

Feature



Kabuki Revolution Extreme

Katrina Lynn and Mikhail Lynn

A pair of costumers turns Japanese art on its head in a mash-up of Kabuki theater and “Dance, Dance Revolution.”

It was a fruitless YouTube search for a kabuki play from one of the *Lupin the 3rd* movies that led us to Tomasaburo. Until the moment when that great *onnagata* (male actor in a female role) spread the arms of his shimmering kimono in a movement daintier than that of any living woman, “kabuki” meant those guys in angry eyebrow make-up making expansive gestures and speaking too loudly.

Well, admittedly, we weren’t quite that clueless, but we had never taken the time to watch an entire play, so our only experience with the art was the scenes Americans know – the white and red make-up, the men with enormous fake shoulders, and the rhythmic speaking that is unique to the *aragoto* style of acting. It was a famous *aragoto jidaigeki* (historical drama) about one of Japanese history’s anti-heroes that we were searching for that day. Instead, we found *wagoto* and

the duality that makes kabuki such a uniquely Japanese art.

Wagoto is the feminine side of kabuki theatre, captured in expressive, flowing dance and coy gestures suggesting



Concept sketch for Kabuki Revolution Extreme costumes by Katrina and Mikhail Lynn.

the ideal of *yamato nadeshiko*, the woman as a flower.

Kabuki was created in Japan by a woman named Izumo no Okuni in 1603, at

the very beginning of the Tokugawa Shogunate. While Kabuki was originally performed only by women, officials began to fear that they were degrading the art form, and banned all women from performing in kabuki in 1629. Since then, all roles have been played by men. *Onnagata* train for years to learn the delicate movements of the *wagoto* style.

On the masculine side is *aragoto*, translated literally as “rough stuff”, characterized by padded shoulders, uncannily deep voices, and the red make-up associated with kabuki. The goal of an *aragoto* actor is to appear and sound larger than life. Often their roles are those of famous historical warriors or demons.

This duality of kabuki intrigued us, and we originally considered re-creating kabuki costumes. We had made kimono before – Mikhail was married in the uniform of the Shinsengumi, a group of idealist swordsmen from the late nineteenth century, and at the time, I was tackling Noh theatre in a *kariginu*, the clothing of a Japanese man in the eleventh century and today the traditional garb of Shinto priests.

It was during my searches for videos of Noh that I found a video of a man doing a dance from a kabuki play. The movements were faster than the measured, deliberate steps we usually see in kabuki. In fact, it

looked almost like someone playing the Japanese video game [Dance Dance Revolution](#) (DDR), in which the player steps on corresponding arrows on a dance pad set to a particular song. As the difficulty of the game increases, the dancing becomes erratic and impressive to watch, similar to the climax of a kabuki scene.

One of us, which one is now lost to our kabuki-addled brains, suggested that it



Richard Man <http://www.5pmlight.com>
Katrina Lynn as "Butterfly Lady." Photo by Richard Man.



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Mikhail Lynn as "Sakura Warrior." Photo by Richard Man.

would be fun to do some sort of DDR and kabuki skit, covering our outfits in arrows. We grabbed a set of [croquis](#) and sketched our ideas, planning to submit them to the Future Fashion Folio at the next Costume-Con. Mikhail said, "Wouldn't it be great to make those big arrows on the sleeves... GLOW?" and I knew at that moment we had to make the costumes.

There are kabuki and DDR jokes all over the costumes, hidden in the folds of

fabric that make up Mikhail's *kataginu* (kimono set with the broad shoulders, a style from the sixteenth century) and my *susohiki* (kimono with a train). The *aragoto* style is all about masculinity and virility. Heck, when a kabuki actor wears a sword, it's traditionally worn in such a way as to be unmistakably phallic.

We realized there was no way he could wear it that way and still dance as quickly as required for our skit, so we "compensated" by adding other symbols of virility – the arrows pointing down on his tabard, for instance, and the bells attached to his sword (a detail we found on a real kabuki costume). Arrows hide throughout the costumes, dangling from the *kanzashi* in my wig, trailing down my obi as DDR's "hold" symbol, and even in Mikhail's makeup.



Kabuki Makeup

He was the “Sakura Warrior”, a reference to a DDR remix of the Japanese folk song “Sakura”. His is the “good guy” makeup, or kumadori. The original lines, meant to create a specific emotion, have been turned into arrows to match our theme. Good guys in kabuki plays have red lines. Bad guys have blue lines. The warrior’s wig is actually similar to that of a supernatural character rather than a warrior, but we chose it so that we could go with an outlandish color (like the characters in *Dance Dance Revolution*) and a more exaggerated style that everyone would associate with kabuki.

My character was the “Butterfly Lady”, themed for possibly the most famous DDR song of all time, SMiLE.dk’s “Butterfly.” Mine is based vaguely on oyama (an old term for supernatural female kabuki roles) makeup, but the butterfly over the eyes is a modern touch meant to add an expressionist look to the costume.

I don't even want to go into how much work is in these costumes. They say never to use satin in a costume, but we used and abused it. We used and abused (mostly abused, with heat torture) lame, which was absurd but turned out beautifully. There's glitter-covered sheer in this, cotton, wool, chamois, crepe-back satin, baroque satin, a horrid

swimsuit material, three types of satin rope, 12-gauge wire, 100 LED lights, fiber-optics, and more.

As our first costumes of this magnitude, they were a challenge. Covered in appliqués and sequins and LEDs sewn individually into the trim around the arrows, they took us the better part of four months to make and most of our car to transport. We made every layer individually as it would have been made. With our make-up, they take over three hours to put on, and my kimono weighs almost 40 pounds. I always laugh when people ask why we don't wear

them in the hall. Like real kabuki costumes, they are made for the stage.

Through all of our shouting and seam ripping and carsickness from trying to sew the sequins onto my obi while riding through the mountains of Colorado, we learned that, when it comes to costuming, we were only starting to get our feet wet. This was a project to test our creative problem solving and the strength of our combined willpower, but we finished it.

We realized that we had finally made something worthy of Costume-Con, and decided to enter them in the CC28 historical masquerade. We had no idea how worthy, until after we took to the stage to a techno-remixed version of the famous Japanese song “Sakura” (Cherry Blossom). As they started handing us awards, somehow, two years later, the nights of hair-pulling seemed entirely worth it.

[Editor's note: “Kabuki Revolution Extreme” won Best in Show presentation Best in Novice Division workmanship, and the SiW “Dream Catcher” award.]

Katrina and Mikhail Lynn started costuming together almost as soon as they met in college, perhaps because costuming is what brought them together. They run Kawa Kon, an anime convention in St. Louis, Missouri with a focus on costuming.

KABUKI REVOLUTION EXTREME



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Kabuki Revolution Extreme. Photo by Richard Man.