

# Noh : A Mirror of the Spirit

By Ogamo Rebecca Teele



ALL theater in some way holds a mirror up to life and shows us something about what it is to be a human being. The drama of the Noh theater reveals our spiritual nature. The conventions of Noh provide us with the opportunity to meditate on a particular human emotion or dilemma in depth. Our connectedness to all living beings is revealed; we become aware of our attachment to and nostalgia for the past. Through this sense of connectedness and awareness, we are refreshed and transformed.

From its origins as performance forms of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, Noh itself has undergone many transformations. Rituals and celebratory performances indispensable to an agrarian society grew into a highly enlightened evocative art drawing on the literature of both Japan and the Asian continent, and further developed into the ceremonial art of the warrior class from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, providing a unifying language and repertory of shared aesthetic values for 260 years. Though the upheavals of the Meiji Restoration in 1868 brought an end to Noh's special status, the system of performance schools or styles remained. Noh was censured along with other forms of drama after World War II, but now theatrical training is enjoyed by people in all walks of life and performances are seen not only in Noh theaters, but in public halls, theaters and parks. In May 2001 UNESCO declared Noh drama a World Cultural Heritage.

Noh is about connectedness, and my own connection with Noh began when I was a child. My first memory of Noh is of awakening to the sound of drums, flute and voices to see a beautiful figure that seemed to float before my eyes. A veil between worlds had been lifted, and a being from another dimension had appeared. I found myself excited by the encounter and saddened when it ended. This experience led me to study theater, but I could not find the mysterious magical quality I was looking for in the West. Back in Japan as an adult I enjoyed a lot of Noh performances, seeking the special connection I had felt as a child. I encountered it again at the Kongo Noh theater in Kyoto where I felt immediately drawn to the style of movement and chant, and to the play of light on the masks and costumes bringing them to life.

Japanese society, too, is very much about connections, and now that I knew that the Kongo style of Noh was for me I had to find the right way to connect with it. In traditional Japanese arts, an association with a school or teacher is a mutual life-long commitment, and one that is not made lightly. *Deai*, or first encounters, seem to be fated, and in meeting Udaka Michishige of the Kongo School I found a

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master not only of Noh performance, but of Noh mask carving as well. He also had a vision of the possibilities of Noh that I gradually came to understand.

Udaka-*sensei* (teacher) urged me to study both Noh performance and mask carving to experience and understand the world of the Noh mask from both sides: the myriad expressions of the masks seen by the audience, and the exacting discipline of the performer who must bring the mask to life. It is as difficult to describe what a Noh mask is as to describe Noh itself. In Japanese to say someone has a face "like a Noh mask" is usually considered negative. The women's masks in particular are often singled out as being symmetrical and neutral in expression. However, the modeling of the features is in fact based on a subtle asymmetry, a play of *yin-yang* or positive-negative that enables expression to change, from elation to regret, with even the slightest movement by the actor. In Noh we may say that "it is not the actor who sees, but the mask." The

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challenge for the master actor is to become attuned to the relationship between his body and the mask so that the audience feels that it is, indeed, the eyes of the mask that see and react to the world. A fine mask, in extension, communicates to us seemingly across time and space, its eyes knowing, and the lips parted as if to speak.

In 1980, after having studied Noh for about eight years, I became a *shihan*, or licensed instructor in the Kongo School. As a shihan I started teaching Noh, learning a great deal about myself as I sought to faithfully mirror what I had learned from the sensei for my students, and finding all too often my own flaws from their struggle to imitate me. I am always awed by how the same classic patterns take on the unique nuance of the performers, revealing unknown aspects of Noh and of the performer as well.

The International Noh Institute, founded in 1970 by Udaka-sensei to focus on making Noh more accessible to foreigners, has given men and women from over 13 countries a chance to experience Noh. A performance which has special significance for me was the one held at Yasaka Shrine in Kyoto in the spring of 1988. One of the features of the day was the performance of the main dance sections of the Noh *Yuki*, the Spirit of the Snow, in both Japanese and English. This was the first Noh I had studied in its entirety, and one that my father (who was teaching comparative literature at the University of Texas) translated for me at a time when I could hardly make head or tail of classical Japanese. A woman appears to a traveling monk caught in a sudden snowstorm. "Who am I?" she asks. In a flash of insight the monk answers, "The Spirit of the Snow." With recognition of her identity comes the desire for enlightenment. Her yearning for freedom from her attachments, her ignorance and delusions have piled and drifted like the snow, and through the monk's prayers, she is finally released. Along with the monk we witness her transformation as her form fades and melts with the coming of the dawn. This is a simple play, but also a miraculous encounter with an element of our natural environment that has important implications in a day and age when it is imperative to realize a sense of oneness with the world around us. Udaka-sensei performed *Yuki* at the National Noh Theater in Tokyo in 2002 with a *Ko-Omote*, or



Young Girl's mask, he had carved himself.

There is a tendency to believe that Noh is an art that simply preserves traditional plays and that only a few new pieces are written, and innovations or experiments do not take place. In fact new plays find their way to the stage every year and some are even repeated, which is a sign they have made their way into the repertory, or are beginning to do so. As in the past, these new Noh hold up a mirror to our human condition and allow spirits to pass from another level to our own. In 2003 Udaka-sensei's *Genshigumo*, *The Atomic Cloud, a Prayer for Peace*, was performed for the first time in Kyoto. This presents a kind of requiem for those who lost their lives in the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and also offers prayers for the souls of the victims in the various misadventures that have occurred since the development of nuclear weapons, and for those who have been victims of the terrorism that is so prevalent in our world today. A mother's search for her child who died in the bombing of Hiroshima leads her to Eastern Gate of the Underworld. After being told of the horrors of the bombing, she learns that her child has been reborn as a willow tree. The fervent prayer of the Spirit of the Willow Tree expresses souls of the dead are not forgotten, and peace is brought to flower in the world. Appearing as spirits of the dead were men and women from six countries, including some with family members who were *hibakusha*\*. All were united in a common prayer for peace. The possibility for this kind of performance is what makes Noh a vital performing art today.

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\*Note : survivors of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.