

Last, but not Least

By Kongo Hisanori

While a junior high school student, my hobby was listening to classical music, and because I especially enjoyed opera I believed that I knew something about Western culture. But as the saying "seeing is believing" goes, when I began to travel overseas I realized that unless one actually visits a country and breathes the local air one cannot truly be knowledgeable about a place.

In addition to listening to music, my other hobby is tinkering with elaborate audio systems. Although Japanese products produce precise, clear sounds, few provide the feeling of spiritual rapture offered by Western systems. Japan's climate and natural features might be one reason for this phenomenon. Another could be the tendency of Japanese to do everything to perfection, and to accomplish this they think they must look within themselves, leading toward an introspective spiritual state. Because I have steeped myself completely in the world of noh, I am made aware of these characteristics when I travel abroad for performances and for that reason overseas tours are very important to me.

In the last issue I wrote about shows the Kongo company has performed in North America and Italy. This time I would like to discuss our performances in Spain and France.

The shows in Spain were held in the capital city of Madrid in 1985, the same year as the North American and Italian tours. We gave two days of *takigi noh* performances using a special stage in the Jardin de Cecilio Rodrigues in the Parque del Buen Retiro as part of the Festival de Otoño, Madrid's autumn international culture festival. Because this was the first noh performance in Spain and turned out to be a very popular event, we quickly had to increase the number of seats the second day to accommodate all those who wanted to attend.

The performances were held in a very beautiful garden, where, oddly enough, a number of peacocks were allowed to

roam free. I can still recall the scene of their flight into the branches of the tall trees surrounding the stage where they slept as the performance began at dusk. When the time came for the performance of *Hagoromo*, the peacocks had the semblance of phoenixes.

In between performances I was able to travel to the ancient capital city of Toledo which still retains the atmosphere of Spain during the Middle Ages. I was also able to see gypsies dance the flamenco at a Madrid ballroom. Legend has it that in ancient times gypsies came to settle in Spain from faraway India. Although I am not certain whether their Asian origins have anything to do with it, I thought it interesting that the stage jugged out into the midst of the audience, similar to a noh stage, and the dancers emphasized the balanced posture of their upper bodies, as noh positions do.

The performances in France were timed to coincide with the Paris celebrations of the 1989 bicentennial of the French Revolution. We traveled together with Kyoto's symphony orchestra (Kyoto has a sister-city agreement with Paris) and performed on the same stage. In addition to Paris we performed at the Orange Music Festival in the south

of France. Because the town was located at the northern edge of the Roman Empire, remains of a Roman era triumphal arch can still be seen today. The music festival is famous because it is staged in the remains of an outdoor amphitheater from this age. Even though this ancient stone amphitheater's ceiling is the blue sky, the acoustic effects are quite good and it struck me as strange that even the smallest sound would reach the entire audience.



Izutsu and Nonomiya (page 49) reflect the elegant simplicity and beauty of the typical noh drama.

This time no work, just play

I have subsequently experienced numerous overseas tours, but this past summer I was able to travel to Canada and the U.S. just for tourist purposes with my family, a recommendation from an acquaintance living in Canada. I had planned the trip for some time, so when I was finally able to take a week's vacation I immediately executed the plan. This was what you might call a long-awaited trip for us.

In Canada we visited Toronto and Niagara Falls and in the U.S. we went to Washington, D.C. and New York. With the exception of Washington, the other cities were the unforgettable locations where we had performed 10 years before on the Kongo company's first overseas tour. For me these were deeply memorable locations which I had sworn in my heart to definitely visit once more.

It was an early morning in mid-August when we left Japan which was sweltering through an unusually protracted, record-breaking heat wave, and flew straight to Washington. When I had visited several years earlier for a performance, it was during the middle of the April cherry blossom festival and the banks of the Potomac River were magnificently lined with cherry trees in full bloom. Alighting this time and going to the vicinity of the Washington Monument where we had previously performed noh, the lush, vivid greenery and wide open natural beauty touched my heart with a different kind of emotion.

Next we visited Niagara Falls and I was awed by the tremendous roar and the force of the spray. It was absolutely breathtaking. When we had visited 10 years previously in the midst of a bone-chilling cold snap in January, we were the only tourists curious enough to go to Niagara in the middle of a blizzard. The falls were frozen over, and the cold and solemn appearance made me think how terrible nature can be. This time, hearing the resounding boom of the falls and seeing them for the first time under the midsummer sun, the huge scale and grandeur overwhelmed me and I could not help thinking what a puny thing

human society was. Perhaps living in the city of Kyoto, which even in crowded Japan is like a cozy miniature garden, for many years especially strengthened that perception.

According to local stories, Niagara's falls were formed by a great earthquake long ago. In contrast to the image of waterfalls in Japan, it was as if a giant water demon had fallen from the sky. Overcome by feelings of respect for nature, I had the impression that humans are truly powerless in front of the mighty strength of natural forces. Looking at one waterfall and studying people's living and eating habits, I could see the extent of the differences between Canada and Japan and I once again had the feeling that this was subtly connected to each country's culture and character. Then again, even if the objective of noh—Japan's own ancient performing art—is ultimately an artistic feeling common to all countries, its method of expression is unique and particularly Japanese. So when giving overseas performances, I was extremely interested in how it would be received.

Leaving Toronto and visiting New York the next day I was struck by the changes which had occurred in the 10 years since my previous visit. The security situation had become worse and the whole city had become somewhat unsettled and soiled with filth. However, I can also say that the brightly shining Manhattan night skyline seen from aboard a boat on the Hudson River was the trip's climax and we were once again captured by New York's charms. As the ship drew closer to the Statue of Liberty, its beauty in the pale lights was more than enough to bring our trip this time to a close.

Even now after returning to Japan, if I



Nonomiya

quietly close my eyes Niagara Falls, Toronto's comfortable streets surrounded by greenery, the glittering New York night sky, and much more floats vividly before my eyes. These impressions and numerous memories have been firmly engraved in my heart. The wonder of each country that I have visited has stirred my soul, and while touched by individual cultures I felt more strongly the desire to provide greater numbers of people in other nations with a taste of noh. When my thoughts turn to true international cultural exchanges, the pope's words of welcome when he viewed noh, "cherish the differences between the cultures of East and West," have even more significance now and once again resound in my heart. 201

(Last of 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.