



Kanze Kiyokazu (left) performed in “Okina” for the opening of the Kanze Noh Theatre in Ginza Six on 20 April 2017. He played the *shite* (main role) of the *okina* (old man) and his son, Kanze Saburota (right), played the young man, *senzai*, the *tsure* (companion to the main actor).
© KANZE NOH THEATRE

ETERNAL NOH

Noh (or nogaku) – sometimes referred to as “an art for communicating” or “the art of the calming souls” – is one of Japan’s representative traditional performing arts. We asked Kanze Kiyokazu, 26th Grand Master of the Kanze School, to explain the essence of noh.

KYOKO MOTOYOSHI

NOH was founded in the fourteenth century. It is a traditional performing art that is unique to Japan, and is also referred to as the world’s oldest stage art still performed today. A form of musical drama in which the story plays out along with traditional *shosa* (dancing) and *utai* (chanting of a noh text), noh differs greatly from stage performances that are designed for simple entertainment. Noh performances very strongly reflect the spirituality and religious values of the Japanese people. In 2008, noh was inscribed to UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (as Nogaku theatre).

Noh was formalized as a stage art by Kan’ami and his son, Zeami, and the Kanze School – currently the

largest school in noh, with round 700 *nogakushi* (noh performers) – draws on the long-standing tradition established by these two founders. Kanze Kiyozaku, the 26th Grand Master to lead the Kanze School, elucidates the true essence of noh.

“Noh is sometimes referred to as ‘the art of calming souls.’ The fundamental root that lies at the heart of that is the act of holding a memorial for people who have passed away. At their root, even the most joyous and auspicious programs have the notion of cherishing the memory of those who have died in the past, and are instilled with imagination and blessings for the future.”

Kanze goes on to say that noh is also “an art for communicating,” in the same way as the Japanese tea ceremony or *ikebana* (traditional Japanese flower arranging). Every movement is deliberate, unwavering and free of waste. Chiseling down unnecessary waste to the extreme and discovering beauty in the remaining core is held to be one of the distinguishing characteristics of the Japanese arts. There at the root – Kanze says – lies the supple, soft and gentle emotional mindset that is referred to as *yamato-gokoro*, the Japanese spirit.

Noh is performed wearing *omote* masks called *noh-men*, of which there are said to be around 250 different types. Many supernatural beings make appearances that include spirits, heavenly nymphs, ghosts, and the horned demoness; a woman possessed with jealousy and grudge. Zeami brought a wide variety of figures to the noh stage, portraying the emotions of people from all levels of society and walks of life; from tragic samurai warriors to conquering generals, from emperors to aristocrats, all the way down to the common people. The reason why Zeami made so many different people appear on his stage, explains Kanze, is that “in addition to calming the souls of the dead, Zeami wanted to portray humanity itself.”

“For example, he brings people to the stage who have fallen into the depths of hell, and allows them to relive the most splendid moments of their lives once again on stage... From this we can feel the kindness of Zeami, who made stories like this and acted them out himself.”

In addition to carrying on the traditions of noh in this way, Kanze Kiyokazu is also engaged in initiatives such as performing overseas and creating new noh plays. In July 2016, he and his company were invited, as one of the most outstanding stage performances selected from around the world, to perform at the 20th Lincoln Center Festival held in New York. After their performance, they were met with an endless standing ovation. In 2012, Kanze and his performers gave their first performance of *The Conversion of Saint Paulo*, a Christian noh play, enthralling audiences with a stage performance unlike any before. (Christian noh plays were adapted from the bible in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries when many Christian missionaries came to Japan.)

“When watching noh, please try expanding your imagination. I think that from noh, even people who have never read classical Japanese literature, and even those who don’t understand the Japanese language, can still get a feeling for the spirituality of the Japanese people.”

The Kanze School of noh was recognized by the people in power at the time, and developed. In

1633, the Kanze family received premises covering approximately 1,650m² in Tokyo’s Ginza District from Tokugawa Iemitsu, the third shogun of the Tokugawa dynasty. The Kanze School made this land their headquarters. Later in its history, however, the School returned this received land to Tokugawa Yoshinobu, who was the last shogun of the Tokugawa dynasty.

In April 2017, a new Kanze Noh Theatre was born in Ginza. The theatre is located on the third basement floor of Ginza Six: Ginza’s largest shopping and entertainment complex.



The opening scene of *Okina*
© KANZE NOH THEATRE

“Until March 2015, the Kanze Noh Theater was located in the residential district of Shoto in Shibuya Ward, Tokyo, but there were concerns over the deteriorating condition of the structure and its resistance to earthquakes. We put our hands in when we heard about the redevelopment of the Ginza 6-chome area, and our return to Ginza – with its deep historical connections to the origins of the Kanze School – finally became a reality. We also hold nighttime showings on weekdays, so we hope that people will come to enjoy our noh plays casually, perhaps even on their way home from work.”

The Kanze Noh Theatre aims to be a place where not only Japanese people but also non-Japanese visitors can casually enjoy noh performances. Based on that wish, the theatre is also planning to introduce IT-driven infrastructure and facilities to offer multi-lingual support in the near future. **U**