

# Umbrellas Used in Traditional Japanese Dance

*Nihon buyo*, a form of dance that is one of the traditional Japanese performing arts, features umbrellas in some of its most memorable scenes. We interviewed a member of a prestigious *Nihon buyo* school about the role of umbrellas in dance performances.

(Text: Tanaka Nozomi)

**N***ihon buyo* is a generic name for various styles of traditional Japanese dance, such as *mai* (generally, a type of dance that emphasizes smooth, circling movements), and *odori* (generally, a dance style that features rhythmical, lively movements). The umbrellas used in *Nihon buyo* are an essential prop that assists the audience in creating a richer visual image of characters and scenes. In addition to ordinary *wagasa* (traditional Japanese umbrellas), “trick umbrellas” are also used for dramatic purposes. For instance, when performers change costumes on stage, umbrellas are held up as screens to hide them. In fight scenes called “*tachimawari*,” umbrellas are handled as weapons. Apart from ordinary *wagasa*, a type of traditional Japanese hat shaped like an umbrella but without the handle can also add a touch of glamor to the performance when used as a “trick umbrella.” Since the four seasons are important in *Nihon buyo*, umbrellas are also used as a prop that enhances the lyrical effect of the performance by superimposing the character’s feelings on the natural phenomena typically associated with each season.

This translucent silk umbrella creates an impression of fragility. *Sagi Musume* (“The Heron Maiden”).

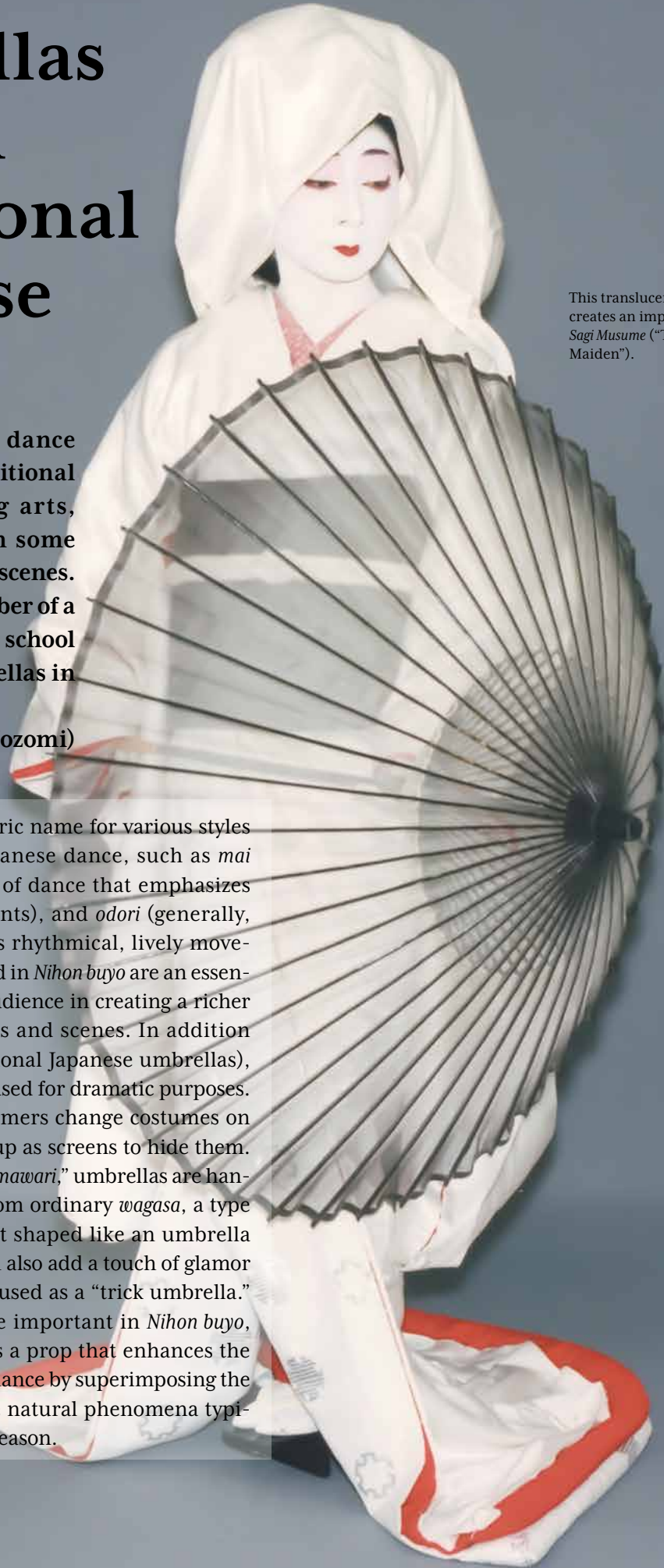




Photo: Nihon Buyo Bando-Ryu


*Kyoganoko Musume Dojoji* (“The Maiden at Dojoji Temple”). Halfway through the play, the protagonist, Hanako, appears on stage with three umbrella-shaped hats, one on her head and two in each hand. When she releases the tricks in the hats in her hands, each hat opens into three linked hats, which symbolize the blooming of plum blossoms.

The use of umbrellas in the famous dance performance *Sagi Musume* (“The Heron Maiden”) is particularly impressive. The curtain opens to reveal a young woman dressed in a pure-white wedding kimono, who embodies the spirit of a white heron. She is holding an umbrella as she lingers by a snow-covered pond with her back to the audience. The umbrella used in this scene is called “*shabari-gasa*” (umbrella made of thin silk gauze). The translucent material of the umbrella gently reveals the pure-white kimono-clad figure of the protagonist, bringing her exquisite beauty into focus. As an incarnation of a white heron, the protagonist wants to escape the bitterness of unrequited fleeting love for a human being, and her emotional state is expressed in the choreography of her dance as she retreats with the umbrella half-open.

We asked the publicist for the Nihon Buyo Bando-Ryu<sup>1</sup>, about which traditional Japanese dance plays featuring umbrellas as props she would recommend and why. This is what she said: “In addition to *Sagi Musume*, *Kyoganoko Musume Dojoji* uses umbrellas to a great effect. This play is based on the Dojoji legend about a woman who turned into a serpent and burned

to death the man she loved.

As a work of art, however, it is a magnificent play that uses numerous costumes and props to paint the image of a young woman in love. Halfway through the play, the protagonist, Hanako, appears on stage with three umbrella-shaped hats, one on her head and two in each hand. When she releases the tricks in the hats in her hands, each hat opens into three linked hats, which symbolize the blooming of plum blossoms.

Traditional Japanese dance has been handed down for generations by preserving *kata* (set forms) and dance formats, while expanding the traditions with new attempts to keep up with the times. As one element in this rich tapestry of traditions, the umbrella used as a prop, too, has a profound meaning, as illustrated by the above examples. I hope that visitors from overseas to Japan, too, will enjoy the presence of umbrellas in *Nihon buyo* performances as they appreciate traditional Japanese culture.” 

1. Bando-Ryu is a school of Nihon buyo (traditional Japanese dance) established by kabuki actor Bando Mitsugoro III. Its current iemoto (school leader) is Bando Minosuke, who inherited the title after the death of Bando Mitsugoro X.



Performance of *Sagi Musume*. Unlike ordinary *wagasa*, which is made of Japanese paper *washi*, *shabari-gasa* is made of silk gauze.



Photo: Nihon Buyo Bando-Ryu / Shoohika Costume