

# The Timeless Allure of the Stage

The appeal of the ancient stage arts of Noh and Kyogen lies in their traditional roots, and modern audiences can still experience their rich nuance and symbolic artistry.



Noh "ENMA" Kita Noh School. Photo by Hiroshi Ishida.

Like a shrine to minimalist theater design, the Noh stage hosts only an ancient pine tree painted on the backdrop, and no curtain separates the stage from the audience. This less-is-more design may appear too simple to theater fans more familiar with the lavish sets of opera and stage musicals, but it is in this empty space that the dramas of Noh and *Kyogen*, the oldest surviving Japanese performing arts, come to life.

Noh is a symbolic musical drama, combining three genres: a narrative *utai* chant using distinctive vocalization; slow, stylized *mai* dancing; and the *hayashi* ensemble of traditional instruments. It is often based on tragic tales from traditional literature featuring supernatural beings, and uses eye-catching costumes and masks. Noh attains the highest levels of artistic perfection, embodying what is expressed through the word *yugen* (profound and refined beauty)—an important concept of Japanese aesthetics.

Another form of theater called *Kyogen* is a form of

comic theater often performed in the intervals between Noh plays. In contrast to Noh, its central part is dialogue and laughter, and masks are seldom used. *Kyogen* stories are often based on events and situations from the everyday lives of the common people in feudal society, and tend to be realistic and easy to understand.

Both originated from *Sarugaku*, a popular style of entertainment since ancient times, and developed in the 14<sup>th</sup> century into what are essentially their present-day forms. Protected and controlled by the ruling Tokugawa shogunate during the Edo Period (1603–1868), Noh became even more ceremonial, as troupes preserved their established high standards by replicating every detail of the great masters' dances, from the proper standing positions to their sliding-foot movements. *Kyogen* was also codified into an established form and was further refined.

As the shogunate crumbled and modernization began in the 1860s, Noh and *Kyogen* lost support. Before long, however, the new government, which had learned

about the West's focus on traditional culture, decided to protect Japan's classical performing arts. Noh and *Kyogen* came to be called *Nohgaku*, and a new type of theater called *Nohgaku-do* was created especially for it. Though indoors, the stage retains its own roof.

Throughout history, Noh has had a tremendous influence on Kabuki and other art forms, both in Japan and overseas. For example, the 20<sup>th</sup> century English composer Benjamin Britten was inspired to compose his 1964 opera "Curlew River" based on the Japanese Noh play "Sumidagawa." Today, *Nohgaku* is highly acclaimed around the world and was added to a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage list in 2001.

Noh performances begin with the faint sound of the *nohkan* flute, while the audience sits with bated breath, eyes fixed on the hushed, empty stage. "There's no other place where one can enjoy such a feeling of tension," says Japanese artist Yasuko Hasumura, who has been a big fan of Noh for many years.

"I have seen groups of non-Japanese leaving a Noh



A foreign visitor tries on a Noh mask at an event organized by the Arts Council Tokyo.



performance in the middle of the performance," Hasumura recounts. "It's true that the introductory and middle parts are very slow and long. Perhaps the ponderous narrative during the temporary exit of the *shite* (main character) made them feel that the play would continue like that to the end. But what follows is different," Hasumura explains. "It's a shame that they left before the *shite* returned."

This is clearly the highlight. Wearing a sumptuous costume and an extraordinary mask, the main character nobly comes back to the stage and performs a special dance, as the *hayashi* musicians gradually pick up the tempo. The whistle of a *nohkan* flute grabs the audience's attention while the various drums, large and small, thunder out a rock music-like beat. As the tempo rises, it is as if the *shite*, the *hayashi* musicians and the *jiutai* chorus group are racing each other to the climax. "And everything echoes under the extreme tension on stage," Hasumura says.

In March, Arts Council Tokyo (Tokyo Metropolitan Foundation for History and Culture) organized a Noh event on the open lawns of a modern museum in central Tokyo, as an opportunity for more people to experience the traditional performing art. The program included Noh performances as well as workshops where visitors could enjoy playing the instruments and trying on the costumes and masks.

Some Noh theaters today provide subtitles, audio guides and other aids designed to help audience members keep up with the action on stage. The sonorous chanting of old Japanese-language scripts is hard to understand even for native speakers, so it may be helpful to read the synopsis prior to the performances.

Noh aficionados, however, say that visitors shouldn't worry too much about the depth of their knowledge. Audiences should give in to the "force" of Noh, believe in their feelings, and wrap themselves in the calm and the tension that can only be experienced—and enjoyed—at Noh theaters.