

DRAMA IN JAPAN

The Audiences Sit on Mats in Topsy-turvy Land

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THEATER Street, Kyoto—it was in July last—was ablaze with war dramas. The street is short, about two of our city blocks in length, and only sixteen feet wide, so that rickshaws are not allowed to enter for fear of discommoding the theatergoers. It contains all the theaters of Kyoto, and at the time of our visit held also about all of the population who had money enough to buy a ticket, the lowest admission price being something like two cents. All the buildings are theaters, holding from two hundred to a thousand each, interspersed here and there with shops.

The entire street was brilliant with large, multi-colored, painted banners, about the size of our side-show banners, depicting in stirring Japanese fashion scenes in the current plays. The title of each drama was declared in black characters upon long white streamers about a foot wide which hung from bamboo poles forty feet high. They were, we supposed, to be read from the bottom upward, and after reading them carefully in both directions we asked the rickshaw man what the plays were about. He said: "One Jap chase eight Russians over a hill." At the higher-priced shows it seemed that one Japanese chased sixteen Russians over a hill, the hill being proportionately higher. The rickshaw man knew everything and had the gift of terseness.

As we were in search of the higher-class drama, we did not patronize Theater-st. nor the plays in Shiba Park, which is much like Coney Island, dramatic shows, intermingled with juggling and "Punch and Judy" booths, acrobatic booths and all sorts of wonderful exhibitions of trained birds and animals.

The small theaters had a queer and amusing way of opening the curtain and seriously beginning the play, and letting the full audience laugh at the comedy and thrill at the tragedy until they were thoroughly enjoying themselves. Then the management would draw the curtain and say: "If you like it, come in." They went in en masse. The interesting fact became apparent to me, even in Kyoto, that the theater is a national pastime if not a consuming passion with the Japanese people. They closely resemble the Italians and the French in their enthusiasm for stage display.

Our first experience of the high-class theater was at Nagoya. We went up there to see the Russian prisoners, three thousand in number, representing the winnings of the small but conquering heroes in one little game in Manchuria. They had camped their prisoners in a large wooded park belonging to an old temple, and surrounded them with a light bamboo fence or stockade which any big Russian was likely to stumble through if he walked in his sleep. They did not break through, however, as outside were the Japanese and all Japan. Moreover, they were contented, comfortable, well-fed and good-natured.

The rickshaw man took us through the gate

and gave us a good view of captives and camp before a lieutenant had time to notify us that we could not see the prisoners. Having seen them, this news left us calm.

Then, having two hours to wait, we spent them at the Nagoya Theater, a fair sample, in plays presented and methods of production, of the other high-class theaters of Japan. It was a broad, squat, shabby-looking building, two stories in height. It seemed shabby to us, being of unpainted wood, but was probably artistic and harmonious to the national eye, as they never put paint on wood. The rickshaw man bought my ticket, which was of wood, unpainted, about the third of a shingle in size. It had large and sinister black characters, but I could not tell whether it was orchestra or gallery till the rickshaw man explained: "Him one box—whole chair—all yourself."

As we approached the inner door, he told us to take off our boots. This was disconcerting. We offered to take off our hats, this being the custom, we explained, in our own country; but boots were what they wanted. In confirmation of the claim, they pointed to a thousand pairs of sandals, wooden with wooden blocks underneath to lift them out of the dust, which covered the spreading floor in all directions. There was no checking system, and how each man found his own, after the show, was a mystery. It may be that he did not, sandals not being tight-fitting and all of them being apparently of the same price. Moreover, gallantly putting on a Japanese matinee girl's sandals while she chews Japanese gum and says in Japanese that the hero was "just too lovely" may offer opportunities to the Japanese young man. A compromise was effected by putting large straw slippers over our boots. Then, softly shod in these gigantic sum-

mer arctics, we were allowed to enter.

We were conducted to the balcony tier, and it appeared that as distinguished foreigners we had each been taxed a yen and a half for a box. The box was about six feet square, the wooden partitions about a foot high, and each box had a single real chair. There are no seats in a Japanese theater except for distinguished

foreigners. The audience sit on mats.

The floor of the auditorium below us was like a large checker-board or a working-model of the Chicago stock-yards, square pens measuring six feet either way and having wooden partitions six inches high. The theater was packed with fifteen hundred people, and each square contained a whole family, seven or eight people, adolescent and adult, squatted on the mat. There were no aisles, and the boxes were reached by walking along the tops of the low partitions, which were four or five inches wide. Floors and partitions were of dark polished wood, and the necessity of removing the sandals, to avoid scratching the polish and to prevent noise, was evident. Straight across the auditorium, from the back of the house to the stage, ran a raised walk of polished wood, three feet above the floor and flush with the stage. It was six feet wide. Its use we could not divine, but we promptly named it "The Chute."

To each of our party was handed a program of four pages, the size of the largest American newspaper. It was profusely illustrated in colors, with large pictures of the actors, and contained, we supposed, biographies of the artists and stories of the plays. We had to do a great deal of supposing, and some of our suppositions tickled the rickshaw man immensely. The Japanese have as a nation a strong sense of humor, and of it "Hi Johnny" had his full share.

The entertainment consisted of three comedies, and these, from first to last, revealed more interesting details concerning the Japanese drama than can well be remembered and set down. The first was "The Princess and the Beggar Girl." The curtain, a magnificent affair of silk embroidery in many colors, was drawn to the sides, not raised. It revealed the interior of a nobleman's house. The stage was set exquisitely but sparingly. One has to go to the theater in Japan to see the national furniture and the lavish richness of the old Daimio and Samurai costuming. The Princess, elegantly dressed, was, it appeared, a young person of petulant, peevish and unsympathetic nature who, in addition to all the other gifts of the gods which had been showered upon her, was

about to be married to a handsome and charming young nobleman. To her came the poor Beggar Girl asking alms, and she repulsed the Beggar Girl with cutting speech, and even slapped her. Her shallow, cruel and ungrateful nature and the two protagonists of the drama thus stood revealed.

The purpose of "The Chute" now became man-

