

When Less Is More

Noh ranks with kabuki as one of Japan's representative performing arts. As a stage drama developed in the fourteenth century, it is regarded as one of the oldest existing forms of theater, and was designated as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO in 2001. **Richard Emmert** has been studying noh for many years. He spoke with Toshio Matsubara.

Noh is performed on a wooden stage roughly five square meters in size. Without curtains or large set pieces, it is extremely simple. The main characters who appear are the *shite* (protagonist), who plays a role such as a ghost, spirit, demon or specter, and the *waki* (bystander), who plays a human. Depending on their role, the *shite* may wear a mask depicting a young woman, a demon or otherwise. The music is made up of a chorus known as a *jiutai* who sing about the scene or inner feelings of the characters and the *hayashi* (instrumentalists) who play instruments such as the *otsuzumi* (hip drum) and *nokan* flute. Noh stories are fantastical and tragic tales based on history and mythology

which bring out the essence and emotions of people through the interactions between the *shite* and *waki*.

Having fallen under noh's spell, Richard Emmert, an American professor at Musashino University's Faculty of Literature, has been researching noh for more than forty years.

Emmert's first encounter with noh dates back to when he was a sophomore at Earlham College in Indiana. At a seminar on noh he had joined casually, he found himself performing in an English language noh play called *St. Francis*, and on the strength of his vocalization and poise was chosen to play the *shite*.

While the English-language noh play was entirely unknown overseas, the performance was successful, and with the support of the Ford Foundation a film of the play was even made. In 1970 Emmert studied at a Japanese university for a year where he learned traditional Japanese music such as the *shakuhachi*. After graduating from Earlham College, Emmert returned to Japan in 1973 to continue studying Japanese traditional music and noh. Then, Emmert made the chance discovery that *St. Francis*, in which he had performed,



Theatre Nohgaku players perform the English-language noh play *Pagoda* in London in 2009.

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Richard Emmert practices noh with his teacher.



would be screened in Tokyo. Going to the screening was what determined his fate.

The organizer of the film screening also wanted to put on a live performance of *St. Francis* in Japan, and asked Emmert, who was right before him, to direct the music. If he was going to do it, he wanted to perform authentic music in keeping with tradition. That meant he would have to learn noh for real. With this in mind, Emmert would become completely absorbed in to the world of noh as if possessed.

In 1974, the following year, Emmert entered the Department of Musicology at Tokyo University of the Arts, where he conducted research on noh. Simultaneously, he continued to take practical lessons on *shimai* (dancing and movement) and *utai* (singing) and later began taking practical lessons on all the instruments of noh including the *kotsuzumi* (shoulder drum), *otsuzumi* and *taiko* (stick drum).

“In noh, the performers dance amid a ‘intense calm,’ and that’s where it overflows with energy. What flows through the dancing is not ‘tension’ but rather an ‘intensity,’ and what produces that intensity is the form,” explains Emmert. “Noh never uses realistic expressions like singing or moving about normally. Everything is expressed according to a prescribed form. While you’ll also find stylistic expression in opera and dance, there is no other art that demands such rigid adherence

to form as noh.”

Since the 1980s, Emmert has devoted himself to popularizing English-language noh plays, and has been involved in the composing, musical direction and performance of various such plays. Since 1991, Emmert has run the Noh Training Project, with workshops in Pennsylvania in the United States and Reading in England, and in 2000 launched Theatre Nohgaku, a noh performance group comprising foreigners as well as Japanese living in foreign countries. Theatre Nohgaku began performing English-language noh plays from 2002, and to date has toured the United States, England, France, Beijing, Hong Kong and Japan.

Emmert says, “We want to steadily prune away the waste while expressing the ‘less is more’ world that is unique to noh. We’re still a long way off, but it would be wonderful thing for English-language noh to someday become as widespread as opera.”



Toshio Matsubara is a freelance writer.