



A scene from the kyogen play "Sanbaso" performed at the Japan Foundation's Japan Cultural Institute in Paris, May 12-13, 2017  
Photo: ©Maison de la culture du Japon à Paris

# Concentration and Release

Actor Manzo Nomura explains the subtleties of Japan's traditional form of comic drama, *kyogen*.

TOSHIO MATSUBARA

**K**YOGEN is a form of comic drama in which characters are played in an exaggerated style going about their everyday lives or recounting an anecdote. The original form of kyogen was created during the Heian period (794-1185) along with *noh*. Its evolved style was established in the Muromachi period (1336-1573).

*Noh*, a masked, dance-based form of drama, shares its roots with *kyogen*. The two are inextricably linked as performance arts and are often performed together. They are in a kind of yin-yang relationship: if *noh*, which represents *yugen* (the subtle and profound), is the moon, then *kyogen* takes the role of the sun. Both have developed as *shinji* (rituals related to the gods), first and foremost as holy performance arts for the gods to enjoy. These are the major characteristics of *nohgaku*, the combination of *noh* and *kyogen*. On the other hand, *kabuki* and other performance arts that were created after *noh* and *kyogen*,

have developed separately as pure performance arts.

"The laughter of *kyogen* comes from the world of traditional Japanese music, that is, comfort and enjoyment," says Manzo Nomura, a *kyogen* performer of the Izumi school. "Life has high points and low points. The laughter of *kyogen* makes people feel like living strongly and positively even when they are worried about many things. A *kyogen* performance does not just make the audience laugh, but does so through implied meanings that connect to the subtleties of life. This kind of laughter is universal. That is why *kyogen* produces laughter not only in Japan, but also around the world, even as times have changed."

*Noh* is a solemn musical drama in which the characters played by performers wearing *noh* masks are people in high positions and gods, while *kyogen* is an optimistic story in which a wide range of characters are played, including ordinary people with various professions, animals, spirits, and very human gods

and ogres. Basically, kyogen is a dialogue drama with almost no music and performers play characters without a mask. There are about 400 pieces of music (plays) of kyogen and its expressions contain the energy of its 600-year history.

“In kyogen, performers place an importance on the pulling power, as in archery, for both their lines and acting (movements),” says Nomura. “While maintaining their tension and concentration, they release their power all at once as expression. This concentration and release is the basic movement of kyogen, which is exaggerated so that the audience can imagine and understand what is expressed in those few movements.”

Nomura performs kyogen overseas, mainly in Europe, where he is held in high esteem. On May 12 and 13 of this year, he performed with his father, Man Nomura, a Living National Treasure, at the Japan Foundation’s Japan Cultural Institute in Paris (Maison de la culture du Japon à Paris) in France and earned high praise. The three plays performed were “*Sanbaso*,” “*Kanaoka dainagon*” and “*Futari bakama*.”

“*Sanbaso*” is a pure ritual in which a god is called on and there is prayer for a good harvest. This play is ceremonial art consisting of *utai* (chanting of a text) and *mai* (dancing) without any story, which is exceptional. “*Kanaoka dainagon*” is a love story about a first-class painter serving in the Imperial Court and “*Futari bakama*” is a slapstick drama about a father and his son under the theme of a ritual for a bride-



Manzo Nomura on stage in Tokyo  
Photo: YOSHIFUSA HASHIZUME

groom marrying into the spouse’s family. The performance began with a symbolic play and then proceeded gradually to plays that were more comedic and easier to understand. Subtitles were also used in the performance in France.

“I chose these three plays because I hoped that the audience in France would be able to get a sense of the breadth of kyogen”, says Nomura. “The plays



In this scene from the popular kyogen play “*Boshibari*,” two servants attempt to drink sake despite being tied up by their master.  
Photo: KUMI AKASAKA / YOROZU KYOGEN

began with a 100% ritual related to the gods, and then moved down from the Imperial court to ordinary people. I thought that as the plays progressed, the audience fully enjoyed themselves with the laughter of comfort and enjoyment from kyogen.”

“A kyogen performer is a Shinto priest handling religious services and, at the same time, a dancer, singer, actor and performer of a comedy skit as if he were a chameleon,” says Nomura.

While performing in Japan and overseas, Nomura is also involved in a wide range of activities, such as the launch of “*Yokoso kyogen* (welcome kyogen),” a kyogen meeting for people from overseas living in Japan, and the initiatives of “*Gendai kyogen* (modern kyogen)” alongside a comedian in which kyogen and a comedy are integrated. He will present a new play, “*Nobunaga Fortune-telling*,” a collaboration with a historian, this summer.

Kyogen is a traditional performance art that continues to evolve. **J**