

JAPANESE DRAMA – Postclassical period

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Overview: The Medieval Age of Japanese Culture (1200-1600)

The gradual decline of the Heian court in the twelfth century corresponded with the rise of the warrior (*bushi*) clans and the dawn of a centuries-long feudal history. Medieval Japan was governed by two parallel political centers— the imperial center in Kyoto and a new warrior administration, the shogunate. The period was marked by the growing power of provincial warrior chiefs (*daimyō*) and their domains (*han*), which numbered well over two hundred. The dominance of the samurai class inspired a warrior code— *bushidō*— that extolled the virtues of dedication, loyalty, and honor. Variants of this ideology would have important ramifications in Japan's subsequent history and culture.

The samurai elites emulated the cultural sophistication and artistic dedication of the Kyoto aristocracy. And their embrace of the meditative discipline inspired by Zen Buddhism would generate a distinctive artistry marked by austerity and solemnity, and a mood of evanescence and ephemerality (*mujō*). As with the Heian era, the cultural legacy of Japan's medieval period has long had a privileged place in the nation's collective memory and is well represented in its trove of literary and artistic treasures.

Noh Drama and its Antecedents

Medieval Japanese culture represents the amalgamation of many centuries of literary and performative styles and genres, together with the profound and aesthetically-rich Buddhist meditative traditions. *Noh* drama can be said to representative the confluence of these influences and inspirations.

As with so much of Japan's great cultural legacy, elite patronage played a key role. The emergence of *Noh* drama is closely associated with one of the early Ashikaga shoguns— Yoshimitsu (1358-1408)— who emerged as an influential patron of the arts in late 14th-century Kyoto. Yoshimitsu is noteworthy for having sought out talented and culturally-sophisticated commoners, providing the wherewithal for their entrée into the elite ranks. Such an individual was the brilliant performer and playwright Zeami (1363-1443), who would go on to establish a new dramatic genre— *Noh*— which would become a fixed landmark on the Japanese cultural map.

Adapting established musical and dramatic conventions and incorporating a range of Buddhist themes, literary allusions, and a rich lyrical vocabulary, Zeami achieved an extraordinary syncretism in his plays for the *Noh* stage. His texts, which have long been considered literary classics in their own right, are performed verbatim, with no improvisatory embroidery. It is the actors, in conjunction with a chorus and musical accompaniment, who collectively breathe life into the words and create the other-worldly atmosphere that *Noh* has come to represent over the centuries.

Noh Staging and Performance Styles

The *Noh* stage is conspicuously spare and unadorned. The single— and singular— image of a pine tree serves as the conventional stage backdrop. The effect is that of a sacred, meditative space, appropriate for austere ritual and inspiring a deep engagement on the part of the audience. The language of the *Noh* text— with Zeami's work as the pinnacle— is difficult and highly allusive, requiring a high level of literary and cultural sophistication. In short, *Noh* is anything but popular theater, and it has long been considered an aristocratic entertainment. Indeed, its patronage was for centuries restricted to the elite classes, who were expected to have attained sufficient background in, and appreciation of, Japan's classical traditions and texts.

Noh performance is conspicuously non-mimetic; actors' movements are deliberate and highly stylized, conveying solemnity, deep significance, and lyrical depth. Actors share the stage with a chorus— seated

individuals who intone portions of the *Noh* text in a manner reminiscent of classical Greek theater. Indeed, the affinity of these two great theatrical traditions has long been noted and appreciated.

Additionally, *Noh* performance includes an important musical component— flute and drums, which generally accompany the various dances (*mai*) that are a fixture of the performance. *Noh* music and dance complement the narrative and recitative core of the play— the story being enacted on stage. Zeami's genius lay in the manner in which he selected key episodes and figures from the classical literary tradition and 'repurposed' them for the *Noh* stage. His two chief inspirations were the twin masterworks of Japanese fiction— the mid-Heian *Tale of Genji* (*Genjimonogatari*) and the early 13th-century *Tale of the Heike* (*Heike monogatari*). Additionally, Zeami composed plays inspired by Japan's canonical poets— legendary figures such as Narihira, Komachi, and Saigyô. Indeed, it can be argued that *Noh* drama is irreducibly lyrical in its language and staging, serving as a vehicle for the preservation and advancement of Japanese poetry as the bedrock of Japan's cultural heritage.

Up until modern times, *Noh* was almost exclusively a male performance genre, subject to elaborate conventions and role types. Harking back to Greek theater, the distinction between the lead and supporting roles is crucial. The *Noh* protagonist— the so-called *shite*— is a figure who appears in the first act as an 'ordinary' individual who is encountered by the supporting 'deuteragonist' figure, the so-called *waki*— typically a traveling priest who establishes the identity of the *shite* and elicits his or her story. In the second act of the play, the *shite* appears bearing a mask that signifies one's transformed identity as a ghostly figure, apparition, demon, or wandering spirit seeking healing and salvation. Here the *waki* figure typically serves in the role of exorcist or priestly healer, through whose agency the *shite* figure— and the play itself— achieves some closure.

Other aspects of *Noh* staging deserve mention. Notwithstanding the austere, spare ambience, the *shite* character is typically adorned in a strikingly ornate garment. Moreover, the *shite* generally employs a fan, in such a way as to enhance the dramatic aura. It is liberally employed in the play's dance segments. And the *shite*'s conspicuous mask— an exquisitely crafted object entrusted to artisans of the highest caliber— can be said to assume a life of its own. The distinctive styles of *Noh* dance, which have roots tracing back to elegant *gagaku* court performance of the 8th century, often dominate the performance. And the manner of textual recitation— *utai*— which is shared by *shite*, *waki*, and chorus, has long been a pursuit of serious amateur practitioners, for whom the language of *Noh*, appropriately intoned, possesses unique artistic value independent of the play's actual staging.

In a typical *Noh* performance, the two acts are separated by an intermission performance, called the *ai-kyôgen*. In contrast with the solemnity of the *Noh*, the *ai-kyôgen* in effect provides comic relief in the form of a prosaic rendering of the drama, with actors speaking in informal vernacular and 'behaving' in a more naturalistic manner. In sum, then, the *Noh* stage provides in microcosm the full spectrum of Japanese performative and narrative arts.

Categories, Repertoire, and Schools of *Noh* Performance

It was during the Tokugawa period that *Noh* drama crystallized into specific role categories and performance schools. The five categories— each with its corresponding masks, dance styles, and narrative conventions— are as follows: 1) god; 2) warrior; 3) woman; 4) mad woman; 5) demon. The entire *Noh* repertoire comprises some 250 plays— although many of them are rarely if ever performed. Again, each play is based upon some classical literary text, legendary figure, or spiritual value.

Four major schools of *Noh* emerged during the Tokugawa— and they are still active: 1) the Tokyo-based Kanze and Hosho schools; 2) The Kyoto-based Kongo school; 3) and the Nara-based Komparu school. The casual outsider would be hard-pressed to differentiate among performances of the different schools. Rather, this is the domain of arts connoisseurship— as with opera, classical music, and so forth.

Representative Plays

The following plays by Zeami can be said to epitomize the classical quality of *Noh* drama, which hinges upon the masterful retelling of earlier works and episodes in the life of legendary cultural figures.

- Atsumori** Based upon a famous episode from the *Tale of the Heike*, this play concerns the sad fate of Atsumori, a young Taira clan nobleman who was killed in battle by the Minamoto warrior, Kumagai. In the play, Kumagai appears as the Buddhist priest Rensho, intent upon praying for the spiritual repose of the man he had killed. (Tyler, 37-48)
- Izutsu** Considered by many to be Zeami's finest play, *Izutsu* (The Well-Cradle) is a deeply moving dramatization of the canonical 10th-century *Tales of Ise* (Isemonogatari). Incorporating *waka* poetry by the great Heian poet Narihira, the play is suffused with romantic longing and a wistful evocation of Heian courtly beauty and sentiment. (Tyler, 120-32)
- Nonomiya** One of many *Noh* plays that retell episodes drawn from the *Tale of Genji*, *Nonomiya* (The Wildwood Shrine) concerns the legend of Lady Rokujo, whose unquenchable desire for Genji's affections unleashed a vengeful spirit that cost the lives of her rivals. While recalling the novel's dramatic scenes, the drama ultimately seeks the spiritual reconciliation of the tormented Rokujo. (Tyler, 205-14)
- SekideraKomachi** One of several plays centering on the legendary figure of Ono no Komachi, the celebrated 9th-century poet known for her beauty and her passionate nature, *SekideraKomachi* presents an homage to the Japanese lyrical tradition and the 'Way of poetry.' Appearing as an old, forlorn woman, the *Komachishite* figure is animated in the process of recalling her youth and the poetry that epitomized it. (Tyler, 225-36)

The *Noh* Aesthetic

As a syncretic and classically-inspired Japanese cultural tradition, *Noh* drama incorporates elements of Heian courtly beauty (*miyabi*), Buddhist ritual and belief, and prized (albeit highly abstract) poetic values such as *yugen* (mystery and depth), *sabi* (imperfection and rusticity), and *mujo* (ephemerality). More to the point, the playwright Zeami produced a number of treatises on the art and craft of *Noh* performance. These center on the notion of *hana*— the 'flower' of sublime acting style and perfection of form.

One of the key aesthetic qualities of *Noh* concerns *jo-ha-kyu*, a term that refers to the conventionalized rhythm and pacing of the performance. Deriving from the ancient *gagaku* dance genre, *jo-ha-kyu* is said to govern the interaction of an actor's movements, the musical accompaniment, and the play's narrative flow. The language itself privileges the orthodox convention of five- and seven-syllable lines— the heartbeat, so to speak, of Japan's lyrical tradition.

Noh in the Modern Age

As with other time-honored Japanese arts, *Noh* drama has managed to survive— even thrive— in the modern world. Thanks to the vibrancy of its chief schools, *Noh* continues to be staged in the traditional manner. What is more, a National *Noh* Theater in Tokyo further ensures the continued viability of a performance art requiring decades of training and apprenticeship. It bears noting that Japan's public media outlet, NHK, regularly broadcasts *Noh* performances. A less rigid style of performance marks the many regional and local *Noh* societies, which welcome the participation of women and young people.

Among Western artists influenced by *Noh*, one can cite the noted British composer Benjamin Britten, whose *Curling River* (1964) is an adaptation of the play *Sumidagawa*. And modern Japanese writers such as Yukio Mishima have written plays that retell *Noh* in a contemporary idiom and staging. As might be expected, versions and variants of *Noh* have found their way into Japanese pop culture, in the form of

manga, *anime*, and assorted 'Noh-esque' products on the consumer marketplace. Finally, one can find hundreds and hundreds of *Noh* performances— long and short— on You Tube.

Ultimately, *Noh* drama can perhaps best be understood as an iconic signifier of 'traditional Japan,' on a par with geisha, samurai, and kabuki. It surely ranks among the most distinguished of Japan's virtuoso arts.

Readings

Hare, Thomas, *Zeami's Style: The Noh Plays of ZeamiMotokiyo* (Stanford, 1986)

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_____, *Seeds in the Heart: Japanese Literature From Earliest Times to the Late Sixteenth Century* (Columbia, 1999)

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Shirane, Haruo (ed.), *Traditional Japanese Literature: An Anthology, Beginnings to 1600* (Columbia, 2007)

Tyler, Royall, *Japanese Nô Dramas* (Penguin, 1992)

Varley, H. Paul, *Japanese Culture*, 4th edition (Hawai'i, 2000)

Waley, Arthur, *The Noh Plays of Japan* (Tuttle, 2009)

Discussion Questions and Topics

As a classical performance art, *Noh* can be regarded as irrelevant— even intimidating— to those fascinated by Japan but lacking the sufficient background or cultural sensitivity. What would be a good counter-argument here? In what sense can 'esoteric' products such as *Noh* be precisely that which has the power to attract one's interest? How should one go about becoming more knowledgeable and appreciative?

What seem to be the most accessible aspects of *Noh*? What seems most alien— and alienating? Keeping in mind that *Noh* is ultimately a performance art, allow yourself to take in as many performances as possible. Again, You Tube offers them in abundance.

What does it mean to identify *Noh* drama as a syncretic art? How does it compare, say, with classical Greek drama? Or is there an East/ West divide that cannot be breached? How is one to gain sufficient understanding of Japanese poetry, which is a chief inspiration for *Noh*? Or, rather, should one not be free to glean whatever is appealing about this fascinatingly complex cultural product?

Images (Source for all: Wikimedia commons)



Contemporary *Noh* theater, with its 'shrine-like' ambience. Note the *hashigakari* walkway to the left, which provides stage access to the actors.



Stylized *Noh* stage, with robed *shite* actor in foreground, chorus on the right, and musicians at the rear.



Noh performance on the stage at Itsukushima Shrine, on the Inland Sea near Hiroshima



Three images of the same Noh mask, demonstrating the range of emotional expressiveness that a masked actor can achieve