



Photo courtesy Yuka Tsuen

**G**ray metal desks, piles of papers, a couple of aging computers. Not much to distinguish this office from any other in Tokyo—that is, until you notice the two-meter Japanese longbow propped up casually against the computer server. This is Fujinami Props Co., Ltd., the sole props supplier for kabuki, Japan’s all-male, 350-year-old traditional theater. The company provides everything, from items of period furniture, to swords and armor, to tobacco pipes and pouches, to samurai-era sedan chairs.

Like most organizations associated with kabuki, Fujinami is a repository of rich tradition—in their case literally, because many of their props date back to the company’s founding. That was back in 1872, when kabuki was a popular theater for the masses. More than a century later, kabuki has been recognized by UNESCO as one of 43 Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. Today, it’s both heritage and popular entertainment—and it’s as popular as ever.

### Fireproof

At their HQ in the Asakusa area of Tokyo, we follow Fujinami president Isamu Tanaka through a warehouse stacked floor to rafters with a dizzying array of objects. The company has “probably hundreds of thousands” of props stored here and in their other five warehouses in the suburbs of Tokyo. Tanaka leads us to the 111-year-old kura storehouse in the center of the building. Home to Fujinami’s

# KABUKI PROPS

Story by Tony McNicol  
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most precious props, the kura “is the center of the company, in more ways than one,” Tanaka tells us. It’s easy to see what he means: the company’s offices and warehouses are literally built around the four-story traditional storehouse.

As well as having reinforced steel doors specially made by a safe manufacturer, the 111-year-old kura has one-meter-thick walls and tiny windows to protect its contents from

Kabuki in Paris: the Ichikawa family presents performances at the Opera National de Paris (Palais Garnier) in late March (March 23, 25, 27, 29 and 30). In the main repertory, *Kanjinchō*, Ichikawa Danjuro XII plays Benkei and his son Ichikawa Ebizo XI plays Togashi (page 30). Below: The Kabuki-za in Tokyo's swanky Ginza district. Queues of fans can be regularly seen outside Kabuki's most famous theatre.

fire. Standing next to the doors is a small pail of clay. Not all that long ago the pail would have been a large barrel, and the company's staff would have taken pains to keep it moist at all times. In the event of a conflagration, the clay would be used to stop up the gaps in the door and produce a fireproof seal. That was how Fujinami's props survived the World War II Tokyo fire-bombings, despite almost all the surrounding buildings being razed to the ground.

Tanaka slides open a cupboard door inside the storehouse and pulls out a samurai sword. "You must have more than a hundred swords here?" I ask. Tanaka smiles at my question, "we have thousands." For some plays, he explains, where minor actors take several different roles, they need a separate sword for each. For example, in *Chushingura*, one of kabuki's most famous plays, more than a hundred actors wield several hundred swords. "This one was made

recently... after WWII," says Tanaka, pulling out a long, elaborate sword. Some swords with special uses are in pale yellow bags with names written on them. Tanaka unstrings one, takes out the sword and shakes it gently. It gives a metallic rattle. Actors use the sound to convey aggression or nervousness.

## Close to Real

In the center of the floor near the entrance is a trapdoor. We clamber down into a low-ceilinged room. This is where Fujinami stores the armor. Tanaka pulls a cuirass off the shelf and helps another member of staff put it on to show us. Once the company used to employ their own armor makers, but now they have to find experts from outside the company, often professional armor restorers from museums around the country. "The difference between a Western play and kabuki is that the props in kabuki are very close to the real objects," ex-





plains Tanaka. Something that just looks like armor isn't good enough, it has to be as close to the real thing as possible. That's why a set of armor takes a skilled craftsman six months to make and can cost a small fortune. "This armor is exactly the same as armor from that era. It would probably give you fair protection in a real battle!"

It was in 1872, just after Japan opened its doors to the West following centuries of isolation, that company founder Yohei Fujinami set up business. When the new government banned samurai from carrying swords he was quick to spot an opportunity. Fujinami started buying up the swords and renting them out to nearby theaters. He also lent out tobacco pipes and pouches. More than a century later, though the kabuki theaters have long since moved to a more up-market area of Tokyo and Fujinami is no longer a family-run business, the company remains.

Many of the company's props have been in use for decades, or even centuries, but sometimes new items are needed, too. Often they can be procured at antique fairs and from dealers. Other props are made from scratch. On the second floor of the Asakusa HQ, there is a large workshop area where craftsmen sit

on low stools surrounded by tools and materials. It is headed by Hideo Kumagai, a floppy-black-hat and silver-goatee-wearing 68-year-old who has worked for Fujinami since 1957. Kumagai picks up a huge prop axe and invites us to admire the large crimson fire symbol painted on its head. Then he flips open a lid on the side to show a makeup compartment and mirror; it's so that the actor can secretly touch up his makeup on stage.



The 111-year-old storehouse at the center of Fujinami's Tokyo HQ holds hundreds of precious sets of armor and thousands of swords (above). Below: A woodblock print shows Edo-period Asakusa, where Fujinami has been

located since its founding. The roof-top square structures mark Kabuki theatres of the time.

Fujinami president Isamu Tanaka (right) poses before a set of samurai armor outside the company's Tokyo HQ. The highly authentic sets take months to make but can be used for decades. Below: Lightness and durability are of the utmost importance for items to be carried and used on stage. Traditional materials like bamboo have long been employed, as more recently are plastics and resins.

## Shock Value

Many props are made from wood or paper—lightness being an essential requirement for use onstage—although the company also uses modern materials such as resin and fiberglass. For the times when only the best traditional materials are good enough, the company can go to surprising lengths. Kumagai shows us a lion's head mask covered with gold leaf and made of Japanese papier-mâché. It takes 35 layers of the highest-quality handmade Japanese washi paper to give the mask the proper strength and lightness. Because modern paper isn't up to the job, Fujinami buys up job lots of antique books, medical texts and old court documents and sorts through them to find the paper they need.

Kumagai takes a piece from a box in the corner of the room to show us. It tears with ease vertically, but needs a good tug to rip horizon-



tally. Pasting the sheets perpendicular to one another gives the mask its strength. Unfortunately, no one knows how long the supply of antique books will last, and the price is gradually going up. “We don’t know what we will do in the future,” says Kumagai. “To be honest, it gives me a headache just to think about it.”

Some of the most important props in kabuki are shikake mono (special effects items). Kiyoshi Yamanaka, who works in the metal objects department, shows me one he invented himself. It’s an iron for branding criminals. The user presses the iron against the actor’s flesh and pushes a button in the hilt. An electric filament heats up, ignites a match head



and produces a small puff of smoke. Red paint on the tip leaves a mark on the actor’s skin to complete the effect. “This one’s popular,” says Yamanaka proudly. “The audience gets a shock.”

At 71 years old Yamanaka is one of the company’s older employees, but by no means the most senior. The company offers full-time employees a job for life with a retirement age of 69, much later than the regular retirement age



of 60 in Japan. Staff can stay on even longer if they want—at present the oldest is 78 years old. “They have the skills... experience from decades working here,” says company president Tanaka. “If they left, we’d be in trouble.”

It helps to have older employees to match the memories of the grand old men of the kabuki stage, as it is not unusual for actors to continue performing into their eighties or even older. But that’s not to say Fujinami isn’t recruiting young people, and there is no shortage of eager applicants. The apprenticeship is long—three years—after which the trainees take a written test. According to Tanaka, it takes about 10 years for a new employee to get a handle on all aspects of the kabuki prop-making business.

## Stolen Techniques

Thirty-four-year-old Koji Hasegawa is one of the company’s newest employees. He finished his apprenticeship and became a full-fledged member of staff three years ago. Today, he is sitting near an open encyclopedia of Japanese ducks and making a spot-billed duck costume. (Animal costumes make occasional appearances in kabuki. Fujinami also stocks life-sized wild boar and horse costumes actors can mount onstage.) He tells us that his rather more gruesome graduation piece was a kirikubi (severed head), one of the most difficult objects a crafts-



man can be asked to make. “It was a challenge for him,” says his boss Kumagai approvingly. “There’s no point making things you already know. That’s not how you get better.”

Hasegawa emphasizes how much advice and help he has received from his elders in the props company. It sounds a far cry from what is known in the Japanese arts literally as “stolen technique.” Not so long ago, says Tanaka, young craftsmen would literally have to “steal” the knowledge by watching their teachers in action over the years. “Back then, if you taught your skills, you would lose your standing,” Tanaka explains. “They wouldn’t need you any more.”

Luckily for Hasegawa’s generation, older employees are much more eager to transmit their knowledge now. Perhaps craftsmen are fewer now, and their jobs more secure. Likewise, Fujinami itself also uses whatever modern technology it can to preserve kabuki’s ancient traditions. Since the 1960s they have been recording kabuki performances on video and, more recently, DVD. The recordings provide a record of which props were used in each show and just how each actor used them.

In the theaters, too, there’s a similar mixture of old and new. Kabuki classics alternate with sell-out plays by contemporary writers that combine modern theater and kabuki traditions. Some of kabuki’s younger stars are household names through their appearances on TV and in films. Recently, live kabuki performances have even been filmed on high-definition digital video for showing at cinemas in Japan and abroad. Kabuki is flourishing.

For all the weight of centuries of tradition, kabuki is as dynamic as ever. Fujinami is just one of the many organizations within kabuki that have always striven to balance heritage and innovation. In the words of craftsman Hideo Kumagai as he shows me a plastic molded sword guard, “The materials are new, but the object looks the same as it did 130 years ago.”



A young Fujinami craftsman at work (above). Kabuki prop-making is benefiting from a revival of interest in Japan’s traditional arts, and there is no shortage of enthusiastic young people willing to start Fujinami’s three-year apprenticeship. Left: Fujinami’s tens of thousands of props are stored in warehouses in and around Tokyo. They even include a stage boar suit.