms with the confidence that this is important and so it does need to be slowed down.”

But ultimately, her goal as an actor is the same as always: She wants to reach the audience with something honest. “When you’re on stage, you get lost in it,” she says. “Those are my favorite moments, when you get lost in it.”

—

Mark Blankenship is TDF’s online content editor

[Like](#) 8 likes. [Sign Up](#) to see

Share this with a friend:

2 comments

[1](#) **susan** { 02.14.12 at 9:04 pm }

I spent two summers in Kyoto studying Noh, bunraku, and kabuki. This play lightly touches on those dramatic forms. I enjoyed the “WHY We Travel” number.

[2](#) **Mark Blankenship** { 02.15.12 at 10:26 am }

Hi Susan — This is Mark (who wrote the article.) When I was in college, we spent a semester studying Noh that ended with a performance on the quad. I’m sure that actual Noh performers would’ve been horrified, but we had a great time. What took you to Kyoto? A grant? General interest?

Leave a Comment