

About Noh

HISTORY

Noh developed into its present form during the 14th and 15th centuries under the leadership of the distinguished performer-playwrights Kannami and his son Zeami. Zeami, in particular, wrote numerous plays which are still performed in today's classical repertory of some 250 plays. He also wrote a number of once secret works which explain the aesthetic principles governing noh and give details on how the art should be composed, acted, directed, taught, and produced.

Noh flourished during Zeami's time under the patronage of the military shogun Ashikaga Yoshimitsu. Later during the Edo period (1603-1868), noh became the official performance art of the military government. Feudal military lords throughout the country supported their own troupes and many studied and performed the art themselves. With the societal reforms of the Meiji period (1868-1912), noh lost its governmental patronage and was left to fend for itself. Although it nearly died out, enough performers regrouped, found private sponsors, and began teaching the art to amateurs so that it slowly began to flourish again.

Today, like many classical performance forms throughout the world, noh cannot be described as a popular art among the average Japanese. Yet its supporters are enthusiastic and its professional performers are highly trained and extremely busy performing and teaching throughout the country. There are today approximately 1,500 professional performers who make their living largely through performing and teaching noh.

Though noh traditionally was performed by men only, in the post-WW II era, the number of female performers has increased markedly. Today, the number of professional women performers is over 250. Meanwhile, it is estimated that women make up well over two-thirds of the amateur performers.

TYPES OF PLAYS

There are five categories of noh plays. In order, these feature gods, warriors, beautiful women, miscellaneous (notably mad-women or present-time) figures, and supernatural beings. During the Edo period, a full day's program consisted of the ritual piece *Okina-Sanbaso* followed by one play from each category in the above order. One comic *kyogen* play would be presented between each noh. Of the five categories, the women plays are the slowest in tempo but the most poetic, and of the highest level in expressing *yugen*, an aesthetic term suggesting quiet elegance and grace, and subtle and fleeting beauty.

CHARACTERS

The main character of a noh play is called the *shite* (pronounced sh'tay) who sometimes appears with one or more companion characters called *tsure*. In many plays, the *shite* appears in the first half as an ordinary person, departs, then appears in the second half in his true form as the ghost of a famous person of long ago. The former is called the *maeshite* and the latter, the *nochishite*. Both roles are traditionally performed by the same actor.

The secondary actor, the *waki*, is often a travelling priest whose questioning of the main character is important in developing the story line. He also often appears with companion *wakitsure*. An interlude actor called *ai* or *ai-kyogen* also often appears as a local person who gives further background to the *waki*, and thus to the audience, in order to understand the situation of the *shite*.

CHORUS

A chorus called *jiutai*, usually consisting of eight persons, sits at the side of the stage, functioning to narrate the background, and the story and its mood. It also sometimes describes the character's thoughts and emotions or even sings lines for the characters.

INSTRUMENTALISTS

Instrumentalists known as *hayashi* sit at the back of the stage. They consist of a transverse flute (*nohkan*), an hourglass-shaped drum held at the shoulder (*kotsuzumi*), a slightly larger hourglass-shaped drum placed on the lap (*okawa* or *otsuzumi*), and a barrel-shaped drum placed on a small floor stand and played with two sticks (*taiko*). The rhythms and melody of these instruments follow highly prescribed systems.

One particularly unique feature is the use of drum calls (*kakegoe*), the shouts or cries of the drummers which serve as signals among the instrumentalists as well as between the drummers and singers. These drum calls also add an important element to the sound texture of the performance, which, along with the chant, help create the mood and establish the tempo.

MOVEMENT

A performance of noh is not a performance of realistic theatre. Rather, its movement is highly stylized and prescribed. While some gestures have specific meaning, others serve as an abstract aesthetic expression to convey the emotions of the main character. All of noh can be described as dance. Sometimes there is very little movement as dramatic tension is built mainly through narration. At other times there is strong, vigorous movement. Movement takes place sometimes to the singing of the chorus or sometimes to purely instrumental music. In general, deliberateness, brevity, suppression and abstraction are important features of noh movement.

MASKS

Makeup is not used in noh. Rather, delicately carved masks are often used by the *shite* main character, and/or the *tsure* companion. These masks are considered objects of superb beauty as well as powerful means of expression. In general, any character being portrayed which is not a middle-aged man living in the present will wear a mask. Therefore all characters portraying women and old men wear masks as well as supernatural beings such as ghosts, deities, demons, and divine beasts. In general, masks either have a more or less neutral expression, or portray a very strong emotion. The former, in fact, allows the mask a variety of expressions with the play of light and shadow on it as the actor changes slightly the tilt of the mask. Even in roles in which an actor does not wear a mask, the sense of a masked face is evident. This is called *hitamen*, literally “direct mask.” For this, the actor does not use his face for realistic expression but rather for mask-like expression. The *waki* secondary character or accompanying *wakitsure* never wear masks as they are meant to be middle-aged men living in the present-time of the play.

COSTUMES

Costumes in noh are elaborately made with gorgeously dyed silk and intricate embroidery. These costumes reveal the type of character being portrayed and follow prescribed conventions as to their use. Still, there is much variety. The detail of design, the color combinations, the richness of texture, and the strength of form give noh its visual impact. All characters, whether rich or poor, young or old, male or female, are beautifully costumed. The costuming process is complex. Rather than the actor putting on his own costume, two or three

Noh Reimagined 13-14 May 2016 “About Noh” by Richard Emmert

costumers are needed to sculpt the costume on the actor.

STAGE AND STAGING

The main part of the stage used in noh is a curtain-less square with a bridgeway leading to it from backstage. At the end of the bridgeway there is a hanging curtain which swings up and back allowing the characters to enter and exit. Stages were traditionally outside and covered with a long sloping roof. From the late 19th century, they have been mainly moved indoors. These inside stages are open on two sides in a kind of semi-theater-in-the-round. There is no attempt at designing a realistic stage set. Rather, only symbolic stage properties are used. The pine tree painted on the back wall of the stage represents the tree through which noh was, by legend, passed down from heaven to mankind. In Japanese culture, the evergreen pine has come to be an important symbol of longevity and unchanging steadfastness.

SPACE AND TIME

In general, the use of space and time is not portrayed realistically. Rather, there is a freedom of portrayal which requires the audience members to use their imaginations. Characters take only a few steps and through their song or that of the chorus, the audience knows that they have travelled a great distance. Two characters may appear on the stage nearly side-by-side, but again the audience comes to understand that they are not yet in each other's presence. While this may be confusing for the first time viewer, for many people who come to understand these and other conventions, noh creates a very powerful theatrical expression.

Useful links to learn more about Noh <http://noh.muarts.org.uk/what-is-noh/>

Noh Reimagined – The contemporary art of classical Japanese theatre

13-14 May 2016 www.kingsplace.co.uk/noh