

J A P A N

Brava



Miwa

Akihiro Miwa has been one of Japan's most-loved actresses and singers for 25 years. Miwa—Yukio Mishima's protégé—recently stormed the Tokyo stage in the classic *Black Widow*. **Miwa is a man.** MICHAEL ORLANDO YACCARINO explores the lives and loves of Japan's perennial gay sweetheart.

IMAGINE TOKYO IN THE 1950s: Western culture is streaming into the city, importing a burgeoning gay bar scene. The Brunswick bar wouldn't look out of place in a Paul Cadmus painting: American GIs, hustlers, foreigners, businessmen, and a blush of beautiful young waiters performing a nightly cabaret act.

In this smoky atmosphere, novelist Yukio Mishima met Akihiro Miwa, a handsome waiter whom Mishima would nurture into one of modern Japan's biggest stars.

Twenty-five years after Mishima cast Miwa in his 1968 film *Black Lizard*, Miwa remains one of Japan's most unlikely celebrities: an openly gay man who appears in serious dramatic roles in theatre and film—as a woman.

Sometimes known as the

Edith Piaf of Japan, Miwa also has a flourishing vocal career built on his interpretations of French songs. His recordings are wildly popular in France, Spain, and Germany. In his native Japan, he hosts two television talk shows and his autobiography, *Murasaki no Rirekisho* (Purple Resumé), was a best-seller.

Undoubtedly, one of the most important events in this unparalleled career was in 1968, when Mishima adapted his play, *Black Lizard*, for film and chose Miwa for the title role over two “real” women.

Released in the United States for the first time in 1991, the film received wide critical acclaim. A slightly mystified critic for the *New York Times* wrote: “The film will leave you speechless. Well, almost.”

For Western audiences, what is most mystifying about Miwa's performance (and his attitude to his career) is his complete lack of self-consciousness. He has been

criticised for not being as flamboyant as most female impersonators are, but this is probably Miwa's strongest

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statement.

There is never any sense that Miwa is a male entertainer who is simply dressing up as a woman for his "act." On the contrary, Miwa has created a genuine identity for himself. Despite the usual props of drag—flashy gowns and ever-changing wigs—Miwa plays the title role in *Black Lizard* seriously, without self-parody. A hybrid of Eastern and Western attitudes to cross-dressing, Miwa's performance is startlingly original.

Born in 1935 in Nagasaki, Miwa was given away by his parents to a son-less branch of the family, a common Japanese practice of the day for families who already had boys. His adoptive parents ran a café close by a red-light district. As an adolescent, Miwa became fascinated by the increasing number of foreign films being imported to Japan after the war.

The student Miwa learned his screen-siren aesthetic from western cinema and—while working as a waiter for extra money at the Brunswick—met Yukio Mishima. (Mishima was 10 years his senior and already an underground writer of some repute.) Thus began a platonic but intense artistic relationship that continued until Mishima's notorious death by hara-kiri in 1970. Mishima said of Miwa, "I enjoyed chatting with guys like him because they are more erotic than women."

In the late 1950s, Miwa began a career as a chanteuse at Gin Paris, the most popular "sister boy" bar in



Gay boy made good: Akihiro Miwa in 1994 revival of *Black Widow*, Tokyo.

A K I H I R O M I W A

Tokyo Grande Dame

Japan. He still performs there. Not only did he gain fame by writing Japanese lyrics to many French songs and penning his own hits, but also for wearing make-up and androgynous clothing.

As his fame grew during the 1960s, Miwa began directing night club shows and appearing in female roles. Male actors who perform female roles—the *onnagata* (literally “woman form”)—have been part of the revered Kabuki tradition of Japanese theatre for hundreds of years. Miwa never fit within the institution of Kabuki. Kabuki actors, all of whom are male, must be born to one of the venerated families, who rigidly control the individual lifelong training and performing repertoire.

The wide acceptance of the *onnagata* has been a mixed blessing for Miwa. He faced resistance when he first took this tradition into the realm of popular entertainment, an area where gender-bending remains controversial.

Miwa has had many well-received theatrical roles, but more than any other, his *Black Lizard*—the diva of crime with a 40 carat heart—is his greatest role. Mishima first adapted Rampo Edogawa’s novel for the stage, and the play’s great success led to the making of the 1968 film version.

In the film, *Black Lizard* is a notorious thief who will stop at nothing to obtain the precious jewels of her desires. A handsome detective is hired to foil the empress of Japan’s underworld in an attempt to retrieve a priceless gem. When they meet, *Black Lizard* falls in love with the detective. But this mutual attraction, played out in a treacherous game of cat and mouse, leads to *Black Lizard*’s downfall. In the dénouement, her plans utterly foiled by the detective, she drinks a fatal dose of poison so that she may not only die in the arms of the only man she has ever cared for, but also keep their love perfect forever.

Ever obsessed with his own death, Mishima makes a brief, chilling appearance in the film as a half-nude, embalmed doll in *Black Lizard*’s private museum.

Last Spring the original stage version of *Black Lizard* enjoyed a spectacularly successful revival in Tokyo and several other Japanese cities—its first in 25 years. Miwa was involved in the direction, sets, music, and costumes for the production, which is appearing again this winter.

—MICHAEL ORLANDO YACCARINO

Phase Magazine: Was it a difficult decision for you to take on the role of *Black Lizard* in 1968, even in Japan where female impersonation has been practised for centuries?

Akihiro Miwa: Yes, it was. I assume it would seem awkward and unnatural in the eyes of the Westerner for a male “actress” to play the role of a real woman, not a man simply dressed as a woman, but this was an attitude shared by the Japanese film industry at the time. In the Occidental world during the age of Greece and Rome, there were female impersonators, and similarly in England up until the Shakespearean period.

However, this no longer applies, with the exception of the Orient, where it still persists in China and Japan. In Japan, the history of *onnagata*, or female impersonation, is well over 500 years old.

Even so, there have been very few serious performances that haven’t translated as parody.

That is the basic reason why I decided to create such a role. Even in Japan, there has never been an *onnagata* who has played modern or western female dramatic roles.

You weren’t the first in mind for the role of *Black Lizard*, how did you eventually get the part?

No, I was not. In fact Mishima used two different actresses for the first productions, one of whom was brought in to shoot the film. But, as it turned out, he was not happy with either of them. He came to see my play *Kewaga No Mary* and loved my work. He wasn’t aware of my acting career until then. Even though we had known each other since 1952, he had simply been one of my friends and an admirer of my music. He immediately asked me to

do *Black Lizard*. I fondly remember him saying, “You are the *Black Lizard* herself.” Because of our warm friendship for many years, he instantly understood that I had the sensitivity and personality which this character required.

So, you shared quite a special relationship with Mishima?

I have always treasured my pure friendship with now-gone Mishima. A week before his suicide, he came to the theatre where I was performing with an armful of about 300 red, red roses. Little did I know that this was his way of expressing his final farewell. Never will I forget his deep gaze as he intently listened to me sing *Hymn D’amour*.

One of the strongest aspects of the character of *Black Lizard* is that, even though she is involved in crime, kidnapping and murder, in the end she dies “pure” because of her love for the detective. What are your thoughts on this?

I think your opinion is absolutely correct. She loves each and every beautiful thing in the world. And she will go to any length to get what she wants, regardless of what it takes, with all her might. Later, she discovers something more beautiful than any jewel or work of art, which is love, and chooses to die in order to keep it in perfect form and forever. If she continued to live, she might have become tired of her love or discovered some fault in him.

The film premiered in the West in 1991. Did you ever feel it was misunderstood?

This movie is profoundly meaningful. It raises an important question. *Black Lizard* used to have tremendous materialistic desires, just like most of us in the world. But love opened up her eyes

Black lizard Miwa: In Japan, the history of female impersonation is well over 500 years old



to the fact that a beauty of a higher degree lies among the things that cannot be seen, that is in a world of four dimensions rather than three. In our society people make judgements based on what they see.

So beneath all the priceless jewels that Black Lizard prizes...

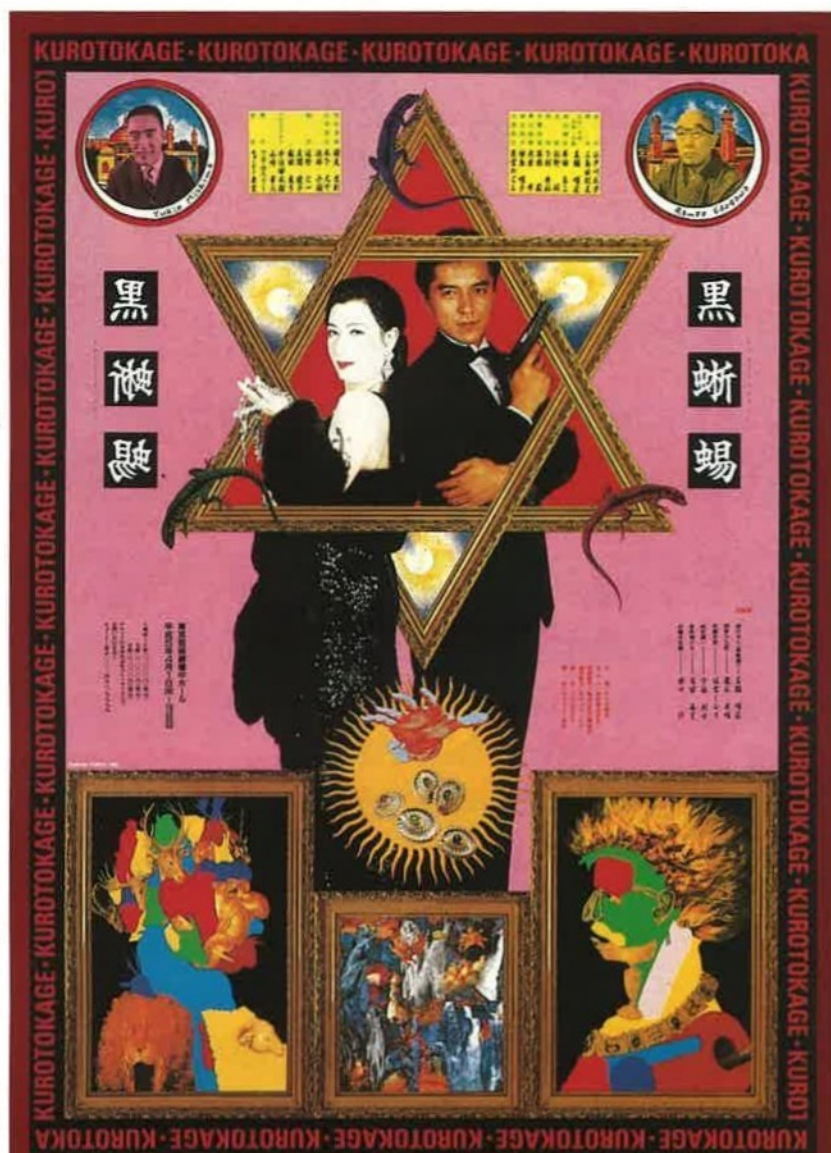
...is the heart. When you sit with someone face to face, what really matters is how beautiful, pure, clear, shiny, warm, tender and considerate their heart is...or not. It's the heart that has to be the standard in judging people. And it is important to exert ourselves every day to make it a habit to keep aware of the heart which you cannot see. If we do so successfully, many of the problems we have in this world solve themselves. Actually, it is quite simple: Each of us needs to learn to love another soul, and that is what Black Lizard learns.

When the film opened in the United States, some critics regarded it as "camp." Is this justified?

People have different "essences" of their own—just like we all look different. Some are idiots or lunatics, while some are geniuses and saints. There are people who have delicate and sophisticated souls, and others who may be sophisticated barbarians. I honestly don't give a damn about the people who accept the film only in terms of camp or homosexuality. They are only proving how insensitive and primitive their minds are. Even though they seem to be writing about the film on the surface, in reality, they are showing their own level of

personality. To put it more simply it's like pearls before swine, or teaching a frog how to appreciate a painting by Picasso.

write just for the money. To mention how the Japanese audience received the film, the fact that it became the most successful film not only in the year of its release, but in the years following, speaks for itself.



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How did the US reception in 1991 differ to that in Japan in 1968?

We also had mixed criticism in Japan. Critics with intelligence and capability, more or less, responded positively as I recall. On the other hand, disapproving comments mostly came from barbarous people who

Are you pleased with the success of the theatrical revivals?

Indeed. It was a great pleasure for me to look back on the stage, which had been difficult due to some illness over the last 10 years.

What in your career makes you the most proud?

The success of my concerts in Paris and Madrid. Also the fact that I have recently been given recognition by the Japanese people, who have begun to realise my true value.

How has the acceptance of gays changed in Japan since the 1950s?

I have been fighting all by myself for the rights of homosexuals. My 40 years in the entertainment business has been a continuous battle between myself and our society. It is ironic that even in Japan, where female impersonators are a cultural tradition, there are still biased views and prejudices. Over the last 10 years we have gained more acceptance in this country, at last, and not so much persecution can be found. I feel that I

have finally gained an improved understanding with the public, which has given me a peaceful and satisfactory life.

So what lies ahead for Akihiro Miwa?

Happiness.

PHASE