

Song, Dance, Action

Matthew Zaff

Wright State University

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“Song, Dance, Action”

It's not your typical comic book; no it's far from that. It is a work of painting, of pen and ink, of photography, and of words. The story is a beautiful collage of action, violence, and compelling character studies, complete with mystery and amazing twists in the plot. David Mack separates himself from other comic book artist with his wonderful artwork, his brilliant storytelling, and a series of books that can be read in more than one order. Mack's *Kabuki* stands alone on the comic stand as the greatest American action graphic novel.

When purchasing a comic book, the first thing one notices is the cover. Cover art must be attention-grabbing so a potential buyer will pick up the comic in the first place. It is usually painted or done in high-detail pen and ink. Unfortunately, the artwork inside the comic is often less fantastic, typically less detailed and eye catching. The comic *Cable & Deadpool* has a cover with the title characters posed in a grimacing fashion, even their muscles seem to have muscles. What lies inside, however, is much simpler, giving the violence a light-hearted feel. However, this is not the case for *Kabuki*. All of the *Kabuki* covers are beautifully painted and range from realistic portraits of mysterious masked women, to abstract collages in which it appears that a person is constructed by many pieces of a painting, with some pieces missing and some duplicated. In many of the *Kabuki* books, much of the art inside the comic actually reflects that of the covers. Even when Mack chooses to use pen and ink instead of paint, it is done stylistically (Giles, 2001), which is not the typical feeling I get from reading *Cable and Deadpool* or any other Marvel comic of similar fashion.

Beyond the initial differences between the cover artwork of *Kabuki* and *Cable and Deadpool*, a continued reading will reveal further differences between the two. One particular difference is that of the plot. A good action comic should have a solid plot, which allows lots of action. A careful balance between the action and plot must be maintained; having too much or too little of either makes the reading uninteresting. The artwork should show talent, as well as work hand-in-hand with the plot. No one wants to read the action in a comic; likewise, a comic with little or no text can be confusing. “If you pick up an issue of *Kabuki*, I don't think that you can really delineate where the writing ends, and the art begins. They are the same thing” (Giles, 2001). A good comic series should be self-containing, needing no or little background information to enjoy it. Finally, the comic series should have some sort of new take, so as to be distinguished from other comics, and while social or political commentary or humor are often appreciated, they are not necessary. *Cable and Deadpool*, as well as most Marvel comic books, works within the specific conventions of American superhero comics. *Kabuki* blurs, bends, breaks and goes beyond these conventions.

The plot in *Kabuki* is a very out of the ordinary. Taking place in near future Kyoto, the story is not only set in Japan, but the characters seem to reflect Japanese culture and values, as well totally abandon them. Weaving its way seamlessly into the story are the honor, family, and strong national pride often associated with Japan in juxtaposition with the seedy underworld associated with western culture. However, the Japanese influence is not the only thing out of the ordinary about *Kabuki*. The central character, Kabuki, is part of a secret organization called the Noh, whose purpose is to maintain the balance between organized crime and politics. The Noh is made up of eight female agents so secretive they

are known to each other only under their aliases. Yet everyone in Japan knows about the Noh because they are famous characters in a popular television series, who preach following the rules: No one really believes they exist, and those unfortunate enough to find out that they do, don't live to tell about it.

The uniqueness of the *Kabuki* plot is not just in the plot itself, but also in how it is told. Mack often writes in stylistically short sentences, with lots of metaphors, much like one would write poetry, both of which he uses to bring deeper meaning, as well as a dark comedic undertone. A good example of Mack's writing can be seen in this quote "...Which leaves no eyes on me. I help them [the guards] shoot each other. I inherit their guns and share the wealth" (Mack, 2001.) Rather than saying she shot the guards, stole their guns, and then shot all of the high profile government officials in the room, Mack instead uses words, such as "inherit" and "share the wealth" to give the action both a comedic undertone, as well as comment on the formality of the situation she was in. In addition, not all of the plot can be easily summarized as with most action comics. While much of the story tells of the progression of characters in an external world, an equal amount of *Kabuki* is devoted to the inner workings of the character's feelings, thoughts, and anxieties. In fact, the second volume in the series, *Dreams*, is, as the title suggests, almost totally about the dreams of Kabuki.

The most common criticism of *Kabuki* is on the qualities that make it so uniquely different. "He's partial to large images and complex collages that fill an entire page, rather than more traditional divisions into smaller panels ...when he does use panels, they are arranged almost randomly on the page" (Rasher, 2004). And while Sarah Rasher condemns David Mack for his cultural inaccuracies, particularly in reference to the large

tattoos, that all the Noh agents' sport (2004), she fails to realize that this is a work of fiction that not only takes place in the future, but uses the world of *Kabuki* to illustrate a large picture.

Additionally, she charges that Mack's work is nothing more than an excuse to draw beautiful women in little clothes, who engage in lesbian kisses (Rasher, 2004). While it is true that the women in *Kabuki* are very beautiful, as well as at times hardly dressed, it is not the perversion that Rasher describes. The nudity that she refers to takes place in an institution designed to control rogue agents. While she could argue that the plot revolves around drawing naked Asian women, it seems the nudity is the physical manifestation of what the characters are feeling, having had everything, including their sanity, taken from them. It is also important to note that Mack takes care to cover-up his naked characters in some form or another. Additionally Mack's characters are very naturally proportioned women when compared to Marvel comics, whose women are so busty and so skinny (dressed in very little as well, I might add) that they hardly seem fit to fight crime. Also the kiss to which Rasher refers, I would hardly call lesbian. While it is true the kiss is between two women, it is far less sexual, as it a kiss of trust between two characters who find very little to trust in their world.

The artwork in *Kabuki* is anything but straight-forward. Although David Mack writes in such a way that the writing could stand by itself, his artwork accentuates his writing. Throughout the series, Mack's art ranges from black and white ink to water color to photography to a collage of all of it. Each style used reflects the tone of the story (Giles 2001). The gritty, film noir feel of Mack's black and white, is used mostly for external plot progression (books *Circle of Blood*, *Masks of the Noh*, and *Scarab*), while

his painting and photography gives a fantasy feel used mostly for internal plot progression and character study (books *Dreams*, *Skin Deep*, and *Metamorphosis*). Just as Mack's writing can stand by itself, so can his art, and often it does. *Dreams* in particular has far less writing than the others and is told through the images. This makes *Kabuki* an extraordinary piece.

Mack demonstrates his ability to tell a story with words or images by themselves. No other American action graphic novel can claim this. Additionally, because he fuses the two together, he tells a story in a way very few other novelist or artist could. Giles said it perfectly: "Only a handful of others can handle both the art and writing chores with such eloquence and beauty" (2001). It is also important to note that each of the books in the *Kabuki* series could function as a book by itself; indeed, they can be read in different order than they were published. In fact, in a conversation I held with David Mack at a comic book convention, I told him that I had accidentally read book 3 (*Masks of the Noh*) before I read book 2 (*Dreams*), without knowing it. It gave the story a totally different feel than it would have otherwise. He said that is great and said he often suggests reading book 5 (*Metamorphosis*) first and then picking back up with book 1 (*Circle of Blood*) as a flash back. Mack uses the convention of having a self-contained story as a means to express his creative ability. While he writes one story that can be read many ways, many Marvel comics use the convention of self-contained stories for economic ventures. By having characters whose history is reestablished each time they are in a new series, Marvel has the ability to retell and ultimately resell the same story over and over with only minor changes.

Kabuki is nothing less than amazing. It is unfortunate that many people don't believe you can find fine art or great writing in a comic book shop. *Kabuki* is a comic book that can be enjoyed by even those who do not typically read comics and one that can be enjoyed by those who are interested in reading something new. If you are only interested in straight-forward artwork and plots, then *Kabuki* is not for you; otherwise you will be blown away. Mack personally guarantees it.

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