

# The Persistence of Noh

By Kongo Hisanori

In this issue, I shall talk about the overall history of noh and my own view on the aesthetic sense of the Japanese as expressed through this art form.

Noh, a stage performing art perfected by Kan'ami and his son Zeami during the Muromachi era some 600 years ago, is said to have derived from the *sangaku* (variety arts) of China's T'ang dynasty and was introduced to Japan during the Nara era. (In addition to *sangaku*, other musical forms that found their way to Japan include *gigaku* and *gagaku*.) *Sangaku*, in contrast to *gagaku* (formal/imperial court music), has the connotation of secular music and refers to art forms such as acrobatics and comical, but realistic, character portrayals (*monomane*).

*Gagaku* is an orthodox performing art composed of solemn music and dance which has been performed continuously until today at the imperial court. Meanwhile, *sangaku* was presented at temples and shrines during religious festivals, mostly in front of common folks, and eventually evolved into today's noh.

Incorporated in the performance of *sangaku* was a monkey act that was particularly popular with the audience. This later came to be known as *sarugaku*, or "monkey music." Eventually this was combined with other dances and music, thus giving birth to the religious ritual called *okina sarugaku*, as well as the *sarugaku no noh* which contained a synopsis and a story line.

During the Muromachi era, several professional *sarugaku* companies were centered around the Kinki area. Kan'ami and Zeami were actors for the Yamato (Nara) *sarugaku* troupe and they traveled to the capital city of Kyoto. The father and son team performed before the shogun Ashikaga Yoshimitsu who was captivated by their performance.

The two thereafter enjoyed his favor and support and *sarugaku* began its departure from the earthy, secular style of the commoners to become heavily influ-

enced by the characteristics of the songs and dances favored by the upper class, such as *shirabyoshi* or *dengaku* (field music) which were very popular in the capital. Consequently, *sarugaku* evolved into a highly sophisticated art form.

Based on these transformations, Zeami further perfected this theatrical art with his own unique artistic concept called *mugen*, a mysterious expression of beauty. This is the noh we are familiar with today.

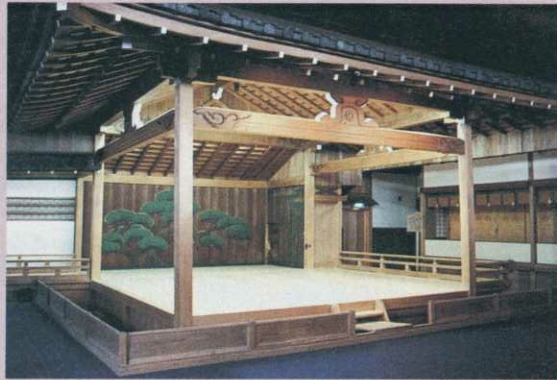
Unfortunately for Zeami, the shogun became more impressed with his nephew On'ami, and Zeami gradually fell out of favor. Eventually, Zeami and his son Juro Motomasa were driven from the status as leaders of noh and became targets of criticism.

Motomasa died at an early age and Zeami, as an old man of seventy-plus, offended the shogun and was subsequently exiled to Sado Island. It is impossible for us to know if he returned to his homeland or was ever released. The "Sitting Stone of Zeami," still standing at Shoboji Temple on Sado Island even today, is said to be the stone where Zeami sat to contemplate new artistic principles of noh.

Although cherished as the person who perfected noh, Zeami encountered repeated setbacks in his later years. Meanwhile, during the time when On'ami replaced Zeami, noh came to be honored as the *shikigaku*, or the formal music, of the Muromachi Bakufu and flourished in Kyoto. It is said that the majority of the



Above: "Kongo-Gire" noh brocade received from Toyotomi Hideyoshi



Left: Kongo Noh Theater (Kyoto)

well-known pieces that represented the very soul of noh were completed during this period.

## Integral part of culture

Soon the central government lost much of its power and Japan entered the period known as the Warring States era when the entire country was engulfed in wars and disputes. During this period, many noh actors sought support from powerful regional daimyo and eventually noh became popular in the regions, thriving as a form of art catering to the tastes of the daimyo and the samurai class. The Warring States era was brought to an end by Toyotomi Hideyoshi, who unified the nation.

Hideyoshi was an unusually enthusiastic supporter of noh, and he commissioned a special play, with himself as the central character, called *taiko noh*. He also took the leading role in some of the plays. It is believed that he even forced noh actors to accompany him to



the frontlines and watched their performances when not engaged in battle. In a letter to his wife Nene, which remains intact to this day, he wrote, "I have managed to learn quite a few new noh plays through rehearsals in between battles and I am going to perform for you upon my return."

Hideyoshi was also an avid collector of noh masks, owning three Ishikawa Tatsumon *koomote* masks, counted among the best existing collection of female character masks. He even named them, in reverse order of the dates they were made, "Yuki no koomote," "Tsuki no koomote," and "Hana no koomote" and treasured them greatly. Hideyoshi also decreed that all daimyo subsidize the four noh theaters, thus stabilizing their income.

Following the consolidation of the Tokugawa Bakufu, this tradition was continued and noh soon developed into the shikigaku of the Tokugawa shogunate. In this way, noh became the official ceremonial art of the Tokugawa government enjoying a stable position for the next 300 years, consequently gaining the opportunity to perfect its artistic form. On the other hand, however, because the Tokugawa Bakufu banned the creation of new works, the vitality for innovation was gradually lost and noh eventually became completely estranged from the common people.

When the Tokugawa government fell to give way to the Meiji Restoration, noh actors suddenly were left to fend for themselves. Without patrons, some performers were even forced to work in agriculture or business, fields with which they were completely unfamiliar, and led a life of utmost misery. This was the time when most noh actors left the theater.

Later, following politician Iwakura Tomomi's visit to Europe, the idea that Japan must have a stage performing art as superb as the opera took hold. Under his direction noh was again revived. In addition, noh actors also came to realize the need to reach the masses by capturing the hearts of ordinary folks instead of placing importance on powerful figures as they did during the Edo era. And noh, surviving the hardship of Japan's

defeat in World War II, has been continued until today.

## In harmony with nature

Since the postwar years, our society has concentrated only on the promotion of scientific technology and the economy, thus neglecting the development of culture. With the bursting of the bubble, people have begun to reconsider their past mistakes and we are said to be entering an era of heart and soul where noh, along with other aspects of traditional cultural heritage, will be given a chance for reexamination.

Reviewing the history of noh, we can't help but be impressed by the ability of the art form to survive the past 600 years, through repeated destructive setbacks, to become the oldest extant professional theater in the world. This is due to none other than its bewitching charm symbolizing the unique spirituality of the Japanese.

One discipline which is characteristic of the inner soul of the Japanese is flower arrangement. In the West, a florist tries to bring forward the beauty of flowers through the brilliance of coloring. In Japan, however, we are able to depict the entire realm of beauty through a single flower placed on the *tokonoma*.

The same can also be said about paintings. Western paintings employ rich colors to beautifully bring out the forms of objects. But in Japanese paintings (especially in *sumie* paintings), the tendency is to use as simple a line or color as possible to take the fullest advantage of an empty space, enabling the true nature of the object to come to the fore.

In this way, in contrast to Westerners who are characterized by their realistic approach to art through an emphasis on overall beauty, we Japanese are on a quest to bring out what we call the innermost essence of our objects from their individual aspects.

Consequently, the beauty of blankness, which has been a characteristic of traditional Japanese art forms, is given birth as an abridgement to demonstrate in the extreme this expression. Of course this blankness cannot be a mere

void. The beauty of Japanese paintings is that the blank portion is used to its fullest advantage. The subject matter, and the blankness which serves as its environment, form a very tight relationship which does not allow for leeway of even one or one-tenth of a millimeter.

Noh, a motionless art form, is said to correspond with the beauty of blankness. To attract the attention of the audience to himself while standing motionlessly on stage is indeed an undertaking extremely taxing on the nerves of the actor. It can be compared to a dancer of "monkey music" making a mid-air swivel at full speed and appearing as if he is, for a split second, motionless.

Moreover, there is the constant striving for that ultimate realm where a noh actor reaches the state of total blankness in which all earthly desires and ambitions are transcended and only tranquility prevails. Put another way, it is the state when one goes beyond all human intentions to become one with nature.

Since the beginning of time, the Japanese have been a people who have strived to live in harmony with nature. Take for example housing, ours are not made of durable materials like the stones used in the West, but of materials such as wood, paper and earth which over the years return to nature. In addition, in the autumn we can hear the sounds of insects and the rustling of pine needles, thus harmonizing our fate with that of nature.

Unfortunately, since World War II we have yielded much of our spirituality to that of materialism in the name of development of civilization.

Today, amid international calls for conservation of the environment and a reemphasis for the well being of the mind, people are rediscovering the Japanese sense of beauty in noh and other cultural assets. I certainly hope that people will see that noh is not just an old traditional art, but can be developed into something innovative and universal in our modern setting.

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