

Edinburgh International Book Festival and Mu Arts present:
**Nonomiya / Song of Rona Island:
A Two-Part Performance.**
Part of Scotland to the World

Part 一
Nonomiya

Classical Noh piece *Nonomiya*, preceded by *Into the Wildwood Shrine*
by Konparu Zenchiku
45 minutes

Interval
20 minutes

Part 二
Song of Rona Island

A collaborative work inspired by Kathleen Jamie's essay 'On Rona'
45 minutes

Supported by

Sir Ewan & Lady Brown
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Kathleen Jamie
Royall Tyler
TESSENKAI Public Interest
Incorporated Association.



Noh Reimagined
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Introduction
Jenny Niven, Festival Director

News from a writer that they're working on something exciting arrives like a gift: sea glass, an unexpected treasure full of possibility. So, when Kathleen Jamie, with characteristic understatement, first mentioned that her brilliant essay 'On Rona' was being creatively reimagined as *Song of Rona Island* through a fusion of Japanese Noh theatre and contemporary Scottish folk music, it was a proposition so singular and unexpected that we immediately began thinking about how we might share it with Book Festival audiences.

Tonight's performance is just one of a new series for us, Scotland to the World, where we aim to bring together artists whose work crosses borders, traditions, and disciplines to reveal just how far Scotland's writers travel: both physically and imaginatively. The works we've curated for this series have connected leading Scottish writers Ali Smith, Len Pennie, Kathleen Jamie, and William Dalrymple with international musicians, artists, and performers and each foreground connection and magnificent diversity. In many ways, the series celebrates how much we are enriched by engaging with traditions and ideas beyond those most familiar to us. A simple idea, perhaps, but one that reminds us that encountering other traditions need never diminish our own; they expand it.

While nothing that our co-conspirator Akiko and Mu Arts produces is entirely 'traditional', we wanted tonight to present *Song of Rona Island* (Part Two of this evening's performance) alongside a classical Noh play, *Nonomiya* (Part One), so that that audiences unfamiliar with Noh might gain an insight into the additional dimension brought by the inclusion of the different elements of Scottish text, music, and performance. Given that you are the most literary of audiences, we felt it fitting to draw from the world's first novel (which so happens to have been written by a woman!), Murasaki Shikibu's *The Tale of Genji*.

We're enormously grateful to all of the creative team who have helped bring this truly unique piece of performance to fruition in Greyfriars Kirk this summer, and to the funders and supporters who have made it possible for us to present this unforgettable Scotland to the World series at the Edinburgh International Book Festival.



三

Part 一
Nonomiya
Into the Wildwood Shrine

An English language retelling of the world, story, and first half of *Nonomiya* by **Konparu Zenchiku** (1405-1470), written by **Gareth Matthey**, developed with **Kanji Shimizu** and **Akiko Yanagisawa**.

Nonomiya
Classical Noh piece *Nonomiya* by **Konparu Zenchiku**, performed in the second part of the play. English translation provided by **Royall Tyler**

Part 二
Song of Rona Island

Based on the work of **Kathleen Jamie**
Originally conceived by **Aidan O'Rourke** and **Akiko Yanagisawa**



Noh Performers

Kanji Shimizu – shite actor
Takao Nishimura – jiutai chant
Kyosuke Tanabe – kotsuzumi (shoulder drum)
Keinosuke Okura – otsuzumi (hand drum)
Satoshi Tsukitaku – nohkan (flute)

Scottish performers and folk musicians

Aidan O'Rourke – fiddle
Brighde Chaimbeul – Scottish smallpipes
Julie Martis – actor

Creative and Production Team

Kanji Shimizu – Stage Direction
Gareth Matthey – Stage Direction / Dramaturg
Arusa Qureshi – Producer
Akiko Yanagisawa – Director (Mu Arts)

四

Noh: Tradition & Change
Akiko Yanagisawa

Noh is one of the world's oldest surviving theatre traditions, with a history spanning more than 650 years. It combines chant, music, dance, masks, and poetry. Its foundations were shaped by the actor and playwright Zeami.

Its protagonists may be gods, warriors, women, demons, or even trees and plants, but often they are ghosts, the defeated, or those trapped by grief, resentment, or attachment. Noh gives voice to those who suffer and have been forgotten, offering solace to restless spirits. In mugen (dream) Noh, developed by Zeami, a travelling monk encounters a spirit from the past in a dream – a dramaturgy that transports us across time and space.

Noh is an art of space. It's almost bare stage, the importance of ma – the space between – and its highly abstract, minimal movement leave much to the audience's imagination. The musicians listen to one another's breath and drum calls, shaping timing and rhythm together. Although Noh is governed by strict forms, those forms create space for freedom, individuality, and fresh interpretations. Noh is surprisingly modern.

Song of Rona Island has grown from this openness. Kathleen's work shares with Noh a sense of time reaching between past and present, space and silence, and a profound awe before nature – the beauty and fragility of life, and an awareness that everything is constantly changing and passing. The classical Noh masterpiece, *Nonomiya*, gives profound and subtle expression to this sense of impermanence.

Two distinct cultures meet here, each bringing its own heritage and way of seeing, climbing the same mountain by different routes towards a place neither could reach alone.



五

Nonomiya: Programme note
Akiko Yanagisawa

Nonomiya by Konparu Zenchiku (1405–c.1471) is based on the 'Sakaki' chapter of *The Tale of Genji* by Murasaki Shikibu (widely celebrated as the world's first novel). It tells the story of Lady Rokujō, once the lover of Prince Genji.

Lady Rokujō suffers a devastating public humiliation when her carriage is forced aside by Lady Aoi (Genji's wife and social superior in the Heian Court) and her attendants during the annual Kamo Festival – a brutal reminder of her inferior place in Genji's life. The episode unleashes such jealousy in Rokujō that her spirit possesses and kills Aoi. Overcome by shame, she withdraws to the sacred shrine of Nonomiya, where she and Genji share a poignant farewell.

Set years after her death, this centuries-old Noh masterpiece explores the restless spirit of Lady Rokujō, still haunted by jealousy, grief, and her enduring attachment to Genji. Disguised at first as a village woman, she gradually reveals her true identity and the depth of her suffering.

In this production, a new English adaptation by Gareth Matthey, Scottish actor Julie Martis introduces the story, guiding audiences into the sacred wildwood of Nonomiya and the haunting world of Lady Rokujō.

Nonomiya Summary

Scene 一

In late autumn, a travelling monk (waki) arrives at Nonomiya, the sacred shrine where an Imperial Princess, chosen to serve as the Saigu, underwent ritual purification before departing for the Grand Shrine of Ise. As he admires the ancient shrine, a refined village woman (mae-shite) carrying a branch of sacred sakaki appears before him.

She explains the history of Nonomiya and tells him that this is the anniversary of Prince Genji's visit to Lady Rokujō, who had withdrawn there with her daughter after the famous carriage clash. Recalling their poignant farewell, she recounts Lady Rokujō's enduring love for Genji with such emotion that the monk begins to suspect she is speaking of herself. At last, she reveals that she is the spirit of Lady Rokujō – and then vanishes.



Scene 二

The monk spends the night praying in the sacred grove. Lady Rokujō's ghost returns, now in the form of a noblewoman riding a broken ox carriage (i.e. the symbol of the humiliation she suffered during the Kamo Festival, when her carriage was forced aside by the attendants of Genji's wife, Lady Aoi).

Still consumed by jealousy, regret, and longing, Lady Rokujō asks the monk to pray for the release of her tormented spirit. Reliving her final meeting with Genji at Nonomiya, she performs an elegant dance, caught between memory and attachment. Unable to escape the past, she returns to her broken carriage and disappears into the night.

七



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Song of Rona Island: The Artistic Vision Akiko Yanagisawa

Song of Rona Island was originally conceived by Aidan O'Rourke and myself as a musical collaboration inspired by Kathleen Jamie's 'On Rona', bringing together Scottish and Japanese Noh music traditions.

As I read Kathleen's essay repeatedly, I felt its profound sense of silence, space, the presence of absence, and the echoes of the past. These evoke the passage of time, history, life, and death – forces that lie beyond human control. This aesthetic resonates deeply with the essence of Japanese Noh theatre.

In 'On Rona', Kathleen encounters something invisible: the lost memories and voice of St Rona and the village people, quietly lingering in the stones of the chapel and the grave. The scene when Kathleen creeps into the chapel, imagining the unseen St Rona, is deeply moving.

Noh, is an artform in which we as audiences hear the stories of supernatural figures or people from the past, giving voice to those who have gone unheard, offering repose to their spirits. Noh stories express what lies beyond human control: the passage of time, the changing seasons, and the transience of life.

In both 'On Rona' and Noh, nature and human beings are not separated. Through the experience of the performance, we as audiences are drawn between the present world and the

unseen world of spirits and memories. This transformation of perception is one of the most powerful dramaturgical qualities of Noh theatre, allowing the voices of the past to be heard and creating a requiem for what has been lost and for those who once lived.

The memories and sensibilities preserved on two distant islands – one in Scotland and the other in Japan – come together in *Song of Rona Island*.

In Japanese aesthetics, particularly in Noh, concepts such as utsuroi, mono no aware, and memory are central. Utsuroi refers to the subtle and inevitable process of change – the way seasons, nature, and human experiences continuously transform. Mono no aware expresses a deep awareness of the impermanence of things and the emotions that arise from recognising their fragility and passing. I see a deep resonance between these ideas and 'On Rona'. I hope you will too.

This production – its first in Scotland – welcomes Scottish actor and poet Julie Martis and explores the profound connection between 'On Rona' and Noh through themes of memory, nature, and the voices of the past. The performance draws audiences between the present world and the unseen realm of spirits and memories, creating a poetic reflection on loss, transformation, and the enduring presence of history.

Song of Rona Island Summary

Scene 一 The Landscapes of Rona

A traveller arrives on the far-flung island of Rona, nothing more than a small green hill rising from the waves. She bears witness to its scale, its peninsulas like mismatched wings, its nameless village and St. Ronan's chapel, both abandoned for centuries. Along with her companions, she settles into the 'bothy', a field station that will be her temporary home.

Scene 二 Life on the Island

As the Witness embraces the slow rhythm of life on the island, she encounters Rona's vibrant ecosystem. By the chapel ruins, she joins a companion listening to the rapid, morse-like calls of migrating storm petrels nesting in the dark. Suddenly, the tense calm is shattered by the arrival of killer whales hunting a lone seal. Urged to watch, the Witness is left transformed, feeling a profound connection to the wild.



Scene 三 The Chapel

The Witness soothes her homesickness in the abandoned village, crawling into St. Ronan's private oratory. While waiting here, the spirit of St Ronan arrives. He speaks of an island once inhabited, of the loss of its people, and the loss of their names. But he knows that the world is constant change, even here on this island. As he leaves, the Witness asks him a question. St. Ronan doesn't answer.

Scene 四 Home

At home, the Witness thinks of Rona, imagining the island in the depths of winter. As she does so, a poem comes to mind, named "Fianuis", one of Rona's barren peninsulas.

Reflection on 'On Rona' Kathleen Jamie

During my visits to the small Hebridean island of North Rona, what occupied my mind and my senses were the sky and sea, and the birds. I think, looking back, that some of the happiest moments of my life were spent on that island. Such a poignant place, well out in the Atlantic, sea on all sides, long abandoned by humans and left to the seals and birds. It was 'remote' but also on the front line, because aspects of climate change and rising ocean levels are played out in these places; the decline in sea-bird populations and the increase in storms and gales are felt there first. Such 'remotes' are the future as well as the past. Knowing that people had once lived on the island, hundreds of years ago, speaks to our times too. Which places will we be forced to abandon before the 21st Century is over?

But for all that, its elemental beauty stays with me. The sound of the waves and the wind, the birds' cries. Scanning the sea for a glimpse of a whale or dolphin. The bog cotton nodding in the breeze. These are things I love. And my companions! In such a place one has to know and trust one's companions, one is reliant on them. Thankfully, nothing went wrong on our visits, we required no assistance. Forty miles out in the Atlantic, with no boat, a medical emergency would have been horrific.

(We had a satellite phone – unlike the occupants of hundreds of years ago. When disaster or disease struck them there was no way to call for help.)

The island's chapel with its tiny oratory is 1,200 years old and still standing. It is hugely evocative. To imagine early Christian monks sailing to the farthestmost islands, there to meditate on God and creation... these are the things I thought about on Rona, the things I wrote about. I thought about the few families who lived there, trying to win a living from its hard soil, until the place was finally abandoned. I thought about time and the transience of all things – including myself.

What never entered my head, not in my wildest imaginings, was that my writings about Rona, its remoteness, its saints, its lost people and natural beauty would find their way to Japan!

Not only that, but there would be cultural resonance. I have since come to learn that the Japanese tradition, especially the Noh tradition is rich with the same symbols: islands and abandonment, priest-saints, nature. A cross-over project would work! Of course, Rona is and was part of Scotland's Gaelic-speaking culture, so to have Scottish music, and Gaelic-speaking musicians involved, completes the circle.

I am just delighted. As I am with the script, which has been taken from my prose and transfigured into almost a Noh style, almost a haiku style. The poet in me warms to that! My heartfelt thanks go to those who have made this project happen, especially Akiko Yanagisawa, and Aidan O'Rourke who first made the connection.

One of the best things about being on Rona was the beachcombing. When we arrived, it was a joy to cross the hill and stroll over the flat, rocky, north-running peninsula called Fianuis, to see what the tides and winter storms had cast ashore. That was what I wanted to celebrate in my poem of that name:

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Fianuis

Well, friend, we're here again —
sauntering the last half-mile to the land's frayed end
to find what's laid on for us, strewn across the turf —
gull feathers, bleached shells,
a whole bull seal, bone-dry,
knackered from the rut
(we knock on his leathern head, but no one's home).
Change, change — that's what the terns scream
down at their seaward rocks;
fleet clouds and salt kiss —
everything else is provisional,
us and all our works.
I guess that's why we like it here:
listen — a brief lull,
a rock pipit's seed-small notes.



Nonomiya / Song of Rona Island 24 & 25 August 2026

