

NOH AND KYOGEN

The world's oldest living theater



Noh performance

Scene of Hirota Yukitoshi in the *noh* drama *Kagetsu* (Flowers and Moon) performed at the 49th Commemorative Noh event. (Photo courtesy of The Nohgaku Performers' Association)

Noh and *kyogen* are two of Japan's four forms of classical theater, the other two being *kabuki* and *bunraku*. *Noh*, which in its broadest sense includes the comic theater *kyogen*, developed as a distinctive theatrical form in the 14th century, making it the oldest extant professional theater in the world. Although *noh* and *kyogen* developed together and are inseparable, they are in many ways exact opposites. *Noh* is fundamentally a symbolic theater with primary importance attached to ritual and suggestion in a rarefied aesthetic atmosphere. In *kyogen*, on the other hand, primary importance is attached to making people laugh.

History of the Noh Theater

In the early 14th century, acting troupes in a

variety of centuries-old theatrical traditions were touring and performing at temples, shrines, and festivals, often with the patronage of the nobility. The performing genre called *sarugaku* was one of these traditions. The brilliant playwrights and actors Kan'ami (1333–1384) and his son Zeami (1363–1443) transformed *sarugaku* into *noh* in basically the same form as it is still performed today. Kan'ami introduced the music and dance elements of the popular entertainment *kuse-mai* into *sarugaku*, and he attracted the attention and patronage of Muromachi *shogun* Ashikaga Yoshimitsu (1358–1408).

After Kan'ami's death, Zeami became head of the Kanze troupe. The continued patronage of Yoshimitsu gave him the chance to further refine the *noh* aesthetic principles of *monomane* (the imitation of things) and *yugen*, a Zen-influenced aesthetic ideal emphasizing the suggestion of mystery and depth. In

addition to writing some of the best-known plays in the *noh* repertoire, Zeami wrote a series of essays which defined the standards for *noh* performance in the centuries that followed.

After the fall of the Muromachi shogunate, *noh* received extensive patronage from military leader Toyotomi Hideyoshi, and in the 17th century *noh* became an “official property” of the Tokugawa shogunate. During these years, performances became even slower and more solemn than in Zeami’s time.

With the fall of the shogunate, *noh* in the Meiji period (1868–1912) was kept alive by the dedication of performers like Umewaka Minoru I (1828–1909) and by the patronage of the nobility. Since the end of World War II, *noh* has had to depend entirely on the public for its survival. *Noh* today continues to be supported by a small but dedicated group of theatergoers, and by a considerable number of amateurs who pay for instruction in *noh* singing and dancing techniques. In recent years *noh* performed outdoors at night by firelight (called *takiginoh*) has become increasingly popular, and there are many such performances held in the summer at Buddhist temples, Shinto shrines, and parks.

Elements of a *Noh* Performance

Stage

The *noh* stage, which was originally outdoors but is now usually located within a larger structure, is itself a work of art. The main stage, measuring six by six meters, is built of polished Japanese cypress (*hinoki*) and covered by a magnificent Shinto-style roof, and there is a bridge (*hashigakari*) that serves as a passageway to the stage. To the right and rear of the main stage are areas where the musicians and chorus sit. The pine tree painted on the back wall serves as the only background for all plays, the setting being established by the words of the actors and chorus.

The three or four musicians (*hayashikata*) sit at the back of the stage and play the flute, the small hand drum (*kotsuzumi*), the large hand drum (*otsuzumi*), and, when the play



requires it, the large floor drum (*taiko*). The chorus (*jiutai*), whose main role is to sing the words and thoughts of the leading character, sits at the right of the stage.

Masks, Roles, Costumes, and Properties

Many people, both in Japan and abroad, who have little or no direct knowledge of *noh* theater have nevertheless come into contact with *noh* through its famous masks, which are often shown in museums and special exhibitions. The many mask variations fall into several general types, such as young woman, old man, and demon, and even among masks used for the same role there are different levels of dignity (*kurai*) which affect how the role and play as a whole are to be performed. Joy and sadness can be expressed with the same mask through a slight change in the way shadows fall across its features.

Usually only the leading character (*shite*) wears a mask, though in some plays a mask is also worn by accompanying characters (*tsure*). Subordinate characters (*waki*), their accompanying characters (*wakitsure*), and child characters (*kokata*) do not wear masks.

Along with its masks, *noh* is also known for its boldly patterned extravagant costumes, which create a sharp contrast with the bare stage and restrained movements. A *shite* costume with five layers and an outer garment of rich brocade creates an imposing figure on stage, an effect that is heightened in some plays by the wearing of a brilliant red or white wig.

The ability of the *shite* and *waki* to express volumes with a gesture is enhanced by their use of various hand properties, the most important of which is the folding fan (*chukei*). The fan can be used to represent an object, such as a dagger or ladle, or an action, such as beckoning or moon-viewing.

Kyogen performance

Okura Yataro performing *Boshihari* (Fit to be Tied) at the 5th performance of *noh* dramas included in the list of World Intangible Cultural Heritage. (Photo courtesy of The Nohgaku Performers' Association)



Program and Plays

A traditional *noh* program included five *noh* plays interspersed with three or four *kyogen*, but a program today is more likely to have two or three *noh* plays separated by one or two *kyogen*. Both the program and each individual play are based on the dramatic pattern *jo-ha-kyu* (introduction-exposition-rapid finale), with a play usually having one *jo* section, three *ha* sections, and one *kyu* section.

The *noh* repertoire is made up of *Okina*, which is only performed on special occasions and is more of a ritual dance than a play, and about 240 extant plays classified into five different groups. The first group consists of the god plays (*waki noh*), in which the *shite* is first a human being and later a god. These plays, slow moving even by *noh* standards, are performed relatively seldom today. The second group is the warrior plays (*shura-mono*). In most of these a dead warrior from the losing side in the Taira-Minamoto War pleads with a priest to pray for his soul. Wig plays (*kazura-mono*) represent the third group. These plays are often about a beautiful woman of the Heian period (794–1185) who is obsessed by love. The fourth group is the largest and is usually referred to as “miscellaneous *noh*” (*zatsu noh*) because plays on a variety of themes are included. The fifth and final group is the demon plays (*kiri-noh*). In these plays, which tend to be the fastest moving of all the groups, the *shite* often appears in human form in the first half and then reveals himself as a demon in the second half.

A *Noh* Play: *Aoi no Ue*

The play *Aoi no Ue* (*Lady Aoi*) is one of the most frequently performed in the *noh* repertoire. The original author of the play is unknown; it was revised by Zeami and is based on events in the 11th-century novel *The Tale of Genji*, by Murasaki Shikibu.

As the play opens, a court official (*wakitsure* role) explains that Lady Aoi, the

pregnant wife of court noble Genji, is ill, and the sorceress Teruhi has been called in an attempt to identify the spirit possessing her. A folded robe placed at the front of the stage represents Lady Aoi.

The sorceress (*tsure* role) summons the spirit possessing Lady Aoi.

The spirit (*shite* role) approaches. (The *shite* wears the *deigan* mask used for vengeful female spirits.) It is Lady Rokujo, Genji’s neglected mistress. Speaking for herself and through the chorus, Lady Rokujo tells of the ephemeral nature of happiness in this world, and of her resentment toward Lady Aoi as the wife of the radiant Genji. (Lady Rokujo had been further humiliated when her carriage was pushed aside by that of Lady Aoi at a festival not long before.)

The spirit of Lady Rokujo moves forward to strike Lady Aoi with her fan, and then moves to the back of the stage. There, shielded from the audience by a robe held by attendants, the *shite* changes from the *deigan* mask to the *hannya* female demon mask.

The court official calls a messenger to summon a Buddhist mountain ascetic (*waki* role) to exorcise the spirit.

After the exorcism rite begins, the *shite* returns to center stage, now wearing the demon mask and wielding a demon rod. They fight and the angry spirit of Lady Rokujo is overcome by the ascetic’s prayers. This triumph of Buddhist law and saving of Lady Aoi contrasts with *The Tale of Genji*; in the novel, Lady Aoi dies giving birth to Genji’s son.

History of *Kyogen*

Kyogen is thought to have its roots in entertainment brought to Japan from China in the 8th century or earlier. This entertainment evolved into *sarugaku* in the following centuries, and by the early 14th century there was a clear distinction among *sarugaku* troupes between the performers of serious

noh plays and those of the humorous *kyogen*. As a component of *noh*, *kyogen* received the patronage of the military aristocracy up until the time of the Meiji Restoration (1868). Since then, *kyogen* has been kept alive by family groups, primarily from the Izumi and Okura schools. Today professional *kyogen* players perform both independently and as part of *noh* programs.

Performances and Plays

The word *kyogen* usually refers to the independent comic plays that are performed between two *noh* plays, but the term is also used for roles taken by *kyogen* players within *noh* plays (also called *aikyogen*). Among the *kyogen* roles found within *noh* plays, some are an integral part of the play itself, but it is more usual for the *kyogen* role to serve as a bridge between the first and second acts. In the latter case, the *kyogen* player is on stage alone and explains the story in colloquial language. This gives the *noh shite* time to change costumes, and, for uneducated feudal-era audiences, it made the play easier to understand.

In the current *kyogen* repertoire there are about 260 independent plays. In the most common classification system, these are divided into the following groups: *waki kyogen*

(auspicious plays), *daimyo* (feudal lord) plays, Taro-kaja plays (Taro-kaja is the name of the servant who is the main character), *muko* (son-in-law) plays, *onna* (woman) plays, *oni* (devil) plays, *yamabushi* (mountain ascetic) plays, *shukke* (Buddhist priest) plays, *zato* (blind man) plays, *mai* (dance) plays, and *zatsu* (miscellaneous) plays. With the exception of the miscellaneous group, the largest category of *kyogen* is that of the Taro-kaja plays. The Taro-kaja character is a kind of clever everyman, who, while he never escapes his destiny of being a servant, is able to make life a little more enjoyable by getting the best of his master.

Kyogen costumes are much simpler than those used for *noh* and are based on the actual dress of medieval Japan. Most *kyogen* do not use masks, although there are about 50 plays where masks are used, usually for non-human characters such as animals, gods, and spirits. In contrast to the expressionless quality of *noh* characters, whether masked or not, *kyogen* performers depend on exuberant facial expressions for comic effect.



Noh and kyogen masks

(Photos courtesy of National Noh Theater)
(Left) A *noh ko-omote* mask used for young woman roles.

(Right) A *kyogen* monkey mask.