

The Appreciation of Noh Overseas

By Kongo Hisanori

In 1954 the Kita and Kanze schools performed their first overseas shows at an international theater festival held in Venice, and from that time until the present numerous overseas performances have been enthusiastically staged. Since our first tour abroad to Canada and other parts of North America in January 1984, the Kongo school has embarked on a European tour and staged a performance at the Vatican for Pope John Paul II (in August that year), followed by performances in Spain and France, and then on to Washington D.C. and Portland in the U.S., Australia, and Israel, for a total of eight overseas tours. Today, overseas performances have become commonplace, with all five noh schools eagerly staging numerous performances throughout the year.

Further, as Japan's international standing has come to take on more importance, people in other countries have come to have an increased interest in Zen, tea ceremony, and other facets

of Japan's ancient, traditional culture. More and more people want to learn about Japan through noh and mutual international cultural exchanges are flourishing.

When asked which of the many overseas performances was the most memorable, I would have to answer that it was that first tour to Canada and the rest of North America. It was our school's first overseas tour, and since it was my first experience in the capacity as head of the group it was all a total mystery to me, seeming like a complete muddle right from the preparatory stages. The schedule called for 25 performances in 14 cities over 42 days, kicking off in Montreal and then on to Toronto and Ottawa before heading to New York, Philadelphia, San Antonio, Denver and San Francisco.

Pulling together our entire troupe of 16 people, noh masks, costumes, stage props, and various other types of baggage, we finally left Japan in a bitterly

cold January that I shall never forget. Before arriving in Montreal, Canada where our first performance would be held, we went through a rigorous schedule, changing planes three times in the U.S. By the time we arrived, it was the middle of the night and everyone was too done in to even talk.

The town of Montreal that greeted us was mantled in deep, silent snow and the lights shining along the city streets gave the city a truly beautiful appearance, making me think of France. The beauty made us forget our fatigue and then again we felt relieved that we had in any case arrived at our first destination safe and sound. Stepping out into the late night we grabbed a light meal at a nearby Italian restaurant and all lifted our glasses in a celebratory toast. Upon learning that we had come from Japan, a tipsy, 40-ish gentleman sang the Canadian national anthem and joined us in a welcoming toast. And so began the first day of our long tour.

We were accompanied by two Americans, one during the first half and the other during the latter part, who acted as our navigators. Both had previously lived in Japan for some years and were Japan aficionados who possessed special expertise and had studied noh and kyogen. At our destinations they provided explanations prior to the performances and we looked upon them as reassuring managers.

The day after our arrival we took the stage at Montreal's lovely, large Place des Arts theater, performing the noh dramas *Yashima* and *Hagoromo* (*The Feather Robe*) and the kyogen *Uri Nusbuto* (*The Melon Thief*). We staged the performance just as we would have done in Japan, but it seemed as if it was a bit too long for people from another country who were seeing noh for the first time. Subsequently we made an effort to gradually shorten the performance times. In keeping with the custom overseas we also took curtain calls, but as we were unaccustomed to this



Following a performance of *Hagoromo* at Castel Gandolfo, the Pope's villa.

practice we were a bit embarrassed at first. There were even some members of the audience who made a special effort to stop backstage after the show and tell us that although it was the first time they had seen noh, it had been splendid and moving, which was very heartening and pleasing to us.

We subsequently performed at theaters in various large cities in the U.S. and also visited numerous universities where we were surprised to find more people than we had imagined who were interested in Japan and other Asian countries and were studying culture and other subjects. We held lectures along with the performances at each university, drawing many scholars and students, among whom there were many whose spoken Japanese was more skillful than ours and some who knew more about Japan than the Japanese, leading to very specialized and high-level questions and exchanges of opinions about noh and Japanese culture. These were very stimulating and interesting experiences for us as noh actors.

During the course of the tour we experienced everything from the extreme cold of our first stop in Canada, where at -20° it was cold enough to freeze your ears, to weather that reminded one of early summer in San Antonio in the south of the U.S. during the last half of the tour, providing us with a renewed appreciation of the breadth of the American continent.

In summer that year during the Italian tour led by my father I was able to participate in a performance in front of the pope at the Vatican, thus experiencing two overseas tours in the same year. For this performance about 100 Kongo supporters joined us through a tour, making it a very lively trip. The pope viewed the performance at Castel Gandolfo, his suburban summer villa. Facing a lake



Palazzo Pitti, Florence

atop a mountain, it was a quiet, lovely place. In a corner of the garden are the remains of an ancient Roman outdoor amphitheater. If you listen closely it is almost as if you can hear the faint and faraway breath of an ancient age in the rich, half-decayed ambience of the stonework. Although until then I had thought that noh was ancient, I had the strange sensation that it was actually quite new as I surveyed these ruins.

In the lingering dusk the pope viewed *Hagoromo takigi noh* (noh by bonfire) in the garden. As the ambassadors from various countries to the Vatican and other audience members from Japan looked on, we performed in an atmosphere imbued with quiet elegance, lit by the bonfire's flames and a Mediterranean summer evening breeze wafting over us.

At this point I would like to present the pope's post-performance remarks verbatim:

"This is the first time I have had the experience of coming in contact with a traditional, ancient Japanese performing art. Viewing noh, I endeavored with all my might to detect what the common and diverging aspects of Eastern and Western cultures might be. The human spirit that seeks truth and beauty is common to both, but the differences in varying races', traditions', and cultures' philosophical and artistic expressions surely derive from the richness of humankind. Without mutual ex-

changes and encounters between the differing cultures of East and West especially we surely would not be able to share that richness.

"I would now like to express my heartfelt appreciation for the goodwill and efforts of all of you who traveled all the way to Europe from faraway Japan and especially here to Castel Gandolfo to provide us with this opportunity to meet you. Thanks to you we have had an opportunity for mutual dialogue. In that sense I would like to thank you for this evening's encounter.

"Art is always more than meets the eye and expresses something sacred. Now, with everyone's cooperation, I would like to close this evening's entertainment with a prayer. Please join me in prayer to the Supreme Being, each according to your own country's beliefs and customs."

Afterward, the pope took the hand of each actor and stagehand, thanking everyone for their efforts, and his heartwarming expression made our hearts swell with gratitude.

Thinking about it, my overseas tours, starting with the locations in Canada, enabled me to stage performances in various locations with differing cultures—in New York, said to be in the vanguard of modern culture; and on the other hand in Rome with its rich atmosphere of ancient traditions, and other places in Europe, a storehouse of traditional culture. As a solitary noh actor, I have to be sincerely grateful for my great good fortune. When differing civilizations meet in mutual understanding their influence on each other engenders a new, unforeseen culture. Cradling visions that stretch from the ancient past all the way to the distant future, I hope that I can experience more wonderful future encounters through the medium of noh.

(Fifth in a six-part series.)

Kongo Hisanori, a famous noh performer, is head of the Kongo School. In 1991 he was designated as an important intangible cultural asset.