

# Familiar Story, *Macbeth*—New Context, Noh and Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood*

By Minae Yamamoto Savas

This article explores the effects of Akira Kurosawa's adoption of Noh conventions through an in-depth analysis of *Kumonosu-jō* (*Castle of the Spider's Web*, also known as *Throne of Blood*, ©1957 Toho Company), an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Traditional Japanese Noh theater is an enigma to many students in other countries. Discussing the influence of Noh on a Japanese film based on a well-known Western drama makes a connection with a culture that is unfamiliar to students who have never been to Japan. Finding a familiar story within a new context not only fosters and strengthens students' intellectual ability, but it also provides them with new insights into their perspectives. This process further challenges students to examine their preconceived notions about a culture that is different from their own. What stereotypical qualities do they often assign to people in Japan? Why do they make these assumptions? Challenging students' assumptions about a "foreign" culture will help them think reflectively about complex and diverse social identities in their own culture as well as others. Learning about a foreign culture thus broadens students' horizons and helps them realize that other ways of living and communicating are just as real as their own.

Traditional Japanese theater has a performance tradition spanning several hundred years. Japanese Noh drama has a particularly rich theatrical and aesthetic heritage that offers a doorway into Japanese history and culture. Despite the fact that Noh theater presents the richness of Japanese cultural heritage, there is a lack of extensive dialogue in Noh performance. Japanese Noh plays unify and harmonize mime and dramatic elements with dance, chant, and an orchestra composed of a flute and three drums. The other critical elements in the performance of a Noh play are masks, robes, the mode of production, and the unique stage space in relation to the audience. These elements are intricately woven together into a harmonious whole, creating a unified aesthetic experience.

Just as Shakespeare looked back on European history and myths, Noh plays draw on episodes from older texts, as well as folktales featuring historical or legendary figures. Many of the Noh plays written and revised in the medieval period are still performed today after going through changes reflective of shifts in patronage, audiences, and social climate.

The ideal of simplicity in the art of Noh and other art forms, such as flower-arranging; tea ceremony; landscape gardening; and monochromatic painting, which flourished in the Muromachi period (1336–1573), is closely associated with the aesthetic concepts of ideal beauty. The stark simplicity in Noh was, and is, a means to express the refined beauty and admiration for traditional aristocratic culture. Such refined beauty was particularly valued during the Muromachi period, the seminal period for Japanese Noh theater that is celebrated as a watershed epoch for Japanese culture. The study of Noh theater as a significant living art not only gives us an insight into the culture of medieval Japan but also helps us focus on certain cultural continuities bridging traditional and contemporary Japanese societies.

## Akira Kurosawa's Adaptation of *Macbeth* in His Postwar Japanese Film

The influence of Noh on the films of Akira Kurosawa (1910–1998) is particularly evident in *Throne of Blood*. Basing his work on Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Kurosawa set this film in Japan's middle ages (1185–1600), a period when samurai warriors first rose up to challenge the authority of the established court. Although the early medieval period marks the firmly established governance by the shoguns—hereditary commanders of a military force—the late middle ages saw more frequent incidents of the overthrow of a superior by his



Figure 1. A Noh performance within the film. (*Throne of Blood*, ©1957 Toho Company)

Washizu (*Macbeth*).  
(*Throne of Blood*, ©1957 Toho Company)

own retainers. This significant historical and social pattern of late medieval Japan coincides with the phenomenon presented in *Macbeth*. By transplanting *Macbeth* to medieval Japan and incorporating Noh elements in *Throne of Blood*, Kurosawa enhances the theme of *Macbeth*. In *Throne of Blood*, Kurosawa allows his audience to scrutinize human desire for power, cruelty, and weakness that yields to temptation. *Throne of Blood* begins with the following song:

*Look upon the ruins  
Of the castle of delusion  
Haunted only now  
By the spirits  
Of those who perished  
A scene of carnage  
Born of consuming desire  
Never changing  
Now and throughout eternity.<sup>1</sup>*

This introductory chant gives a vivid description of the emptiness of General Washizu's (Macbeth) ambition and desire for power. After defeating rebel armies, Generals Washizu and Miki (Banquo) are lost in the dense Cobweb Forest on their way to the fortress of Lord Tsuzuki (King Duncan). In the forest, they meet a ghostly prophet. As she predicts, Washizu and Miki are both immediately promoted by Lord Tsuzuki. The prophecy further deludes Washizu into believing that he will ascend to the throne. Encouraged and manipulated by his ambitious wife, he plots the murder of his lord, eventually bringing himself and his wife to ruin.

In *Throne of Blood*, Kurosawa emphasizes the narcissism of Macbeth, underscoring his excessive ego. This struggle is artistically manifest in the Noh-style interaction between Washizu (Macbeth) and his wife Asaji (Lady Macbeth), not the soliloquy of *Macbeth*. The contrasting reactions of the couple in the film are effective in accelerating the plot toward its climax. Washizu and Asaji, for example, struggle with their own internal contradictions while they work together to achieve their mutual goals driven by their shared desire for power. Washizu is torn between two irreconcilable feelings: his loyalty toward Lord Tsuzuki (King Duncan) as well as to his friend Miki (Banquo) and his ambition to become the absolute authoritative figure. Asaji, on the other hand, criticizes the ambivalence of Washizu, enticing him to prove himself manlier. "Ambition makes the man," she says. Much of Asaji's mercilessness is, however, merely camouflage to conceal her own inner fragility. Ultimately, not being able to cope with her own internal conflicts, she, not Washizu, is the one who loses mental equilibrium.

The individual struggles featured in this postwar film are indicative of Japan's constant conflict between preserving cultural tradition and yielding to the forces of modernization with its fruits of progress. This conflict is made manifest in the skillful hands of the director. Kurosawa was born at the end of the Meiji period (1868–1912), the dramatic era of modernization and Westernization. He lived through the twentieth century, experiencing the war years of intense nationalism and Japan's postwar period of rapid economic growth. As established Japanese film scholar Tadao Satō points out in *Currents in Japanese Cinema*,

*Japan had cast off feudalism to embrace modernism with such haste and vigor that repercussions of the battle between old and new were being felt at all levels of society.<sup>2</sup>*

The battle between old and new is conspicuous in the films of Kurosawa, who was educated in both Japanese tradition and Western knowledge. In *The Warrior's Camera: The Cinema of Akira Kurosawa*, leading American film scholar Stephen Prince explores the contradiction that he finds in Kurosawa's films and his heroes. He contends that Kurosawa has repeatedly broken with tradition to challenge the social determinants structuring the individual yet attempted to identify with a traditional cultural legacy that emphasized *giri* (obligation) and ties of joint responsibility that linked members of the group.<sup>3</sup> In Japanese cultural tradition, the importance of joint responsibilities linking members of the group is highly valued, while in Western culture, emphasis is on individuality.



Figure 2. Asaji (Lady Macbeth) sitting next to Washizu (Macbeth).  
(*Throne of Blood*, ©1957 Toho Company)



Asaji (Lady Macbeth)  
(*Throne of Blood*, ©1957 Toho Company)

In *Throne of Blood*, the viewer witnesses the embodiment of the complex interplay of Eastern and Western traditions, and Noh performance is effectively incorporated to reflect the historical era in which the film is set. Kurosawa also used ritualized elements of Noh to highlight the tension and intensity Asaji (Lady Macbeth) conveys. For example, her fixed expression reminds the audience of a Noh mask with its suggestion of restrained or suppressed emotions hidden behind the mask. Her highly stylized movements conceal the deliberate nature of her actions. Chants resounding through *Throne of Blood* are modeled on the traditions of Noh songs. There are many allusions to well-known Noh plays, creating a cinematic world of multiple dimensions. Kurosawa manipulated these highly evocative elements of Noh to awaken the imagination of the audience, which is the goal of medieval Japanese Noh theater.

### The Influence of Noh on *Throne of Blood*

Akira Kurosawa's film adaptation helped solidify his international reputation. By adopting Noh aesthetic elements, Kurosawa has reconstructed *Macbeth* in his *Throne of Blood*. He expresses his fascination in this way: "I was attracted by the Noh because of the admiration I felt for its uniqueness, part of which may be that its form of expression is so far removed from that of film."<sup>4</sup> Kurosawa further acknowledges his indebtedness to Japanese Noh drama:

*I like [Noh] because it is the real heart, the core of all Japanese drama. Its degree of compression is extreme, and it is full of symbols, full of subtlety. It is as though the actors and the audience are engaged in a kind of contest and as though this contest involves the entire Japanese cultural heritage . . . I wanted to use the way that Noh actors have of moving their bodies, the way they have of walking, and the general composition which the Noh stage provides.*<sup>5</sup>

In *The Films of Akira Kurosawa*, well-known American film critic Donald Richie argues that another reason for using Noh in this film is that Kurosawa was interested in the limitations of character, that is, "the Noh offered the clearest visual indication of these limitations."<sup>6</sup> As Richie points out, there are certain "limitations" that one can express using stylized movements and masks of Noh. These visibly imposed "limitations" are indeed effective at expressing restrained or suppressed emotions on the Noh stage. Richie



Figure 3. A fukai mask is expressive of the sorrow of the woman who has lost her child. Source: <http://bit.ly/wxjF1M>.



Figure 4. Asaji's sorrow. (*Throne of Blood*, ©1957 Toho Company)

indicates the Noh elements are mostly associated with Asaji, for "she is the most limited, the most confined, the most driven, the most evil."<sup>7</sup> Similarly, film scholar Keiko McDonald, in *Japanese Classical Theater in Films*, claims that in some scenes, "while Washizu's features convey expressions of horror and dismay, her [Asaji's] face is a study in absolute control: static, cold, and impassive, like a female blank Noh mask."<sup>8</sup>

Asaji's face resembles *fukai* or *shakumi* masks, which designate a middle-aged woman. Some scholars claim that the female Noh mask is virtually expressionless because it represents what may be called "neutral expression" or "intermediate expression." However, the "expressionlessness" of Noh masks is deliberate. Using the expressionless Noh mask is one of the most effective ways to express what is beyond expression. In the scene depicted in Figure 2 (facing page), for example, her Noh mask-like expression

effectively reveals the hidden force of the dark side of human nature, bringing out intense moments. It is true that Asaji conceals her feelings more thoroughly than her husband does. As a result, she is more overwhelmed with the intensity of internal conflict than Washizu.

The screenshot in Figure 4 (page 22) is taken from the final scenes in which Asaji loses her mind after she discovers her baby is still-born. The stillbirth is a brilliant addition of Kurosawa and not a part of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. The concealed feelings under her *fukai* or *shakumi* mask-like expressions are momentarily revealed, as seen in this screenshot.

### The *Hannya* and *Ja* (Serpent) Masks

In Noh plays featuring mad women, the madness of the protagonist is hidden behind her expressionless mask, displaying her madness at the most dramatic moment. A mad woman in Noh plays often forgets herself because of some kind of traumatic event that triggers the mental disequilibrium. The majority of these plays feature a mother's affection for her child and her suffering when parted from that child. The madness is expressed in a subtle yet intense manner. Such restrained madness often conveys the agony, suffering, and despair of the female protagonist. Figure 5 is one of the most often-discussed scenes where Noh elements express madness. Strongly indicating derangement, Asaji's dramatic expression resembles that of a demonic woman wearing *hannya* or *ja* masks. Her expression of madness reveals profound sadness, derived from the vanity of willful desires.

Kurosawa's adoption of Noh is not limited to the performance of Asaji and Washizu. The film also contains a significant allusion to the well-known Noh Play *Kurozuka*, or *Black Mound*. This play begins when two itinerant monks seek lodging for the night in the house of a poor woman at Kurozuka in Adachigahara. To entertain the guests, the mistress of the house spins a hem thread on a spinning wheel while reciting a lament for her empty and bitter life. For the Japanese audience, the early scene from the film in which Washizu encounters an obscure woman spinning thread on a wheel deep in a forest signifies the cycle of sufferings of all beings.

In the Noh play *Black Mound*, the mistress warns the monks not to look into her bedroom when she leaves them to collect firewood to keep them warm, but one of the monks is unable to restrain his curiosity. Peeping into her room, he finds a pile of skeletons. Realizing that they are in the house of a demon, the monks flee hurriedly. Appearing as an angry demon, the mistress chases them down until she is finally



Figure 5. Asaji's madness. (*Throne of Blood*, ©1957 Toho Company)



Figure 6. A *hannya* mask. Source: <http://bit.ly/yAsZXu>.



Figure 7. A demonic woman in the Noh play *Kurozuka* (*Black Mound*). Source: <http://bit.ly/xu7i5b>.



Figure 8. An old woman in *Throne of Blood*. (*Throne of Blood*, ©1957 Toho Company)



Figure 9. A pile of skeletons in *Throne of Blood*. (*Throne of Blood*, ©1957 Toho Company)

quake of 1923, his brother said to him, “If you shut your eyes to a frightening sight, you end up being frightened. If you look at everything straight on, there is nothing to be afraid of.”<sup>9</sup> We have to look at the pile of the skeletons straight on. We cannot escape from this reality. This brief shot is more visually powerful than an actual brutal murder scene could be.

Finally, the basic structure of Noh greatly influenced Kurosawa’s filmmaking. Kurosawa adopted one of the most important aesthetic concepts in Noh, the three organizational steps based on ancient Chinese court music: *jo* (beginning and preparation), *ha* (break and rupture), and *kyū* (rapid or urgent). In relation to the full dramatic action of *Throne of Blood*, the introductory chant in the film constitutes the first *jo* section, where a slow and dignified tempo is used for the opening element. The rapid *ha* phase effectively builds, yet vacillates. This section designates a shift to a faster tempo that accentuates Washizu’s torment because of his own troops’ betrayal, as well as the death of his wife. The final *kyū* scene reaches a state of controlled frenzy when an even more rapid tempo concludes the story. In this final scene, Washizu’s own archers turn on him and fill his body with a barrage of arrows, including one straight through his neck. The final *kyū* thus generates the climax.

overcome by the power of the monks’ prayers. In the film, Washizu and Miki (Banquo) pass mounds of unburied human skeletons, reminiscent of the Noh play. This scene effectively presents the multiple dimensions of the film. For those familiar with the Noh play *Black Mound*, it indicates human weakness and falling into temptation. The irony of this play is that the ascetic monks who are practicing the severe service of self-discipline and abstention cannot restrain their curiosity. Their lack of self-discipline ignites the anger of the demonic woman, who attempted to offer some help by providing them with shelter and warmth. For those who see the horrifying scene as it is, this scene signifies the futility of the human ego, which can drive people to kill each other. There are no brutal murder scenes in the film; instead, Kurosawa makes the best use of the invisible by allowing the imagination of the audience its full play, which is the fundamental principle of Japanese Noh theater.

According to Kurosawa in his 1982 book *Something Like an Autobiography*, when his older brother took Kurosawa to the ruins of the Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923, his brother said to him, “If you shut your eyes to a frightening sight, you end up being frightened. If you look at everything straight on, there is nothing to be afraid of.”<sup>9</sup> We have to look at the pile of the skeletons straight on. We cannot escape from this reality. This brief shot is more visually powerful than an actual brutal murder scene could be.

In *Throne of Blood*, Kurosawa exploits various theatrical elements of Noh, such as structural organization, masks, music, chant, and choreography to reproduce the theater experience of Noh within his film. The highly stylized Noh movements and expressions Washizu and Asaji delicately applied in their performances reinforce the tension and intensity that they convey. The allusions to Noh drama that Kurosawa includes in the film produce multiple layers of meaning. Kurosawa’s use of the three organizational *jo-ha-kyū* steps effectively builds to a climax at the end of the film, allowing the effects of the vanity of human desire to linger in the audience’s mind. Kurosawa’s *Throne of Blood* embodies the intricate interplay of Eastern and

Western cultures. We find a familiar story in a new context and a new story in a familiar context. Directing students’ attention to the dramatic and cinematic application of Noh in *Throne of Blood* helps them understand the significance of Japanese performance traditions. Through learning about visual and performing arts such as Noh, students can develop their knowledge of Japanese culture and refine their critical skills in a range of literary and artistic disciplines. ■



Figure 10. Washizu’s body filled with arrows. (*Throne of Blood*, ©1957 Toho Company)

## FILM CHARACTERS

### Throne of Blood [Kumonosu-jō] (1957)

Film	Play	Actor
Taketoki Washizu	(Macbeth)	Toshirō Mifune
Asaji, his wife	(Lady Macbeth)	Isuzu Yamada
Yoshiaki Miki	(Banquo)	Minoru Chiaki
Yoshiteru, Miki's son	(Fleance)	Akira Kubo
Kuniharu Tsuzuki	(Duncan)	Takamaru Sasaki
Kunimaru (Tsuzuki's son)	(Malcolm)	Yoichi (or Hiroshi) Tachikawa
Noriyasu Ogagura	(MacDuff)	Takashi Shimura
Forest Spirit	(Witches)	Chieko Naniwa

## NOTES

1. Toshirō Mifune and Isuzu Yamada, *Throne of Blood* (The Criterion Collection, 2003), DVD. This version contains audio commentary by Japanese film expert Michael Jeck, a new essay by Stephen Prince (*The Warrior's Camera: The Cinema of Akira Kurosawa*), and two alternative subtitle translations: an English version from Japanese film translator Linda Hoagland, Kurosawa expert Donald Richie's subtitles with Jacobean diction and notes on subtitling by Hoagland and Richie.
2. Tadao Satō, *Currents in Japanese Cinema*, trans. Gregory Barrett (Tokyo, New York: Kodansha International Limited, 1982), 9.
3. Stephen Prince, *The Warrior's Camera: The Cinema of Akira Kurosawa*, rev. ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 3.
4. Akira Kurosawa, *Something Like an Autobiography*, trans. Audie E. Bock (New York: Knopf, 1982), 147.
5. Donald Richie, *The Films of Akira Kurosawa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 117.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. Keiko I. McDonald, *Japanese Classical Theater in Films* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1994), 132.
9. Kurosawa, 54.

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- Throne of Blood*. DVD. Directed by Akira Kurosawa. Toho Company, 1957; Toho International Co., Ltd., 2002; The Criterion Collection, 2003.

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