THE ROOTS OF JAPANESE CULTURE AS SEEN IN THEATER AND ART 2 credits (Spring)

Course Description:
Although it gives the impression of continuity, Japanese culture is the product of successive waves of change and consolidation. The three most important times in this regard are the Muromachi period, the Edo period, and the Meiji Restoration. This course will concentrate on the culture of the Muromachi period and its theatrical forms of noh and the comic kyogen theater and the culture of the Edo period and its theatrical forms of kabuki and Bunraku puppet theater.

Textbooks:
Readings will be from Karen Brazell, ed. “Japanese Traditional Theater: Anthology of Plays” (Columbia University Press) and Donald Keene “Anthology of Japanese Literature: Earliest Era to Mid-Nineteenth Century” (required for purchase) and additional readings will be posted on Moodle.

Course Plan:
1 Unit 1: Ancient Roots (Classes 1 and 2)
The introduction will look at Japanese history and culture when it emerges in writing with the ancient chronicles and clues to the nature of Japan before that in archaeology and Shinto.

In this class we will also start learning “Unohana,” a piece of Kiyomoto kabuki music sung to the shamisen. This will be a way of experiencing the traditional approach to language and poetic images.

2 Ancient Roots continued

3 Unit 2: Heian Poetry and Narrative as expressed in Art (Class 3)
Traditional theater is tied to texts and especially poetic language and images. This poetic language took definitive form in the Heian period. We will concentrate on some episodes from the “Tales of Ise” and then the way that poetic images from stories become iconic visual motifs in art.

4 Unit 3: Military tales, Chinkon (Quieting Spirits) and Singing Stories (Class 4)
The political dominance of the Imperial court ended with the wars between the Genji and Heike clans and the establishment of a military government in Kamakura. Culturally it was a relatively conservative period, but saw the creation of “The Tales of the Heike,” a long ballad performed by blind musicians accompanying themselves on the Biwa lute. This class will look at some episodes from “The Tales of the Heike,” especially the story of the death of the young warrior Atsumori.

5 Unit 4: Synthesis in Muromachi Culture (Classes 5 – 8, Class 7: first 2-page paper due.)
The Muromachi period was a very murky and unstable period politically but it also was one of the richest periods of cultural creation in Japanese history. Many of the customs and styles of life that we think of as “Japanese” came into use in this period. The military government became established in Kyoto and all the prominent groups in Kyoto – military leaders, the imperial court and court aristocrats, the newly ascendant merchant and craftsman class – all vied together for dominance which resulted in cultural forms that brought all these influences together.

This unit will look at some of the features of Muromachi culture and then at the noh plays “Atsumori,” “Izutsu” and “Sumidagawa.” And it will also look at the comic kyogen plays “Futari Bakama (Two in One Hakama)” and “Tsukimi Zato (The Moon Viewing Blindman).”

6 Synthesis in Muromachi Culture (continued)

7 Synthesis in Muromachi Culture (continued) first 2-page paper due

8 Synthesis in Muromachi Culture (continued)

9 Mid-Term (first part of Class 9)
Unit 5: Rebuilding into Edo Culture (remainder of Class 9)
All the cultural innovations of the Muromachi period carried over into the Edo period where they became the culture of the samurai elite. But at the same time, the commoner classes created a vibrant, new urban culture of their own, which includes popular fiction, ukiyo-e pictures and the kabuki and Bunraku theaters.

This class will introduce the history and culture of the Edo period

10 Unit 6: Kabuki (Classes 10 – 12)
The kabuki theater began as a dance review and became a rich dramatic form with all male actors including men called onnagata specializing in female roles. This unit will look at the bombastic masculine acting style of aragoto and then how it combines with onnagata to form plays.

11 Kabuki (continued)

12 Kabuki (continued)

13 Unit 7: Bunraku puppet theater (Class 13)
The Bunraku puppet theater grew up together with the live kabuki theater and they strongly influenced each other. This unit will look at the great playwright Chikamatsu Monzaemon and “The Love Suicides at Sonezaki,” the first seawamono play about the life of commoners.

14 Unit 8: The Meiji Restoration and the Roots of the Present
Japanese culture changed totally with the Meiji Restoration. It is, of course, impossible to deal with this in its totality, but this unit will look at the way that the traditional approach to language and poetic images changed with Shoka, the new songs created for education.

Other: none

Method of Evaluation:
Grading will be based on 2 two-page essays, and a mid-term and final examination.