



The Kabukiza theater, illuminated in Tokyo's glitzy Ginza district, is a reminder of the country's quieter past.

PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

Japan says 'sayonara' to Tokyo's kabuki theater

While the premiere venue has a date with a wrecking ball, its replacement, a 49-story office tower, will feature a new theater for the stylized classical dance-drama

BY SHINGO ITO
AFP, TOKYO

The curtain is coming down on Tokyo's Kabukiza, the iconic home of Japan's traditional kabuki drama, which is set to be demolished next month to make way for a skyscraper.

Women dressed in their finest kimonos and crowds of tourists have flocked to the venue, a landmark that evokes ancient Japanese castles and temples, to catch the final shows before its date with the wrecking ball.

Nestled amid the glass and steel of the upscale Ginza shopping district, the four-story playhouse, with its curved roofs and red paper lanterns, is a reminder of a quieter past beloved by many in the bustling metropolis.

For more than half a century it has been the premiere venue in Tokyo

to see kabuki, the stylized classical dance-drama whose all-male actors perform in extravagant costumes and mask-like facial makeup.

The theater's owner, movie and entertainment company Shochiku, plans to take down the building sometime next month and build a 49-story office tower on the site by 2013 at a cost of US\$467 million.

The company, which says the old structure fails to meet earthquake-safety standards, has said it will rebuild the theater, using some original facade ornaments, on the bottom floors of the new building.

In contrast to the half-century old structure, the new version will boast elevators and the latest energy saving technology.

In the meantime the show must go on and daily plays will continue to be staged at several other venues in the city, including the nearby Shimbashi Embu theater, and elsewhere in Japan.

Still, for many the Kabukiza demolition will mark the end of an era. "When the Kabukiza closes, I will close my shop," said Kazushi Nishii, 80, who sells roasted chestnuts outside the theater. "My girlfriend called the Kabukiza will be gone. I don't want to see a new one."

Kikuko Murakami, 79, a nearby kiosk owner, said: "I am very sad, and it's difficult to buy tickets this month ... There are a lot of people visiting."

Crowds have been queuing outside the theater, which is listed as a cultural property and has been

decorated with blue and red drop curtains with the farewell message "Kabukiza. Sayonara performance."

Artists have been drawing and painting the theater, while foreign and Japanese tourists have posed for photos in front of an electronic countdown board showing the days left until the final show on April 30.

The Kabukiza was originally built in 1889 and has since been reconstructed repeatedly following fires, the 1923 Great Kanto Earthquake, and US air raids at the end of World War II.

The current theater was built in 1950, using some materials from the bombed site, with an audience capacity of 2,000.

"It is a symbol of rebirth after the war, so this is a very important

building for us," Nobuyuki Suzuki, 66, said, painting a picture of the theater from the sidewalk.

"I don't think it's right to break it down," Suzuki said. "I think this building should remain as a treasure of Japan."

Kana Kashima, a 21-year-old university student, said: "I feel very sad. It is historic and doesn't look so old, so tearing it down is unfortunate."

The firm, however, says reconstruction is unavoidable.

"We also feel very sad as we have an emotional attachment to the current building, but it is our duty to offer a safe environment to our audience," said Ippei Noma, a Shochiku official in charge of the reconstruction.

"And many of our audience

members are complaining about the inconvenience and unfriendly facilities for the elderly, such as the absence of elevators or escalators," Noma said.

The company plans to set up a "Kabuki" gallery in the new building to pass on the 400-year-old tradition to younger generations, as well as an information center to help foreign visitors better understand the art form.

"Theater can't exist without an audience," Noma said. "It is our mission to take measures to maintain our traditional art."

"In kabuki, we have long maintained old things while embracing the challenge of the new," Noma said. "The concept of kabuki is exactly the same as our reconstruction concept."

[SOCIETY]

US helps African navies with floating academy

Washington seeks to boost maritime security in West Africa as piracy threatens states and investors and billions of US dollars lost in illegal fishing and oil theft

BY DAVID LEWIS

REUTERS, ABOARD USS GUNSTON HALL

Men in blue overalls haul on the ropes alongside American crewmen sporting hardhats shaped as Stetsons and decorated in the stars and stripes.

"Pull harder! Coil the ropes!" one of the Americans barks at the "ship riders," a term used for the West African sailors aboard the US amphibious landing vessel as she slips her moorings in the port of Dakar.

This is a floating academy, part of an effort by the US military to train local navies and coast guards to combat rising instability in the Gulf of Guinea — an increasingly important source of oil and other raw materials for Western markets which has drawn huge international investment.

The US says the destabilizing effects of piracy, drug smuggling, and illegal fishing in the area are also costing West and Central African coastal economies billions of US dollars each year in lost revenues.

"You have an area that is traditionally a landward-focused region which is awakening to the impact of the maritime domain," said Captain Cindy Thebaud, commander of the US Navy's

Destroyer Squadron Six Zero and head of the project.

After two weeks of training in Senegal, the African officers and deckhands will spend a week at sea on the *USS Gunston Hall* alongside their US counterparts learning skills ranging from basic navigation to anti-piracy techniques.

The training is part of US efforts to make Gulf of Guinea maritime security more robust but, with navies often coming low in the pecking order in African militaries, there is a need for increased investment in boats and other equipment.

"There are challenges with resource allocations everywhere in the region," Thebaud said. "But the education and the visibility is continuing to increase and, bit by bit, we are seeing increases in allocations in resources."

The Gulf of Guinea, which runs down from West Africa through Nigeria and Angola, is important because of its vast potential energy reserves.

Ghana will soon join traditional Gulf of Guinea oil producers Nigeria, Angola, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea and Cameroon, while Liberia and Sierra Leone have also made offshore energy finds.



Critics say US policy is purely in self-interest, as the world's top consumer will rely on the region for a quarter of its oil supplies within the next five years.

But sailors said countries in the region were keen on the project as they understood the threat insecurity posed to governance and economic growth.

Amphibious Assault Vehicles are seen on the deck of the *USS Gunston Hall* during an open day at Rota naval base in southern Spain. The ship is serving as a "floating college," training sailors from West African countries. PHOTO: EPA

Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea "is not the same level as Somalia but it could have the same consequences," said Lieutenant Commander Emmanuel Bell Bell, a Cameroonian officer onboard.

Earlier this month Cameroon partly blamed piracy for a 13 percent fall in oil production last year.

"In Cameroon we have shipping and oil. The slightest act of piracy creates an atmosphere of fear. It could lead to things shutting down," Bell Bell added.

The training is part of Africom, the US command center for Africa, but European navies have begun to take part in an effort to broaden the program and cooperation.

Commander David Salisbury, a British naval officer, said a thwarted hijacking of a ship off Benin and a Ghanaian raid on a fishing vessel in December were evidence of improvements. But he warned that threats were "huge and had been

largely ignored" and "we should talk about progress in decades".

The size and power of the *USS Gunston Hall* — a heavily armed ship that can deploy smaller landing vessels, machine gun-mounted speedboats and hundreds of soldiers — is far cry from the kit most of the sailors onboard are used to.

"We are working with grandpa zodiacs with 42 horse power motors," said Blawah Charles of Liberia's newly established Coast Guard.

Some navies in the region are so limited in boats and fuel that their patrols cannot venture far out to sea and pose little threat to illegal fishing vessels or smugglers.

Instability in the Gulf of Guinea has also attracted the interests of private military contractors.

US private security company MPRI earlier this year announced it had won a multi-year contract worth US\$250 million to improve maritime security for Equatorial Guinea.

Some fear this pointed to increased competition and the potential for military confrontation. But Thebaud said private military companies' involvement would be "complementary."