



Noh mask of Atsumori, Edo period (seventeenth–eighteenth century).
Source: *Christie's* at <http://tinyurl.com/zlrmqvw>.

Special Segment on Japanese Noh Theater

Editor's Introduction: The following three essays, written by a theater professor and two historians who teach in liberal arts institutions, exemplify rich interdisciplinary content and pedagogy. Copies of syllabi for the courses described in this article appear in the online supplements for this issue.

Cutting-Edge Samurai Theater *Noh Then, Noh Now, Noh Tomorrow*

By Matthew R. Dubroff

Noh is the sung, danced, masked dramatic form of Japan. The performers depict stories where the *shite*, the main masked actor, interacts with the *waki*, a side actor, and the *kyogen*, an interlude performer. A Noh stage is a roofed pavilion (even indoors) that has an entry bridgeway and a back wall with a painted pine tree. The orchestra consists of two or three drummers and a flute player at the back of the stage in full view during performance, along with an eight-member chorus that sits to the side. Noh plays are derived from Japan's classic literature and often feature the *shite* as the ghost of a famous warrior or spurned lover returning to a battle site or the location of a love affair. Actors' movements and vocalizations are highly stylized. While some narrative sections lack much physical action, many plays culminate with dance sequences where the *shite* reexperiences a peak emotional moment of their character's life.

Noh theater was developed by Kanami Kiyotsugu (1333–1384) in fourteenth-century Japan. Amidst a variety of other performance styles, it gained in popularity to the point that the shogun Ashikaga Yoshimitsu (1358–1408) called for a command performance. The event was successful for Noh, as well as Kanami's son, Zeami Motokiyo (1363–1443), who performed there. Zeami caught the attention of the shogun and became his close acquaintance. From this point, Zeami continued to perform while enjoying all the benefits of court life, including a formal education. When Kanami passed, Zeami took over the troupe and recreated his father's Noh theater, utilizing his refined court sensibilities. What he developed became the most popular theater in and out of the court in his lifetime. He also wrote numerous theoretical treatises to ensure that his art would continue after his time. He was highly successful. Through generations and various internal and external challenges to its existence, Noh has been passed down from master performer to student, unbroken and significantly unchanged for seven centuries.

Currently, there are approximately 1,000 Noh professionals performing 250 plays in the classic Japanese repertoire. Weekly and monthly performances are exciting, one-time-only events because of the combination of performers and plays. As a result, Noh's popularity has extended beyond Japan, and many non-Japanese appreciate, study, and even train in Noh. Formed in 2000, Theater Nohgaku is a group of highly trained, non-Japanese performers dedicated to performing classic and new Noh in Japanese and English. The following essays explore how Noh's rich history and its wealth of performance traditions are a wonderful teaching resource across a range of academic disciplines. Several useful texts, websites, and videos are also noted.

Teaching About Noh

Inspiring students about Noh theater presents many challenges. Archaic language, otherworldly music, and slow pacing are anathema to many sensibilities of contemporary entertainment. However, the samurai's theater is a practical, exciting pedagogical tool. This article will show how Noh's aesthetics derive from a "samurai sensibility" and how teachers with little training can lead worthwhile investigations.

A First Play

The Noh play *Atsumori* and its plot and stage conventions make it an excellent choice to working with Noh in the classroom. *Atsumori* is a frequently performed play in the Noh repertoire and is a favorite of performers and audiences. The setting is the site of the battle of Ichinotani immortalized in *The Tale of The Heike*, the story of a civil war (Genpei War, 1180–1185) between the Taira and Minamoto clans. Years after the battle, one of the victorious warriors, Kumagae no Jirō, now a priest, has changed his name to Renshō. During the battle, he killed the young warrior Atsumori but afterward felt remorseful, gave up his swords, and turned to prayer. Returning to the site, he hears flute music and meets some grass cutters on their way home from their labors, singing songs of their

harsh lives. They discuss the elegance of the music being played by people of such low social status. The flute player lingers, asks Renshō to pray for him, and then suddenly disappears. During an interlude, a local villager meets Renshō and recounts the full story of Atsumori's death. Realizing who Renshō is, the villager encourages his prayers. The ghost of Atsumori returns in his full battle outfit and confronts Renshō; recounts the Heike's fall; and explain how, sensing their imminent demise before the battle, they celebrated and young Atsumori played the flute. The ghost dances as he remembers that night and reenacts his fight with Kumagae. As he does, he nearly attacks Renshō, but ultimately hears Renshō's prayers and vanishes with the wish that the two will meet and be friends on the same lotus in the afterlife.

Structure

One component present in this summary is the concept of *jo-ha-kyū*. Zeami, the main creator of Noh, used this aesthetic from Chinese court poetry in all aspects of his theater. As a rhythm—*jo* is slow, *ha* is gaining speed, and *kyū* is rapid acceleration to an abrupt stop—it can be clapped as a means of connecting to a concrete experience for students. Beyond rhythm, *jo-ha-kyū* also governs the plot's structure. The *jo* is the introduction of the different characters. The *ha* has three subdivisions of *jo-ha-kyū*. When the characters meet, there is a buildup of dramatic interest, or the *jo* part of the *ha*; the questioning back and forth is the *ha* of the *ha*; and, finally, the request for prayers and the disappearance of the grass cutters is the *kyū* of the *ha*. The second half of the play is considered the *kyū*, with more action, including dances and the near-attack upon Renshō. Suddenly, the play draws to a close with a wish for friendship in eternal rebirth.

Comparing *jo-ha-kyū* to Aristotle's notion of the plot structure—exposition-inciting incident-conflict-climax-resolution—there is the idea of an abbreviated resolution. Many, but not all, Noh plays follow this progression. There are

five main genres of Noh plays typically considered in the following order: god, warrior, woman, miscellaneous, and demon. While *Atsumori* is a warrior play, frequently the other genres of plays also have a wandering priest meeting a mysterious person who turns out to be a spirit/god/demon of some significance to that specific locality. Ultimately, prayers appease the supernatural force.

Connecting to the samurai, jo-ha-kyū exists within the martial arts. The art of *iaidō*, “sword drawing,” is dominated by the rhythm. In a preparatory position, the warrior contemplates his plan. The sword is drawn, steps taken, and the blade flashes out to block and attack. Suddenly, the blade is returned to the scabbard and the samurai reassumes his starting position.

Noh plays are composed of dramatic units called *shōdan*, “small steps,” that follow the jo-ha-kyū structure. They are various songs, dances, or dramatic components (self-introduction, conversation, etc.). For a playwriting assignment when smaller units are used, the challenge of crafting a full play is lessened.

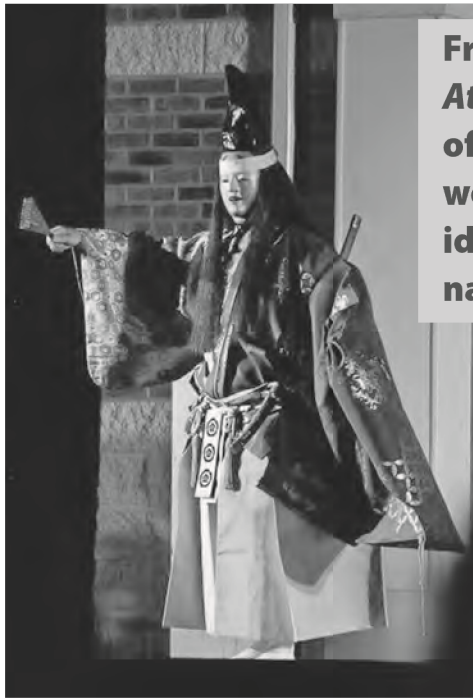
Thematic Analysis

Jo-ha-kyū is the engine that drives Noh toward its aesthetic goal—an expression of *yūgen*, “dark, mysterious beauty.” While not all plays register this sentiment, the feeling of the dark mystery of life pervades warrior Noh. In contrast, much of Western drama focuses on an experience of katharsis, or emotional release for its audiences.

Aristotle’s katharsis is an audience’s experience of relief that occurs typically near the climactic moment of a performance when, for example, lovers are reunited or villains are caught or punished. This has remained one of the dominant goals of entertainment for centuries. *Yūgen*, on the other hand, does not provide this sensation, but rather creates an atmosphere of deep empathy between playwright, performer, and audience. The difference between katharsis and *yūgen* highlights a sharp distinction between Japanese cultural values and those of the West.

In the classroom, connecting to the idea of samurai’s life-and-death struggles, unfortunately, continues to have a strong resonance with our time. While not as direct as a sword fight, the reality of terrorist attacks and IEDs is alive in students. Many warrior plays come from *The Tale of the Heike*, the civil war epic of Japan. The Civil War of the US is a ripe area of exploration for stories that would make for wonderful American Noh.

Themes of life and death are present in *Atsumori*’s main characters, who also cover the spectrum from friend to enemy. As a flute player, Atsumori embodies the concept of *bunbu*, the Japanese marriage of high culture and the warrior arts. From a Buddhist perspective, *Atsumori* captures the sense of attachment to things of this



Gary Mathews as nochi-shite, “Atsumori.” Photo: Bill Martinak.
Source: Theater Nohgaku blog at <http://tinyurl.com/zysgedj>.

From a Buddhist perspective, *Atsumori* captures the sense of attachment to things of this world and contrasts it with the idea of *aware*, “the fleeting nature of life.”

world and contrasts it with the idea of *aware*, “the fleeting nature of life.” The play presents a tension that embraces an unresolved sensibility. Western theater, with its reference back to Aristotle, calls for a solid resolution. Student playwrights feel freed when told it is not their job to solve the problems their plays present.

Noh utilizes theatrically viable techniques, including characters in disguise, ghosts, songs, and dances. *Atsumori* hits its dramatic peak at the reenactment of Atsumori’s death, culminating in violence between enemies and a hope for future world friendship. Despite an exotic quality, the totality of these factors makes for good theater.

Physical Techniques

With some preparation, an untrained teacher can provide discussion topics, as well as some fundamentals of Noh movement and voice. Noh actors’ skills function as components of creative student work and as an exploration of Noh’s relationship to the samurai.

Kata is a term meaning “pattern” or “form,” and Japanese arts are frequently composed of sequences and arrangements of kata. Noh’s kata is its body language and embraces a range of footwork, arm gestures, and head turns. Before any complex movements can occur, there is a base position from which all other activities begin and return.

Kamae is Noh’s basic stance—heels together, feet splayed, leaning forward from the ankles, torso upright, arms forward, elbows out, wrists in, and hands clasped with three fingers flat and the thumb and pointer slightly pinched. This is

not a natural or comfortable position. The fundamental movements of Noh do not appear to be difficult, but when students attempt them, they realize that there is much happening beneath the surface.

As with *Atsumori*’s themes, *kamae* is an embodiment of oppositions. Effort is needed to sustain this stance and requires full engagement. This might be a goal of Western acting techniques, but for Noh, it is primary. Noh lends itself to a total fictionalization of the actor and performance. While it was likely not the original intent, Noh has a postmodern feel to it by embracing the fictional experience of theater.

The first movement of Noh involves walking. *Suriashi*, or “sliding feet,” is a process whereby from a *kamae* stance, knees are bent and one foot slides forward. When that foot is fully forward, it is levered up flat from the heel and allowed to return to the ground. The back foot is brought forward, and this process is repeated in alternation until both feet come together and the legs are straightened to return to *kamae*. The goal is a progression with no extraneous movement. The foot flap at the end of each step is decorative, engaging the performer so that walking is not merely shuffling.

Connecting this mode of walking to the lives of the samurai relates to their clothing. Long robes and *tabi* (split-toed foot socks) call for considered movement due to the risk of tripping. With shoes removed indoors, there is the convenience of sliding socked feet. Specifically to the samurai, basic stances and footwork are fundamental techniques in many martial arts. For Noh, this movement suggests a ghostlike presence. Walking in this manner unites an ensemble in movement and gives a production an overall grounded atmosphere. Dealing with weighty subject matter, this stylization functions well. Western drama relies quite heavily on realism, but there is room from the Greeks to Samuel Beckett and beyond for some coordinated stylization.

The kata of Noh can be classified according to jo-ha-kyū. Jo kata look and function like what they are—if a performer picks something up, they actually do that. Ha kata are symbolic gestures—crying is shown with a raised hand held up in front of the mask and slightly bowed head.



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This stylized movement will not look like the crying that one normally sees. Finally, *kyū* kata are abstract gestures that are opportunities for showing off costumes and fans, while others are pure movement. One kata of this level is *shikake*. Simply described, *shikake* is walking forward, raising the left hand in front of the belly and the fan in front of the face, with both hands centrally aligned. There are more complex kata, but *shikake* is straightforward and occurs multiple times in many plays.

The notion of set movements connects to many martial arts. In contemporary karate competitions, there are sections devoted to kata performance. The samurai watching Noh would find the gestures evocative of their own training.

The prevalence of realism in modern acting leaves many Western actors unprepared to deal with any extra real, poetic material. Kata guide an actor's first steps into a world of activity beyond their normal behavior. Similarly, even though real-action kata are functionally direct in their expression, there is still a degree of stylization. Noh movements generally have a quality of economy that is a great guide for inventing new kata for Western actors.

Vocal Techniques

Voice work in Noh is challenging to address; however, there are valuable connections to be drawn and explorations to conduct. Three modes of Noh voice are *kotoba*, "words"; *wagin*, "melodic"; and *gōgin*, "dynamic"; with each utilizing a specific timbre. Some exposure and training are needed to effectively teach Noh singing techniques. However, there are vocal patterns worth considering in their relationship to the samurai, and there are contemporary applications.

Kotoba uses a phrase split in half, a buildup to the middle, a pitch spike on the second syllable after that, and a descending pitch to the end. The only notation is a comma indicating the midpoint and a period.

Wagin is written with text and musical notation. The notation includes an indication of the pitches in three registers, and the shape of the pitch shifts.

Gōgin is a mode that has the same appearance on the page as *wagin*, except for one kanji to indicate *tsuyoi*, "strong" (as opposed to *wagin's* *yowai*, "weak"). The effect, however, is radically different; and while there are pitch modulations,



Atsumori. Source: Trad Japan Nipponet website at <http://tinyurl.com/znd5cw6>.

the priority is on energy, as opposed to the shifts of *wagin*.

These modes all have distinct qualities, and the connections to the samurai are somewhat tenuous. *Kotoba* might be an indication of battle cries, with emphasis related to the spiked syllable. *Wagin* might connect to the blind *biwa* singers who sang the war odes that became the *Heike Monogatari*. Finally, *gōgin* evokes Buddhist chanting.

Vocal timbre takes years to develop, but vocal energy and shape are appreciable and functional immediately. Vocal energy of Noh is sustained without any drifting off at the end of sentences. There are useful distinctions between the modes regarding shape. *Kotoba* has a pattern and can be transferred into English fairly readily with some discussion regarding emphasis. A way of representing how *kotoba* sounds in Japanese might appear like this:

*Kyo no shura no, **kata**ki wa ta so!*

Or, a different sentence in English:

*I am starting to think, it **was** you who did it.*

In both sentences, there is a buildup of intensity and pitch to the comma, a slight pause at the comma, and then a spike of pitch and intensity on the second syllable (underlined in bold) after the comma. From there, the sentence pushes down to the final punctuation.

Wagin is more difficult to describe and perform, as it demands a musician's sensibilities.

A challenge is to use only three or so notes and then navigate the shifts between them. Finally, *gōgin* is a mix between energy and shape. This is considered the most difficult vocal quality in Noh, and it is best to focus on the force behind the voice. An image used is a car kept in low gear. With any of these modes, the Western actor must create the shape and quality that convey their text's sense and emotion.

Conclusion

These fundamental aspects of plot, movement, and voice all relate to the samurai who supported, appreciated, and performed Noh through various phases of their long history. There are also practical ideas for exploration by Western theater practitioners. Noh is a multifaceted art with many opportunities for research. It is also a practical performance style that can be a starting point for journeys into theater that, like life, can be simultaneously dark, mysterious, and beautiful. ■

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USEFUL WEBSITES

Comprehensive General Information: <http://tinyurl.com/hjv5xar>.

The Theater Nohgaku main page: <http://tinyurl.com/jve79ef>.

Full performance of *Atsumori*: <http://tinyurl.com/z5t8w98>.

Full performances of *Kokaji* and *Kuzu*: <http://tinyurl.com/goy3p44>.

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