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Ballet Review



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Lady Aoi at Japan Society in New York City

On the cover: Mark Morris' *Festival Dance*.

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Cover photo by Tom Brazil: Mark Morris' *Festival Dance*.

Lady Aoi in New York

Joseph Houseal

When Ulysses S. Grant visited Japan in 1879, he was one of the first Westerners to see a noh play. According to native lore, Grant said to the emperor after the performance, “I don’t know what it is, and I don’t understand it, but you must preserve it.” Preserved it was, and early this spring Kashu-juku Noh Theater of Kyoto presented three performances at the Japan Society in New York as part of a five-city tour that commemorated the 150th anniversary of the first Japanese trade delegation to the United States in 1860.

Commodore Perry’s missions to Japan in the

1850s, which helped to destabilize the Tokugawa Shogunate and led to the Meiji Restoration of the Imperial line in 1868, opened the Japanese islands to the world. An unintended consequence proved to be the undermining of traditional practices in a rush to embrace little-understood Western ones. Perhaps the most poignant photograph in Ernest Fenolosa’s monumental *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art* (1912) shows some wooden sculptures dating as far back as eleventh-century Heian times thrown into a bin for firewood.

Motivated by such cultural savageries, Fenolosa, a New Englander, began to catalogue the artistic contents of Buddhist temples throughout the length and breadth of Japan, and went on to form the East Asian collections for Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts. His 1882 essay, “An Explanation of the Truth of Art,” was a watershed. It initiated the con-



Aoi No Ue: Katayama Shingo (Lady Rokujo’s Spirit), Arimatsu Ryoichi (Official), Tamoi Hiromichi (Sorceress),

struction of the Tokyo Fine Arts Museum and the registry of what the Japanese came to call National Treasures. It is no exaggeration to claim that Fenollosa saved Japanese art for the Japanese.

Fenollosa also recognized the value of noh and in a quandary about how to assist in its survival determined to study under Umewaka Minoru (1828-1909), one of the last three practicing noh masters of the day. His was the only stage that remained open for performances at a time when noh families were left without a means of support or a position in society. Umewaka's descendants tell that notes left by their great-great-grandfather mention Fenollosa's kindness, his understanding of noh, and the fact that he didn't have a very good singing voice and couldn't dance.

Fenollosa's book, *Noh, or Accomplishment*, appeared in 1916. Ezra Pound had edited Fenol-

losa's manuscripts after his death in 1908 and himself embarked on several translations of noh plays. Fatefully, Pound befriended William Butler Yeats, and Yeats went on to be profoundly influenced by noh, even in the limited way he could experience it. His intuitions succeeded where Fenollosa's first-hand knowledge had not, by bringing notoriety and an appreciation for the literature of noh to the West.

It was hard to fathom a six-page play lasting more than two hours in performance, and Yeats believed in part that noh was intentionally obscure. So he made his own modern "noh," *Four Plays for Dancers* (1921), inscrutable indeed. Also in 1921, the great Asianist Arthur Waley, whose earliest poetry had been championed by Pound, produced a volume of noh translations that stands by the sheer beauty and spiritual insight the texts convey.



with musicians – Kawamura Masaru, Narita Tatsushi, Sako Yasuhiro – and chorus members. (Photo: Costas)

In 1925, during Denishawn's Asian tour, Ted Shawn made films in Tokyo of noh plays. They still exist and are among the very first moving pictures of noh. During the occupation of Japan after WW II, noh became indebted once again to an American, an unheralded army major, whose job it was to identify and censor Japanese art forms that exalted warfare, deification of the emperor, or medieval society, all of which, of course, noh does. He concluded that noh was harmless, citing how sedate and harmonious the audiences were. Kabuki, by contrast, was banned until 1947.

In New York, Kashu-juku's performance of the noh masterpiece *Aoi No Ue* (*Lady Aoi*) was a



Aoi No Ue: Arimatsu Ryoichi. (Photo: Costas)

lesson in dramaturgical essentialism. *Aoi No Ue* is a famous, even overperformed, work. By a wide margin, it has been presented abroad more than any other noh play. It would be as if the Royal Shakespeare Company toured overseas with only *Romeo and Juliet* believing that foreigners would be unable to comprehend anything else. I hope for the great day when noh troupes and American presenters

begin to mine the repertory of the more than three hundred extant plays and show more of noh's diversity to Western audiences.

However, to those who have never seen *Romeo and Juliet*, or who can never get enough of it, it is, in fact a very great play and a quintessential expression of Western culture. *Aoi No Ue* is a very great play, taken from a very great book (*Tale of Genji*), and a quintessential expression of Japan. *Aoi No Ue* is also considered by the Japanese to be particularly entertaining, and perhaps this somewhat justifies its choice.

Noh plays are classified into five categories: God plays, warrior plays, woman plays, variety plays, and demon plays. *Aoi No Ue* is in the fourth category, a variety play, which possesses characteristics of the supernatural, a crazed woman, a spirit possession with its subsequent exorcism, and a demon.

Noh requires a protagonist called a *shite*, pronounced "shee-tay," who sometimes has a sidekick called a *shite-tsure*. Noh also has a secondary performer, called a *waki*, who names the place and converses with the *shite*. He in turn sometimes has a sidekick called a *waki-tsure*. Then there are three musicians, sometimes four, and a chanting chorus that completes the all-male cast.

Another feature of a noh performance is *kyogen*, comic interludes separating the intense and tragic noh plays or scenes. *Kyogen* is a separate repertory with performers who specialize in farce. *Kyogen* actors also sometimes portray mundane

characters in the noh plays themselves. *Aoi No Ue* had it all: a protagonist and sidekick, a secondary actor and sidekick, a *kyogen*, a flute player and three drummers, and a six-man chorus.

Aoi No Ue's plot is simple, but twisted. Prince Genji's child-bride, Lady Aoi, is pregnant but her spirit is afflicted, seemingly possessed. A sorceress is called in to divine if Aoi's soul-



Aoi No Ue: Katayama Shingo. (Photo: Costas)

tormentor is living or dead. She determines that the tormentor is none other than the spirit of Lady Rokujo, a lover spurned by Genji, who was destroyed by his rejection and is consumed with jealous rage.

Next a common noh device is used: A priest is summoned to call out the demon and cast away obstacles to enlightenment. The priest prays with fervent belief in the power of the sacred Buddhist scriptures. In the middle of his prayer, the spirit of Lady Rokujo returns, this time as a ghastly horned demon. The play's black-magic story culminates in a dance: spiritual warfare between the demon and the priest. The priest wins, the demon realizes its errors, and its soul is released to enlightenment.

One of the great pleasures of *Aoi No Ue* is its use of three different masks: an anguished middle-aged woman's mask for the living spirit of Lady Rokujo, one for the sorceress, and one for the demon. The program notes at the Japan Society called the performance faces of noh's actors and these masks for the women

"expressionless." This is wrong. The masks, an art form in themselves, catch and focus the light falling on them so that they seem to portray many emotions. The expression is always the same and always different.

Lady Aoi never appears at all. She is represented by a kimono laid flat on the floor at the front of the stage. In truth, even when noh actors portray living people, and not ghosts as is common, the real location of every play is the realm of the spirit, and the story told is of the anguish of a soul seeking enlightenment.

Zeami (1363-1443) was the son of Kanami, a great performer and author of the proto-noh plays called Sarugaku. (Their names are posthumous honorifics – the suffix "ami" an appellation for Amida Buddha – and pronounced "zay-ami" and "kan-ami," respectively.) As an eight-year-old child, Zeami, then called by his birth name, Fujiwaka, was taken to the side of the seventeen-year-old Shogun Yoshimitsu, who was deeply moved by his beauty as a boy and as a performer. Yoshimitsu introduced



Aoi No Ue: Katayama Shingo (Demon), Hara Masaru (Priest). (Photo: Costas)

Fujiwaka to the most refined practices in art and religion during the Muromachi period, which was one of the most beautiful and sophisticated in Japanese history.

Zeami, noh's great creator, performer, and theorist, used these refinements to transform noh into the form we see today. His early fifteenth-century writings on the philosophy and theory of performance, intended as secret teachings to guide his descendents were lost, only to be rediscovered in 1908 and made public the next year. Along with other discoveries, they were subsequently edited into a definitive edition in 1940. Kashu-juku or Studio of Kashu, was named for *Kashu*, the preliminary version of Zeami's great book *Kakyo*. This is meant to suggest that in the theater an artist is always a work in progress.

The performers we saw are members of some of the most famous and prestigious noh

families in Kyoto, particularly those of the Kanze School, founded by Zeami himself. Kyoto noh is distinct from other forms, not only in the pedigree of the families' traditions, but for the nuance of the performing style. Even amid this, the Katayama family is known for its orthodox, almost archaic, aesthetic. The scion of the family and founder of Kashu-juku, Katayama Shingo, performed the heart-breaking double role of the spirit of Lady Rokujo and her demon in the purest classical style. For all the demon's ferocity, it is finally pathetic, deserving of compassion. Joining Katayama were offspring of other of Kyoto's renowned noh families: Oe, Kawamura, Ume-waka, Mikata.

The New York program opened with an uncostumed *mai-bayashi* (dance and music) from *Yashima*, a play that recounts a sea battle, famous in Japanese history, between the

Taira and Minamoto clans in the twelfth century. It is instructive to see these dances as an excerpt, dressed simply in a plain kimono and *hakama* and without a mask. The movement is

clearer, and the dramatic scene is presented not as furious drama, but rather as a split in the psyche.

The protagonist becomes silent as he suc-



Mai-bayashi from *Yashima*: Umewaka Naoyoshi. (Photo: Costas)



Boshihari: Shigeyama Ippei and Shigeyama Doji. (Photo: Costas)

cumbs to Fate. When he starts his stately dance, the chorus begins to speak in the first person the thoughts of the main actor, as well as a poetic description of the battle and its deaths. Zeami believed noh should always be beautiful no matter the subject, even war and killing. We also can see the literary and martial story-telling roots of noh derived from an earlier form called *kowaka*, which, like noh in later times, was often performed for warriors on the eve of battle.

Following the *mai-bayashi*, three heirs of kyogen actor and Living National Treasure Shigeyama Sennojo performed the comic piece *Boshihari (Tied to a Pole)*, in which two bound servants contrive, despite their circumstances, to steal their master's sake.

The families involved in the Japan Society's evening of noh and kyogen include several Living National Treasures and a number of the performers themselves have the odd but noteworthy distinction of having been designated by the Japanese government as Important Intangible Cultural Assets, which is often a way station en route to later status as a Living National Treasure.

None of this matters, however, if the performance doesn't work. What makes it work or not can be measured by one of Zeami's central concepts: *hana* (literally "flower"). This idea has been characterized as "understated elegance" or even "glamour" for its aloof and hard-to-define but undeniable elan.

In fact, noh might best be compared to jazz. Even when Ella Fitzgerald and Count Basie were performing together, *hana* didn't necessarily. When does a flower blossom? When all the elements conspire together perfectly, voilà!, a miracle, and the flower opens. The attentiveness of the audience is of absolute

importance and many other factors also come into play.

One of these is the perfection of "holes" in the performance rhythm. Although the flute and drums seem like they are playing the most bizarre music, it is in fact, quite straightforward, and in 8 counts – but with holes. To offer a rudimentary example: If one drum strikes on counts of 1, 2, 5, and 7, the other might strike on 8, 4, 6, and 7, which means that both of them will sound on 7.

Therefore, the ensemble of musicians and actors wait before coming together on 7. This causes a time dilation by altering the regular 8-beat count into a variable flow in time. The wait can lead to apprehensive, void-filled silences, broken only by a shamanic cry and the single, timed strikings of the drums. In noh, a performance is judged by the silence it produces.

At the Japan Society there was utter silence in the house. As *Aoi No Ue* ended, no one in the audience wanted to break the spell with applause when, with characteristically Japanese precision, the actors, musicians, and chorus left the stage one at a time.

As I looked over the printed program before the performance started, I recognized many familiar family names from my years in Kyoto, but the performers listed were unknown to me. Then I read that one of them, Shigeyama Doji, had made his stage debut at age three, and it struck me: I saw that performance. This night I would be seeing not old friends but their sons and grandsons.

There is something thrilling about a culture that produces masters as it raises generation after generation to maturity. May this strength of character and tradition continue to serve Japan well.