

Part 1

Away from Clamor & into the Dream World

# Noh Drama

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Photos: Kameda Kunihei

History of Noh

When talking about the history of *Noh*, it is always emphasized that it is the world's oldest theatrical art, lasting for 600 years up to the present time. However, when we search its root more deeply, we find that it actually originated from *Sangaku*, a Chinese entertainment that was brought to Japan during the Nara period (710-794). Over the years, *Sangaku* fused with Japanese indigenous folk performing arts and separated into two genres: *Dengaku*, which was primarily music and dance, and *Sarugaku*, which was comical and involved mimicry.

A few hundred years after this separation, in 1374, the four schools of *Yamato Sarugaku* (which later became the *Kanze*, *Hosho*, *Konparu* and *Kongo* schools) staged a fundraising *Noh* performance at the Imagumano Shrine. Ashikaga Yoshimitsu (1358-1408), the third *shogun* of the Ashikaga family, favored *Dengaku* up to that time, but by a sudden whim, he decided to go to watch *Sarugaku* at the shrine. This was how the rise of *Sarugaku* started. Yoshimitsu completely enjoyed *Sarugaku*. The head of the *Kanze* School, Kan'ami, and his son did not miss this chance and succeeded in winning the patronage of the *shogun*.

The father (then aged 42) and the son (then aged 12 and called Oniyasha) captured the teenage *shogun's* heart – the father with his mature and elegant style of acting and the son with his innate beauty and flirtatiousness. Yoshimitsu's patronage and support lasted for their lifetime. Although *Sarugaku* had not been as popular as *Dengaku* until that time, this event catapulted it to a meteoric rise.

While the power shifted from the Ashikaga family to Oda Nobunaga (1534-1582), Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536-1598) and then to the Tokugawa family, *Sarugaku Noh* performers always managed to win the patronage and protection of the ruler to establish a solid footing for their art – with the help of favor-currying techniques one would expect from seasoned performers. There were many civil wars during those years and sometimes *Noh* performers had to lie low, but they always managed to rise again like a phoenix before anyone knew it.

No. & Types of Noh Dramas

When all schools are combined, there are approximately 200 plays at present. Although it is said that some 2,000 to 3,000 plays were created so far, they

went through rigorous natural selections and their number came to settle at around 200 during the Edo period (1603-1867). This figure has not changed even today. In recent years, newly written plays and revivals of old ones are performed often, but in principle these are not counted as today's numbers.

*Noh* plays are classified into the following five genres:

1. *Shobanme-mono* (first group)  
[*Waki-noh-mono* (god plays)]

The protagonist is a deity. These plays are to pray for peace under the heaven, security of the nation and abundant crops of grains, and praise the virtue of the deity.

1. *Nibanme-mono* (second group)  
[*Shura-noh-mono* (warrior plays)]

In the plays of this genre, apparitions of generals or princes of the Minamoto or Taira families appear and show the carnage of war or their suffering after death.

3. *Sanbanme-mono* (third group)  
[*Kazura-mono* (wig plays)]

Protagonists are elegant ladies of the imperial court, who demonstrate graceful dances.

1. SHIN (god) "TAKASAGO": The spirit of the pine (embodiment of God) appears as an old man. 2. NAN (man) "TAMURA": A ghostly apparition of a general drives off the enemy. 3. NYO (woman) "YUYA": YUYA, a nobleman's lover, dances. 4. KYO (lunatic) "HANJO": One sleeve is taken off to express a woman going mad longing for people. 5. KI (demon) "UKAI": Demon in hell

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4. *Yonbanme-mono* (fourth group)  
 [*Genzai-mono* (realistic plays)]

Many of these plays are to console mothers who are in a frenzy over the death of their children. The plays in this genre are very dramatic and their protagonists are diverse, including the young and the old of both sexes.

5. *Gobanme-mono* (fifth group)  
 [*Kiri-noh-mono* (final plays)]

These are dramatic spectacles, in which ogres, *tengu* (long-nosed goblins believed to live in the mountains), fairies and other supernatural creatures show their feats. The last play of the day always belongs to this genre.

These five genres of plays are also called god, man, woman, lunatic and demon, respectively, because of the nature of *shite*, the protagonist or the leading actor. As players don the costumes and masks appropriate for their roles, *Noh* is a costume play with stylized beauty. This is why it is called the world's oldest masque. Some roles do not require masks, however. These are called *hitamen* (face without a mask). In *hitamen* plays, the performer makes his own face into a mask; that is a face that does not show any emotions. This is a characteristic of *Noh*.

■ **Noh Performance & How to Enjoy It**

*Noh* is always paired with *Kyogen*, a short comical play. While *Noh* is to be called a classical tragedy that keeps disciplined calmness, *Kyogen* can be said to be its direct opposite in that it is a casual, modern art which invites laughter. For centuries, a program for *Noh* performance presented tragedies (*Noh*) and comedies (*Kyogen*) alternately. A look at programs of *Noh* performed on the stage of the Edo Castle (now the Imperial Palace in Tokyo) during the Edo period shows

that the programs, which were called "formal five-play programs," followed one pattern: opening with "*okina*" (old man signifying God), played as a ritual, and proceeding with the five genres of plays in the order as described before, with a *Kyogen* play performed between each *Noh* play. Programs usually began at around 8 a.m. and lasted until around 7 p.m., which required fortitude on the part of spectators.

In the Meiji period (1868-1912), when the performance of both *Noh* and *Kyogen* became something for ordinary people, eating boxed lunches and drinking *sake* in the spectators' seat during performances were allowed. Even though *Noh* was opened to the public as a rather high-class entertainment, it was not possible to cheer or encourage loudly one's favorite performers as in the case of *Kabuki* or *sumo* wrestling since its status was as prestigious as that of the warrior class. Manners have become even stricter since World War II, and since it is not allowed to leave one's seat except during intermissions, it has become more confining.

In addition, *Noh* has many stage conventions and its tempo is extremely slow. For example, performers shuffle quietly step by step, and if an actor takes two steps, this means that he has traveled thousands of miles. When an actor looks downward (which means "his face being clouded") and holds his hands in front of his eyes, this represents weeping. Since all movements are in strict accordance with the styles set many centuries ago, attaching too much importance to interpreting these stylized movements will give you a stiff neck.

The formal five-play program is hardly performed any more. Even though the program has been simplified to three *Noh* plays plus one *Kyogen* play or two *Noh* plays plus one *Kyogen* play, they

usually last three or four hours. Therefore, one recommended way of enjoying *Noh* is that once you settle into your seat at a *Noh* theater, you sever all ties with the real world and throw yourself into the dream world of *Noh*. Do not try to understand *Noh*, but empty your heart and mind to watch the dramas. In a mysterious place that is beyond time and space, a heavenly beauty moves without moving and will lead you to a sweet place like a paradise. The slow motions in *Noh* are certain to make you drowsy. Today, *Noh* is the only theatrical art that will lead you to sweet dreams. In fact, it is only with *Noh* that you can sever yourself from the real world, which is nothing but noise, and buy dreams. Then, on the other hand, a monster, which is far ahead of science fiction movies, may suddenly appear on stage to wake you up. In that case, you will enjoy its dynamic movements and the stage. In any event, the structure, comprising *jo* (opening), *ha* (transition) and *kyu* (suddenness), on which Zeami based his theory of arts and which he taught as a pattern of the development of a story (the first part of *jo* is a god play, the first, second and third parts of *ha* are a warrior play, a wig play and a realistic play, and *kyu* is a final play) is very well in tune with human physiology.

Once you are captured by the charm of *Noh*, try to understand it by studying it little by little. The tradition which has survived several centuries has been perfected, and cannot be destroyed no matter what you do with it. However, *Noh* has not become rigid and it is a presence that continues to live. There is a saying about blind men touching only a part of an elephant and claiming what it was like, but an elephant called *Noh* can make you feel its presence in its entirety, no matter which part of it you touch. S

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