

## HABILITATION THESIS REVIEWER'S REPORT

### Masaryk University

**Applicant**

**Habilitation thesis**

**Reviewer**

**Reviewer's home unit,  
institution**

**Ivan Rumánek, PhD.**

The okuni soshi manuscripts as testimony of a point of fracture in classical Japanese theatre

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[Review text]

Dr. Rumánek's thesis is an examination of a group of four manuscripts (collectively known as the "Okuni sōshi" or "Okuni kabuki sōshi") which detail the early origins of what has come to be known as kabuki. Three of the manuscripts date from the seventeenth century and the fourth is a fragment which was included in a nineteenth-century collection of essays which was printed and published. Although these manuscripts, and the importance that they have for the history of Japanese theatre, have been well known since the early twentieth century, very little scholarly attention has been given to them in the West and there have existed no translations of the texts of this source material into English. In addition to the role that these texts play in the history of kabuki, they are also an important source for understanding the relationship between this genre of theatre and earlier performance traditions, especially sarugaku (what is now called nō or noh). Dr. Rumánek's thesis is that a detailed examination of both the text and the images of this group manuscripts can allow for a new apprehension of kabuki's earliest developments and its relationships with sarugaku. Dr. Rumánek includes a transcription and translation of the three main manuscripts from the collection as an appendix.

I found Dr. Rumánek's thesis highly original and extremely valuable to the study of early kabuki and of Japan's theatrical history more broadly. In particular, the chose analysis of both text and image as the relate to the "Okuni sōshi" group of texts will be an invaluable resource for anyone interested in the relationship between kabuki and nō and in the social and cultural history of kabuki in the early seventeenth century. Most interesting in Dr. Rumánek's argument is the idea that a point of fracture between the two traditions (sarugaku or nō and the nascent kabuki) can be located within the performance of Okuni and her troupe as it are recorded in what is believed to be the earliest of the manuscripts, the Kyōdaibon. Dr. Rumánek's thesis is that although the performance begins with a rather conventional nō-like opening, this then quickly gives way to a very different, seemingly contemporary form of performance. In other words, what Dr. Rumánek argues is that the very earliest sources that exist in relation to the history of kabuki show clearly both its relationship to the earlier (and dominant) for of nō as well as some breaks that point forward to something of what the new dramatic art would become.

There are several questions that Dr. Rumánek's provokes but which he does not answer in detail in the thesis; although these questions are not directly related to his central argument, I believe some attempt to answer them could enrich the value of the thesis. The first is the relationship between the *Kottōshū* fragment and the Bunkakan fragment and what the

significance of this might be not for our own understanding of the history of kabuki but for how the history of kabuki was understood within the nineteenth century. Dr. Rumánek suggests that the *Kottōshū* fragment appears to be a copy of the Bunkakan fragment (or that there may be an intermediary source) and this is fascinating from the perspective of how writers and antiquarians like Santō Kyōden had access to early seventeenth century material and how this material then circulated in print in the early nineteenth century. This in turn suggests that rather than treating the *Kottōshū* fragment as part of the group of “Okuni sōshi” texts it is better understood as distinct, perhaps more similar to the colotype reproductions made by the Waseda Theatre Museum in the 1930s as a reproduction of the original text.

The second question that I hope Dr. Rumánek will address more fully is the nature of historical evidence broadly and the “Okuni sōshi” texts in particular. On page 64 Dr. Rumánek writes that “They can be considered a record, more or less exact, of the action on the stage, and are regarded as such in this chapter.” There has been a long tradition within the study of the theatre in Japan (going back to at least Tsubouchi Shōyō) of treating images as almost proto-photographic or proto-cinematic recordings of reality and yet anyone who has worked on premodern texts and images knows that these materials (often of uncertain date and uncertain origin and uncertain provenance) pose problems of interpretation. These problems are themselves interesting and Dr. Rumánek’s discussion on page of the ambiguity of the opening of “Kuni-jo kabuki ekotoba” is a good reminder of this; I believe a fuller accounting for the problems and nature of evidence would make this aspect of the thesis more convincing: for a reader (such as myself) who is sceptical that such documents are in fact “a record, more or less exact, of the action on the stage” how best are we to understand their historical meaning and their role as evidence?

One minor error that Dr. Rumánek should fix is his romanization of the title for “Kuni-jo kabuki ekotoba.” He seems to interpret jo (女) as modifying kabuki but this should be read rather as a suffix attached to the name Kuni however the latter seems to be the agreed upon reading of the title (as for example in the Kyōdai repository <https://rmda.kulib.kyoto-u.ac.jp/item/rb00013520> ).

**Reviewer's questions for the habilitation thesis defence** (number of questions up to the reviewer)

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- 1) If we question the idea that “[the “Okuni sōshi” manuscripts] can be considered a record, more or less exact, of the action on the stage” and instead treat them as rather useful but imperfect sources of information, how would this change your approach the manuscripts and to your conclusions?

## **Conclusion**

The habilitation thesis entitled *The okuni soshi manuscripts as testimony of a point of fracture in classical Japanese theatre* by Ivan Rumanek, PhD., **fulfils** requirements expected of a habilitation thesis in the field of Theory and History of Theatre, Film and Audio-Visual Culture Studies.

Date: January 22, 2024

Signature: