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Theatre review: 'Kutsukake Tokijiro' an inspired Yakuza yarn

- **KUTSUKAKE TOKIJIRO**
- NOVEMBER 15, 2011
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RATING FOR KUTSUKAKE TOKIJIRO

Mounting a 1920s Japanese gangster play with J-pop flavored fillips may seem like a tough sell, but the new Off-Off-Broadway production of [Kutsukake Tokijiro](#) is a successful hybrid that should appeal to fans of "world" stage productions.

Opening last week at Tribeca's [Flea Theater](#) and running through Nov. 27, *Kutsukake Tokijiro* (if you can pronounce it, you've probably already seen it) caps a nearly three-year journey to the stage by New York's [Kurotama Kikaku Company](#) and its artistic director, Jun Kim. A native of Japan with Korean heritage, Kim is an actor, dancer, and director of the show, doing double duty in the opening scenes as Mutsuda-no-Sanzo, the target of the titular Tokijiro (played with noble gravitas by Yasu Suzuki).

View slideshow: [Jun Kim of Kurotama Kikaku Company](#)

If these names sound musty, consider the source material: written by Shin Hasegawa in 1928, *KT* is a hallmark of Japanese popular theatre, based in turn upon on a 19th century Japanese Yakuza/lone gambler story cut almost from the same cloth as the Spaghetti Western. In its first-ever English translation by the venerable Keiko Tsuneda, *KT* is reborn for an American audience.



'Kutsukake Tokijiro' runs through Nov. 27 at the Flea Theatre in Tribeca.

Photo credit:

Courtesy of Kurotama Kikaku Company



Video: [Benefit night for 'Kutsukake Tokijiro'](#)

Kim's vision for a 21st century *KT* is to inject Japanese pop culture animation and folk songs as well as the dance movements of Noh, Kabuki and contemporary dance to form a "J-pop Theatre." This is achieved via Japanese-language scenes between Tokijiro and his rivals (English supertitles are helpfully flashed above center stage) and through his more tender moments with Sanzo's widow, Okinu

(Hiroko Yonekura), whom Tokijiro elopes with along with her young son Tarokichi (Asuka Morinaga).

Naturally, just when Tokijiro thought he was out...well, you know the rest, as the shady innkeeper Yasbeh (Jiro Ueno) makes him an offer he can't refuse, blurring the line between the concepts of obligation (*giri*) and love (*ninjo*), ideas deeply rooted in the Japanese populace at the time and fuel for great drama.

Kim is in his comfort zone with this material (he previously helmed an Obie Award-winning production of the Edo period *Benten Kozo* for the Flea), and the contemporary touches, like music by famed pop producer/NHK composer [Ryo Yoshimata](#), blend in well with the vintage storyline. Live guitar and booming wood block percussion (a bit too booming from where this Examiner was sitting) punctuate the action scenes.

There are some other fantastical touches that hold the audience's attention, too, like Tokijiro's anime-inspired duels (complete with back projected graphics courtesy of Berlin-based French artist Yoann Trelu) and some more incongruous moments (like when the jocular Yasbeh belts out the chorus of Olivia Newton-John's "Physical") that actually work, softening the inherently grim material. This also goes for the dance numbers(!) by Kayoko Sakoh, which add texture, not padding, to the show's swift 75-minute running time.

While this production of *KT* itself earns its Off-Off-Broadway stripes (the Flea seats about 40), the diversity of talent and the unique setting provide an intimate opportunity for the theatergoer to visit a Japan that no longer exists, but will endure forever.

Here's hoping that Kim's next project reels in an even bigger audience.

Kutsukake Tokijiro runs through Nov. 27 at the Flea Theatre, 41 White Street (between Church Street and Broadway). Tickets are \$20. For more information, visit www.kurotamakikaku.com or call (212) 352-3101.