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Author(s)	Dimitri Eipides
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Toronto 95



The Written Face

Daniel Schmid

SWITZERLAND/JAPAN, 1995

89 minutes ■ Colour/35mm

Production Company: T&C Film/
Euro Space

Producer: Kenzo Horikoshi, Marcel
Hoehn

Screenplay: Daniel Schmid

Cinematographer: Renato Berta

Editor: Daniela Roderer

Sound: Dieter Meyer

Principal Cast: Tamasaburo Bando,
Yajuro Bando, Yagoro Bando

Print Source/Foreign Sales Agent:

T&C Film, Seestrasse 41A,

8002 Zurich, Switzerland.

Tel: (41-1) 202-3622.

Fax: (41-1) 202-3005.

"*The Written Face* is neither a film about Japan, nor about Kabuki theatre. We knew it was impossible ever entirely to enter into this world, a world one supposes is innately inconceivable, which offers at first sight merely a mirror image of the alien. We were always 'within, yet still on the threshold.'" – Daniel Schmid

If *The Written Face* isn't "about" Kabuki, the time-honoured Japanese art of stylized drama punctuated with singing and dancing, it is certainly an impassioned tribute to it. This ancient performing tradition is beginning to disappear, and director Daniel Schmid – back at the Festival again – has set out to document one of its most respected practitioners, Tamasaburo Bando. Tamasaburo, who first appeared on stage at the age of five, is considered one of the Kabuki theatre's finest Onnagata – men who specialize in playing female roles.

Combining performance with documentary, Schmid has given his film an episodic structure, composed of four parts. In the first section, "Orochi", Tamasaburo performs a dance drawn from Japan's oldest myth, about a drunken snake. The second, "Tamasaburo Bando and His Idols", consists of interviews with the performers who have inspired Tamasaburo's performances, serving as teachers and role models. Among them are Butoh dancer Kazuo Ohno; actor Haruko Sugimara, who has worked with most of Japan's greatest directors, including Kurosawa, Ozu and Naruse; and legendary dancer Han

Takehara, herself a member of a declining tradition: the geisha.

The third act, "Twilight Geisha", is a light-hearted variation on traditional geisha themes. Concluding the narrative is another traditional Kabuki dance, "Sagimsume", a story of reincarnation and a girl's transformation on a snowy winter's night, performed by Tamasaburo and his company. This poignant final piece provides a fitting coda to a film that, one day soon, may be a rare record of a vanished art.

■ Dimitri Eipides

Daniel Schmid was born in 1941, and spent his early childhood in a grand hotel run by his mother and grandmother. In addition to film, he has also directed several operas at Geneva's Grand Theatre and the Zurich Opera House. His films include: *Tonight or Never* (72), *La Paloma* (74), *Shadow of Angels* (76), *Violanta* (77), *Notre Dame de la Croisette* (81), *Hécate* (82), *Tosca's Kiss* (84), *Jenatsch* (87), *The Amateurs* (90), *Off Season* (92) and *The Written Face* (95).

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