

The Tranquility of Noh

By Kongo Hisanori

Since this is the first of a series, I shall begin by presenting some general background information on noh and an introduction on the state of mind seen through this art form peculiar to Japanese. This I hope to do through my own impressions and knowledge of the art form accumulated over a long period.

Noh, first perfected in the Muromachi era by Zeami some 600 years ago, is a stage performing art which calls for the use of masks. Continued unbroken since the beginning, it is the oldest living drama form of any importance, not only in Japan but in the world. Its origin came 200 years before the renowned Shakespeare completed his plays.

The main reason this art form has been able to be continued uninterrupted until today is connected with the fact that Japan, as an island country, has been exempt from the invasion of other races. This was what made the cultivation of a homogeneous culture possible. In addition, in the advancement of the artistic culture, while in the West people tend to move beyond the old to give way to something entirely new, in Japan, rather than creating a new culture, do we not see people preferring to deepen the existing culture and trying to reach a higher plateau? This characteristic of the Japanese can be seen even today. Even in the field of science, rather than being in the frontier in the invention of modern technology, it is said that Japanese people are better at perfecting an existing technology.

Noh, since its birth some 600 years ago, has been inherited by a handful noh families, succeeding from father to son, and from son to grandson. Today there are five schools of noh. I belong to the Kongo School and am the 26th generation. I started my stage performance in my early childhood at the tender age of four, and my son, in a similar way, made his first debut performance last fall at the age of five. Members from noh families start their stage performances at a very young age and undergo very strict



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training over the years.

They say one does not reach the highest artistic level until he is well into his 60's and it is not unusual to see noh actors in their 80's still making stage appearances. This is why noh can be said to be one of the art forms that most respects maturity. The kind of plays performed in today's noh are often selected from a repertoire of 200. Although newly written plays are performed, those that are of overwhelming popularity are still the classical plays, and some of these were written as early as 600 years ago.

What's more, at a noh performance, officially five plays are performed in a day. Preceding the five plays is usually a performance of religious rites called *okina*, prayers for the security of the nation, a good harvest of five crops and the proliferation of offspring. In addition, in between the five plays are also performances called *kyogen*, humorous comedies. The comedies, which are given as interludes between noh plays, are a format seen also in the early operas of Europe. From this, perhaps we can get a glimpse of the exchanges between the East and the West in the early days.

Today, most people think of noh as a stage performance with few movements, boring and hard to understand. In fact, the essence of noh lies precisely in the tranquility. "The beauty and

strength of noh exists in its concentration," says Japanologist Mr. E.F. Fenolloosa. French actor Jean Louis Bareau also stated, "Noh tranquility is breathing." I thought these were very insightful statements that well captured the essence of noh. The stillness of noh is accomplished from the balance between the force that wishes to move from within to without and the force that tries very hard to contain the movement to go from without to within. In this way, the performer's spirit is exactly concentrated on one point.

What's more, when standing on stage wearing a noh mask, a performer sometimes falls into a very strange mental state. Peering from the dark and seeing only a glimpse of light from the eye-holes of the mask, the performer falls into a state of extreme concentration from a sense of pressure. While his mind may still be with him, he may feel that he is physically leaving his body. Zeami said that this referred to *riken no ken*, which is said to be a very important realm for an actor to reach in his dance of the noh.

By the way, it is difficult to say that noh is a popular form of entertainment. As is the case with ancient Japanese music, part of the reason why noh is not popularized is said to have something to do with the education system since Meiji. In the Edo period, because many tutors at the private elementary schools were *ronin* (samurai who lost their jobs) the songs of noh, part of the educational training of samurai, was taught enthusiastically. Since Meiji, however, because Japan wanted to emulate Western countries, the government changed the educational curriculum to Western style. And when music education became overly Westernized, was the time when ancient Japanese music became quickly distanced from commoners.

Luckily, there seems to be a resurgence of popularity in things Japanese in recent years. Riding on the kabuki and sumo boom, noh is also command-



Matsukaze as performed by Kongo Hisanori

ing a wide interest among many people. This is indeed something to rejoice in.

The highest form of expression

Allow me to introduce here a noh play called *Hachi No Ki* or *The Dwarf Trees*, which well expresses the mind of Japanese people. The play opens with a snowstorm in the state of Kozuke. A lone priest, who happens to be traveling on his journey back to Kamakura from the state of Shinano, becomes caught in the snowstorm when he passes through a place called Sano in Kozuke. He then seeks shelter from a house he sees nearby. (This priest is Hojo Tokiyori, formerly a very influential regent before the Kamakura Bakufu. Upon retiring from the regency, he leaves home to become a priest and travels around to see the state of the country. Whenever he sees poverty and hardship, he always lends a helping hand. In this sense, he is a character in the same vein as those in the presently popular TV drama series *Mito Komon*.)

The master of the house initially

declines to accommodate him, saying "Our's is indeed a very unsightly place." After declining the priest, the master began to feel sorry for him and decided to let him stay for the night. He then shares with the priest millet rice and laments at their state of having to rely on this rice for survival.

When the cold evening comes, the master brings out his last three favorite dwarf trees—plum, cherry and pine—and burns them to keep the guest warm. The three were the remains of dwarf trees that the master carefully nurtured before he fell to this wretched state. To chop them up is behavior that proclaims a person's readiness to resign from participating in state affairs. Realizing that the master's behavior is not that of an ordinary person, the priest asks who the master is. "I am the ruined warrior Sano Genzaemon

Tsuneyo. My lands were usurped and when I complained to Kamakura, Regent Tokiyori had already left on training and there was nothing I could do. Even though I have been reduced to poverty, I still have torn armour, a rusted sword and a thin horse and if the rulers of Kamakura should call for my help, I am ready to hurry to their service," said the master loftily.

When it comes time for the priest to go, Tsuneyo and his wife both try to ask the priest to stay a few days longer. The priest declines, but before he leaves, he says to the couple, "Please drop by when you have a chance to come to Kamakura. Perhaps I can be of some help. And please, do not give up your appeal."

Once back in Kamakura, Tokiyori issues an order to call together the warriors from the eight states in Kanto. This is not because something urgent has happened, but because Tokiyori wants to test Tsuneyo's truthfulness. Like he has promised, Tsuneyo does arrive in Kamakura with his thin horse.

Tokiyori, picking Tsuneyo from the army, introduces himself as the priest who visited him before. Praising

Tsuneyo for his loyalty, Tokiyori returns his lands. As a gift for the warm treatment he received from the burning of the three dwarf trees, Tokiyori rewards Tsuneyo with three plots whose names are connected with the three dwarf trees—the villa of Umeda (plum field) in Kaga, the villa of Sakurai (cherry well) in Ecchu and the villa of Matsuida (pine well field) in Kozuke.

This is the rough outline of the story behind the play. The song has been very popular since ancient time and is famous as a piece that describes the truthfulness of people. The kind of heart-felt exchange has been thought of by the Japanese as the ideal kind of human relationship. Such is not the kind of relationship built on a mutual agreement, but a realm in which people communicate through utmost sincerity, one where honesty is treasured as the highest virtue.

Japanese, since the old days, have put a lot of weight on the so-called *ishinden-shin*, or direct communication from mind to mind. Of course, it is precisely because Japanese are a homogeneous people that they have been able to communicate well mutually without an exchange of words. In our international society, such kind of communication, however, would not have a place. What are the Japanese saying? I can't understand them! Japanese are often said to be a race not skilled in expressing their opinions. This, I believe, has been caused by the Japanese tradition of placing importance on the hidden meanings behind words.

Noh boasts a long history. It has gained high recognition worldwide for its artistic value and is said to hold a wealth of the very essence of the Japanese spirit. I sincerely hope that noh can be seen not only in Japan, but internationally by as many people as possible, and that it can play a role in improving mutual understanding between Japan and the world.

(First of a six-part series.)

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