

the majority of plays focused on the exploits of warrior heroes. *Noh* evolved as a surprisingly restrained and even fastidious art, considering it came out of a world of chaos, bloodshed, and war. You can go to Japan today and see a *Noh* drama performed. It is the oldest continuously performed drama in the world.

The Drama

We credit one father–son team with the creation of *Noh*. **Kan’ami Kiyotsugu**, a professional actor, began training his son, **Zeami Motokiyo**, at the age of six to follow in his footsteps. In 1374, the shogun (head samurai warrior) ordered the two to appear in a command performance. The shogun was so impressed that he took them into his service. Kan’ami, a skilled musician, composer, and playwright, began the work of refining *Noh* performances, which had been a hodgepodge of song, dance, and bits of story, juggling, gymnastics, and stilt walking similar to *Zaju*. He gathered stories, songs, and epic poems about the warriors and heroes of the past and structured them into the elegant dramas of the mature *Noh* theatre. Zeami continued his father’s work, writing about 240 of the surviving plays, all now designated as national treasures.

Styles

Noh drama is ceremonial, mysterious, and tragic. Impregnated with Zen Buddhist concepts of enlightenment through meditation and personal insight, it focuses on symbolic images and the struggle to escape the realities of time and place. Shinto beliefs also play a role, as ghosts and gods haunt the stage while mortal men struggle to understand the mysteries of life.

The plots are slim. The focus is on the precise, choreographed movements and vocal inflections. The protagonist is the *shite* (pronounced “shtay”), meaning the “doer.” He may be a god, a ghost, or an animal, but most often he is a legendary warrior. Always played in masks and costumes, tradition dictates every detail of this role to allow instant identification of the character. Questioned and challenged by secondary characters who may be ministers, commoners, or priests, the *shite* responds at length, defending, explaining, describing events, or chastising the others.



FIGURE 7.5 A *Noh* actor performs a female role at Tokyo's Sensoji temple.

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