

Nogaku—*noh* and *kyogen*—inseparable opposites

'*Nogaku*' refers to *noh* and *kyogen*. Along with *kabuki* and *bunraku*, they are forms of Japan's classical theatre. *Noh* and *kyogen* were the first to be designated as a UNESCO intangible heritage of humanity in 2001 (*bunraku* followed in 2003, *kabuki* in 2005). Having been performed as professional theatre since the 14th century, *nogaku* is considered the world's oldest living theatre.

In its broadest sense '*noh*' can refer to *kyogen* as well. For the uninitiated, the storylines of *noh* plays can be difficult to follow, but even a first-time viewer can appreciate the refined beauty of *noh*. A sense of elegant and elusive beauty, called 'yugen' in Japanese, is highly valued in *noh*. *Noh* is essentially a symbolic theatre and it is said that if a *noh* fan from the 14th century were transported to the present day, the visitor from the past would recognise the oldest *noh* plays immediately, such is the continuity of the *noh* repertoire.

A talented father and son team, Kan'ami (1333-1384) and Zeami (1363-1443), transformed a type of theatrical performance known as *sarugaku* into *noh*. Music and dance were first introduced into *sarugaku* by Kan'ami, and later Zeami refined the aesthetics of *noh*, including the ideal of *yugen*. From the earliest days, *noh* attracted influential patronage among the military upperclass, and under the Tokugawa Shogunate (1603-1867), it became an 'official property'. After the fall of the shogunate, *noh* survived thanks to individual patronage and the commitment of performers. Today it is supported by the public, including keen amateur performers who pay to take lessons.

In contrast to the rarified atmosphere of *noh* plays, *kyogen's* main priority is to make the audience laugh. The themes of a *noh* play deal with human destiny rather than events; *kyogen* takes as its subjects folk tales or the everyday life of common people in feudal society. In fact the largest number of *kyogen* plays are the *Taro-kaja* plays, which entertain with stories of a servant trying to outwit his master. *Taro-kaja* is the name of the main character, the servant who stands as a type of everyman.

Nogaku is performed on a 6 by 6 metre stage made from cypress wood, and a painted pine tree is the only background used in all the plays—there are no set

changes. The scene is set by the words of the actors and chorus. Musicians and the members of the chorus sit on the stage wearing traditional but plain kimono. There is nothing plain about the actors' costumes.



This picture from a performance of *noh* at Verbrugghen Hall, Sydney, in 2006 shows the splendour of a *noh* costume. The *shite*, Sakae Terai, is playing the main role of the woman/spirit in the play 'Kakitsubata' (Iris).

The costume of the main actor, the *shite*, is multilayered with intricate brocade robes, such as the one pictured here. Together with the height of the headdress or wig, the *shite's* presence commands the stage. Those famous *noh* masks are normally only worn by the *shite*. There are several basic types of mask. What may seem strange at first is that the same mask will be worn while the character expresses different moods, such as sadness and happiness. The mask is angled so that shadows create the different expressions. Several hand-held props are also used, folding fans being the most common.

Kyogen costumes are simpler in comparison to the *noh* robes and are based on clothing worn in medieval Japan. Another difference is that masks are not normally used, and when they are used, they generally depict non-human characters. The expressions on *kyogen* masks are not as restrained as the *noh* masks;

instead heightened facial expressions (real or mask) help the comedy of the play.

So, how do *kyogen* and *noh* go together? Today a program usually consists of two or three *noh* plays interspersed with one or two *kyogen* plays. Traditionally a program would have five *noh* plays with three or four *kyogen* in between.

It is hard to imagine a theatre form surviving for so long if it only dealt with themes of human destiny in a highly stylised way. A good laugh is often called for to get through life itself, so it seems to make sense for *nogaku* to include something of the sublime and the ridiculous.

Further information

The Web Japan website has an illustrated Japan Fact Sheet on *nogaku* which gives a more detailed explanation of the history and practice of *noh* and *kyogen* <http://web-japan.org/>

The Japan Arts Council also has an online introduction to *nogaku*. www2.ntj.jac.go.jp/unesco/noh/en/