

Noh Go Zone

Blowing free helps
bamboo flute virtuoso
Yukihiro Isso break
with tradition



This month Londoners get a very rare chance to dip into the medieval music theatre that is noh. Austere, subtle, highly stylised and strangely addictive, noh is seldom seen outside Japan, but for two days Kings Place will host wailing drummers, harsh flutes and stamping, masked actors. Rather than simply bring over an established noh company, however, London based promoter Akiko Yanagisawa has lined up an interactive experience: British composers will engage with Japanese musicians, workshops will encourage first steps in music and dance, and turntablist Mariam Rezaei (a member of Gateshead's Noisestra) will weave traditional noh ghost stories into improvisations.

There's also saxophonist Evan Parker searching for common ground with noh flute virtuoso Yukihiro Isso. The chameleon-like Isso is at the Noh Reimagined festival's heart. He'll be performing straight 16th century noh with actor Yoshimasa Kanze and the regular three drummer line-up, before switching to new pieces by Andrew Thomas and Nicolas Morrish Rarity. He's also bringing fresh compositions of his own to the party. Isso is that rare item, a musician steeped in tradition who also loves to blow free. In February he brought kabuki percussionist Takinojo Mochizuki to London's Cafe Oto, where they played several high energy sets alongside free percussionist

Roger Turner and bassist John Edwards. Among Isso's battery of flutes are family heirlooms dating back 500 years.

Talking to him the following day, I learn that he represents the 15th generation of a family of noh musicians. Indeed he has been playing on stage since he was nine years old. "Noh music is all fixed," he tells me, "apart from the embellishments, where there's flexibility. The world of noh is very conservative, so I have a hard time playing experimental music, but for me it's all part of the same thing."

The noh flute (nohkan) is specially constructed so as not to play normal scales. While he was at school, however, Isso worked out techniques enabling him to play Vivaldi's music, by which he was particularly excited. In between talking, he rips out a few phrases from a Bach flute sonata, which demands acrobatic crossfingering on his instrument.

In his twenties he discovered free jazz thanks to Ornette Coleman and Peter Brötzmann. In fact, shortly after hearing Cecil Taylor he was up on stage playing with the pianist at an outdoor festival in Japan. "They invited me to play because they knew I was a fan," he explains. Collaborations with John Zorn and butoh dancer Min Tanaka followed – though I notice Isso's eyes light up most brightly when discussing the British fusion guitarist Allan

Holdsworth. As conversation proceeds, it's clear how much he relishes the world of musical freedom he has discovered, from 1980s jazz fusion via hard blowing free jazz to contemporary improv. He talks of his dream: a renaissance within noh theatre. To the Western ear and eye, part of its fascination is that it's preserved as if in aspic – no fancy restagings of Shakespeare in 1930s Chicago here. A noh play is a time machine, whisking you back to a Japanese noble gathering in 1500. But the price paid is that musicians like Isso have little room to innovate or evolve the tradition. A situation made worse, the way he sees it, by the Japanese public's ignorance of their own traditional arts.

Isso remains committed to the family business of playing for traditional theatre, but hopes that some day he can create a space within noh where he can import what he's learned from other musics. "At the time noh was born," he points out, "it was an avant garde contemporary art. The traditional repertoire doesn't even use ten per cent of the potential of the noh flute. In fact I am doing a variety of new things in the traditional noh performances. There's really no end to the things I want to do."

□ Noh Reimagined is at London's Kings Place from 13–14 May. kingsplace.co.uk
Clive Bell