

## Introduction to the Noh and Kyogen Performances

### 25h ICOM General Conference 3, 4 September 2019 Kyoto, Japan

It would be simply impossible to compress in a short introductory talk the wide universe of noh and kyogen, one of Japan's most refined stage arts. As you will soon be able to experience, noh is a complex art form, comprising of chant, music, mimetic movement, dance, costumes, and masks. Its plays are based on classical literature, myths, legends, and religious stories.

Noh and Kyogen are sister arts. Noh is serious, dealing with gods, ghosts, or spirits. Its highly poetic texts are delivered through chant, in a way that is similar to Western opera. Actors move according to detailed choreographies that fade into symbolic dances. Noh is serious but it is rarely tragic: most of the drama is resolved at the end of the play. Demons are quelled, vengeful ghosts are sent back to hell, and tormented souls find solace in Buddhist enlightenment.

Kyogen, instead, is a form of comedy. Its stories are concerned with the lives of human beings, often depicting the relationship between master and servant or husband and wife. Its plays are largely based on dialog and are delivered in stylized speech.

The kyogen play performed today, *Bōshibari* ('Tied to a Stick') is an all-time classic piece of slapstick comedy. Two servants who love to drink their master's wine are left home alone.

Though the master ties their hands before leaving, they manage to find their way into the wine cellar... you can only imagine what happens next. Kyogen plays are highly theatrical, hence they easier to access for non-specialized audiences. That is why I will dedicate most of my time today to talk about noh, instead, though a lot of what I will say applies to both.

The arts of Noh and kyogen are traditional, yet contemporary. What we see today on stage is not a historical re-enactment. Rather, it is the product of an ongoing process of development, adaptation, and refinement that has lasted for over six centuries and is continuing today. Noh emerged during the Muromachi period - between the 14th and 16th century. Though rooted in religious rituals for propitiating crops and expelling demons, from the beginning of the 14th century the patronage of the aristocracy urged actors and playwrights to create performances that would be compelling to a sophisticated audience. It is during this time that the 200 plays constituting the current repertory were written. While the lyrics were largely preserved, and are used in contemporary performance, music and choreographies were passed down mostly orally, or, I should say, corporally, allowing for a continuous morphing of the art into new forms.

We can see traces of noh theatre's ritual origins in this unique stage, a reminder of the ancient outdoor performance spaces that you can see at Kyoto temples and shrines today. At the back of the stage, the painting of a pine tree, the same for all plays. Above, a thatched roof. Both are reminders of noh theatre's outdoor origins. They give the stage a beautiful look, but they also serve practical functions: reflecting the sound of musicians and chorus sitting in the back

and on the side, and visually demarcating the performance area. All elements of noh have both an aesthetic and a practical function. All that is superfluous has been left out. (Such is the power of tradition).

Since noh does not attempt imitating reality, it makes no use of set designs. All performances begin with a blank space, exactly as you see it right now, and end the same way. A performance is a fleeting moment. It doesn't exist: it *happens*.

Unlike Western theaters, this stage has no lifts, no wings, trapdoors, or orchestra pit. What you see is what you get. Once the performers are on stage, nothing is hidden from sight. There is no director and no conductor: actors, musicians, chorus, stage assistants, they all take part in the collective narration of a single story.

Behind the five-color curtain is the *mirror room*, where the main actor dons the mask, completing the transformation into the character before appearing on stage. This is the first time the actor meets the mask, which is never used in rehearsal (more about that in a second).

As the introductory music is played, the curtain lifts, and the actor appears on stage. The mask, as well as the colors and designs of the costume, suggest the identity of a character. Flowers and grass on a red background for a young woman, bold, geometric patterns in gold against a blue background for a god or a warrior. As the stage is minimal, actors appear as moving landscapes, evoking the season or scenery of the play.

Costumes are lavish items entirely made with hand-operated looms, using pure silk, gold and silver thread. Model costumes were created in the late 16th - early 17th century and were highly influenced by the refined taste of the aristocratic supporters. Contemporary costumes are based on the same models, though artisans who pass on their tradition for generations here in Kyoto always experiment with creating new color and design combinations.

Usually, the first actor to enter is the *waki*, or side actor, always taking the role of an alive male human being. He always performs unmasked. The dramaturgical function of the *waki* is that of setting the scene and giving the main character motivation for appearing.

In the play that will be performed tonight, *Hagoromo* (The Robe of Feathers), the *waki* is the fisherman *Hakuryō*. The setting is Mio Bay, a beautiful pine-fringed beach from where you can see Mt. Fuji, currently Shizuoka prefecture. After singing about the beauty of the scenery at Mio Bay in spring, the fisherman notices a beautiful robe hanging on the branch of a pine tree and decides to take it to his village as a treasure. As he picks up the robe which will be hanging on the railing next to the pine tree over there and moves toward this corner of the stage, we hear a voice calling him.

From behind the lifted curtain, a beautiful female figure appears. The upper part of the costume is draped down around the hips, revealing the white silk undergarment. This symbolizes that the woman is half-dressed. She is the main character, or *shite*. She is a *tennyō*, a sort of angelic being living in the Palace on the Moon. She descended on earth and was bathing in the sea when the fisherman found her robe.

Male actors do not imitate female voices. Rather, they suggest feminine grace through chant and movement. However, all female characters require the actor to wear a mask. The one used in *Hagoromo* represents the beautiful yet stern looks of a female deity. While costumes have a relatively short lifespan, after which they need to be replaced, masks as old as 600 years are still used in performance today. Actors treat masks not just as mere stage properties, but almost as sacred objects. Masks are vehicles for characters to manifest themselves on stage. They are inhabited with the spirits of the characters, but also with the spirits of the hundreds of actors who wore the mask during its long stage existence. That is why they are never used in everyday practice or rehearsals.

Masks heavily restrict the vision of the actor, who uses the four pillars as a reference to move safely on stage. For the same reason, actors keep a low center of gravity and walk by sliding their feet, a feature for which noh actors are famous. The combination of this peculiar posture and stride with masks and costume makes the actor appear as if they were a *moving statue*. But let's go back to the play.

The angel calls on the fisherman explaining that the garment he found is her robe of feathers. Without it, she cannot return to the Palace on the Moon, where she belongs. The fisherman replies saying that he will only give it back if she dances for him. The angel accepts, but she needs the robe to dance. That is reasonable. Afraid that she will just take it and fly away, the fisherman denies her the robe, and here the angel replies with the famous couplet: "Doubt and deceit belong to humans. In Heaven, there is no lie". The fisherman is ashamed of having doubted the word a deity and returns the robe at once.

At this point, the main actor moves to the back of the stage, where assistants dress him in the robe. You will notice that the costume will be stitched directly on the actor's inner garb with thread and needle.

After wearing the robe, the angel dances in celebration, describing the beauty of the scene and bestowing presents on earth. Finally, she flies away disappearing in the clouds. As the play ends, all performers leave the stage. Actors do not come back for a curtain call. However, if you applaud as they cross the curtain, I am sure they will be happy.

Noh has not always been performed as it is today. An important factor for change was the patronization by the samurai elite between the 17th and mid 19th century. During this period not only the repertory but also the ways of transmission of the noh arts were formalized. With the opening of Japan to the outside world in the late 19th century, foreign diplomats, scholars, and businessmen flocked to Japan, and noh was chosen as the official art for entertaining distinguished guests. A tradition, as we can see, that still lasts today.

Initially, foreign audiences were perplexed by the strange chants and dances, but they soon started to understand the subtle beauty of noh. In 1879, after attending a noh performance, American president Ulysses Grant famously said: "you must preserve this". Preservation, as

you all know better than me, is not a simple feat, especially when applied to intangible culture.

Today, noh is undergoing a crisis: audiences, as well as the professional and amateur populations, are shrinking. Outreach activities such as workshops in schools or subtitle support like the one you will enjoy tonight are being employed with the hope of attracting new audiences, yet performers are struggling to find a compromise between reaching out to a wider public and preserving the tradition that defined noh as one of the highest forms of performance in the world.

Noh needs a new generation of patrons who are willing to support the actors, musicians, and artisans who carry on the legacy of this ancient art. What best chance to find some then here, at the ICOM General Conference in Kyoto! The theme of this year's conference is "Museums as Cultural Hubs", stressing the importance of interconnectedness and collaboration between museums and other cultural institutions. Noh masks are preserved at museums around the world, where visitors can admire them and learn about their history. However, noh masks are not to be thought of as mere museum pieces. They are alive. They were born to be used. I truly hope that in the future more initiatives will bring noh and kyogen performers overseas and allow them to reunite with masks that are sleeping at museums around the world.

Noh is a Japanese tradition, but just like sumo, tea ceremony, or flower arrangement, it is appreciated worldwide. Its stories are timeless and transcend national boundaries. I believe that, if experienced in the appropriate context, noh will not fail to impress any of those who are capable of opening their heart to its subtle yet profound beauty.

Diego Pellecchia (Kyoto Sangyo University)