

## CHAPTER 3

### Kyogen - the early farces

The earliest type of drama to develop in Japan was probably the kyogen play. This seems to have grown out of the primitive farces found in a kind of general variety show called 'informal music' (*sangaku* in Japanese) which was introduced into the islands from Korea in the early eighth century. *Sangaku* contained songs, dances, tumbling, juggling, acrobatics and conjuring tricks, but in amongst the other turns were pieces that involved simple acting, and these seem likely to have been the source of both the comic kyogen and the serious noh play.

The Japanese, like the Chinese and Koreans, distinguished two different kinds of 'informal music', namely 'field music' and 'monkey music' (in Japanese, *dengaku* and *sarugaku*). It is thought that the latter of these acquired its name because it involved monkey-like mimicry. The 'field music' (*dengaku*) contained many very old songs and dances, including important ritual dances to bring good weather and help the rice crops grow, and these were usually performed by Shinto priests at sites in the countryside. The 'monkey-music' (*sarugaku*), on the other hand, was performed by professional actors and contained songs and dances that were calculated to entertain people in the towns. For instance, by the eleventh century the *sarugaku* actors were beginning to present farces with titles like *The Tricks of a Lad from the Capital*, *A Peasant goes up to see the Big City*, *A Nun goes looking for Baby-clothes*, and so on - titles that suggest the exploitation of innocent holy folk and ignorant country-bumpkins by cunning city lads.

The word 'kyogen' was borrowed by the Japanese from Chinese, where it originally meant 'nonsense' or 'crazy irresponsible utterances.' Later, the famous

Chinese poet Po Chü-i used the phrase '*kyogen kigo*' to mean fancy words that drew people away from Buddha's teachings,<sup>1</sup> and the word came to mean a fabrication or fiction which had a morally negative effect. This is shown by the legend that Lady Murasaki, the famous authoress of *The Tale of Genji* (*Genji Monogatari*), went to hell after she died, because she had committed the sin of *kyogen kigo* or writing fiction.

By the late 14th century we find the term 'kyogen' being applied to plays in general and, if the same interpretation of the word applied, it must have meant that at that time any drama was regarded as an anti-religious act of pretence calculated to delude and corrupt the heart of man - an attitude that would tie in very well with the vow taken by some Buddhist priests not to sing, dance or witness plays. However, since that particular vow applied to only a few sects, and most monasteries were only too happy to present plays on festival days, it is no surprise that the stigma attaching to the name 'kyogen' soon faded away.

The Shinto legend of Uzume performing her suggestive dance to lure Amaterasu out of the Cave of Heaven suggests that the original tradition of *sarugaku* was a comic one, and that it was probably associated with the celebration of fertility. The first reference we have seems to confirm this, because it relates to a festival sometime in the late eleventh century at which Uzume's sacred *kagura* dance was due to be performed. On the occasion in question, the current Emperor, Horikawa, sent for his Counsellor and told him to make sure that the *sarugaku* that he selected to follow the *kagura* in the evening was 'something really remarkable'. The Counsellor therefore proposed to his younger brother that they should both hitch up their robes to show their bare legs in the bright light of the courtyard fire, and dance round the flames singing:

*'Later and later grows the night,  
Keener and keener grows the cold.  
I will lift up my petticoats  
And warm my backside at the fire.'*

This was obviously intended as a deliberately indecent performance that would aesthetically reflect the spirit of the *kagura* earlier in the day, by mimicking Uzume's dance, but when it came to the test, the Counsellor lost his nerve. His younger brother, though, was more daring, and went and danced twelve or thirteen times around the fire, singing, and warming his bare legs 'just as though he had really been cold... causing a tremendous uproar.'<sup>2</sup>

Despite the admirable irreverence shown in this performance, the *sarugaku* must already have been developing a serious side, because in the Kamakura period (1185-1336) it split into two separate branches known as 'the basic art' (*honge*) and 'the skilled art' (*nohge*). The 'basic art' kept *sarugaku*'s original humour, and after mingling with 'field music' (*dengaku*), finally emerged as *kyogen*. The 'skilled art', which placed emphasis on song and dance, and took tragic themes from history and legend as its subject-matter, eventually developed into *noh*.

Perhaps because it was a simpler type of drama, *kyogen* seems to have achieved an accepted theatrical form earlier than its more famous cousin. This is indicated by the fact that the priest Genei (1269-1350), who is said to be *kyogen*'s first playwright and who wrote many of the plays in the present repertory, died before Kan'ami and Zeami, the begetters of modern *noh*, had even begun their work on the more serious form of drama.

*Kyogen* and *noh* not only spring from the same source but they seem to counterbalance each other. Manzo Nomura, a famous *kyogen* master, writes:

'The highly refined tastes of the medieval audiences demanded an organic separation of the miscellaneous aspects of *sarugaku* into music and dance on the one hand and mime and humour on the other, resulting in the birth of the twin arts of *noh* and *kyogen*. These two twins were clothed in garments whose colours were as sharply contrasted as red and white, covering their differing skeletal structures of symbolism and simplicity in such a way that they could never again be mistaken for one another. But when the yin personality of the *noh* and the yang personality of the *kyogen* are placed side by side, the effect of mutual reflection produces an especially pleasing harmony.'<sup>3</sup>

This 'pleasing harmony' of the two forms was achieved by kyogen farces being introduced into programmes of noh plays in order to provide moments of relief from the extremely high tension and emotion that the more serious pieces generated, and the practice of playing the two forms of drama side by side has continued ever since. Professional kyogen players are also usually attached to companies of noh actors as a kind of subsidiary branch, and they have a narrative function in many noh plays which is different to their usual farcical contributions - indeed in the noh their roles are often completely serious.<sup>4</sup>

### **The *Okina* play**

There is an interesting survival which shows how close kyogen and noh were in the formative period of Japanese drama. When a full programme of five noh plays (*goban*) is produced with its accompanying kyogen farces - something that rarely happens today - it has always been the custom to precede the performance by an ancient ritual play called *Okina* in which the *shite* (pronounced 'shtay' - the principal dancer) takes on the nature of the god *Okina*. The ritual consists of three dances. First, there is the stately dance of a young man called *Senzai*, which involves special patterns of stamping that bring to mind both the presence of the earth itself and also Shinto rituals for the invocation of a god. During the young man's dance there comes a moment when the noh actor playing *Okina*, who has been sitting to one side of the stage, dons the white mask of a good-humoured old man that represents the god. This is the only occasion in noh where a mask is visibly donned on stage, and the action symbolises the descent of the god into the performer. *Okina* now dances a god dance (*kamigaku*) with great calm and deliberation and, when he has finished, a kyogen actor in a black mask, playing a character called *Sambaso*, performs a lively dance with much leaping, and stamping, and shaking of bells, the actions of which suggest both various kinds of farming work and also the process of dispelling demons.

The structure of this performance corresponds to the three stages of an ancient Shinto ritual called *shiki samba* and the piece, which is considered exceptionally lucky, is intended to bring a blessing upon all the actors and their endeavours as well as upon the audience. It is treated as a sacred event and all the participants have to eat in isolation from their families for several days before they undertake the performance, and devote themselves to rituals of purification. The Shinto associations of the dance suggest that it is extremely old and probably dates from a time when kyogen and noh were only just beginning to diverge.<sup>5</sup>

### The benevolent nature of kyogen

Kyogen deals with everyday human relationships, involving husbands and wives, masters and servants, the rituals of courtship, hypocritical priests, and the con-men of the market-place and their victims. There are also a few plays about gods and demons, but even these superhuman beings are treated in a very domestic and good-humoured way. Altogether it is a very simple and basic type of drama with a kindly and undemanding approach to life, in which every character, whatever their rank, tends to think and react like one of the common people.

For many generations, the plays were preserved and handed down in the form of scenarios, and the dialogue and movement were improvised by the performers.<sup>6</sup> A typical example of such a scenario is the one called *An Umbrella Instead of a Fan* taken from the oldest collection of scenarios in existence today, *The Tembo Kyogen Book*, which was compiled during the 1570s. It runs:

'A Daimyo appears and calls his servant. He tells the servant to go to the capital and buy the most expensive fan he can find. The servant goes to the capital and begins shouting out what he wants to buy. A Con-man appears and sells him an umbrella instead. The Con-man also tells him that if his master gets angry with him, he should sing the song: "On Umbrella Mountain, on Umbrella Mountain, if other people open their umbrellas, I shall open my umbrella too." The servant goes home. When the Master sees what the Servant has bought, he gets angry. He

chases the Servant out of the house. Then the Servant begins singing and dancing. The Master listens and enjoys the song so much that he begins dancing too. Master and Servant dance together. The play ends with a passage from the flute.'

*The Tembo Kyogen Book* contains 104 different scenarios but, as generations went by, the repertory grew larger, plots and dialogue became fixed, and more and more complete scripts began to appear. There are now more than thirty volumes of complete scripts owned by the various schools that play kyogen, containing different versions of 260 plays. For convenience, these pieces have been divided by the actors into several categories, most of which are named after the type of character who plays the principal *shite* role, although a few of them are named after the overall theme of the piece.

Particularly revealing of kyogen's approach to the presentation of life are the pieces about daimyos. These characters are usually introduced as 'The well-known daimyo so-and-so,' and they place great stress on their exalted social position and behave with a level of arrogance that they believe to be suitable for their rank, but they soon reveal that underneath all the external show they are simple-minded, childish, illiterate and thoughtless. Consequently the ridiculous situations they become involved in are generally of their own making.

Needless to say, these pompous simpletons are nothing like the great clan chiefs at the time when the plays were devised, or even the rural village lords of the same period, and the audience tends to see them primarily as kind-hearted idiots. This means that however much the actor sent-up the part, he was unlikely to offend any of the daimyos and samurai who were actually watching the play, which was very important for the actor.

As can be seen from this example, the genre may sometimes be satirical, but it is never aggressively critical or unpleasantly malicious. It prefers to observe and display human behaviour as it finds it and interpret it in the kindest way that it can. All its characters are simple and essentially kind-hearted, and all of them act in a way which is easily understood by the common people, and yet usually shows how people ought to behave in awkward situations.

### Son-in-law pieces

This is well illustrated by the politeness of the father in a piece called *The Rooster Son-in-Law*. This is one of a group of plays called 'son-in-law' pieces which relate to mistakes that occur on the first ceremonial visit of the groom to the house of his father-in-law - a medieval custom which took place in arranged marriages after the contract had been signed, but before the groom had seen his bride. The groom, who is the main character, always appears dressed as a samurai, and announces himself nervously in a serious voice: 'I am a new groom, the joy of my father-in-law'. He brings gifts of food and wine, which give the piece a celebratory note, but the important thing is the ridiculous mistakes and confusions which arise because he is completely ignorant of the proper way in which to behave during the ceremony. In these pieces the secondary roles (*ado*) consist of fathers-in-law, wives and friends, who teach him what he ought to do - often quite wrongly.

In *The Rooster Son-in-Law* the groom is well aware that he does not know the necessary protocol for the visit and pays a call upon his old schoolmaster to find out what he should do. The schoolmaster is irritated by the young man's lack of imagination and decides to make a laughing stock of him. He therefore tells him that he should follow the 'visiting rooster protocol', and act like a cockerel, and he lends him a tall black hat that looks like a cockscomb. As a result when he visits his father-in-law the young man concludes every speech by opening his fan, waving both his arms vigorously, scratching with his feet and crowing like a cock. The father-in-law and his servant, Taro Kaja, cannot understand this behaviour at all, but at last the father-in-law rightly decides that somebody is trying to make a fool of the young man. However, since the disgrace of his son-in-law would be bound to reflect upon him, and also out of an essentially Confucian politeness, he decides that he must imitate what the young man does in every way. So, getting Taro Kaja to swear not to laugh, he sends him off for a matching hat, and the play ends with the son-in-law and father-in-law exchanging compliments, and both of them flapping their arms, scratching their feet, and crowing like mad.

### Taro Kaja pieces

The father-in-law's servant Taro Kaja is a famous kyogen character, who has a whole category of plays named after him, in which he takes the leading actor's role, and there are also many plays in which he takes the part of a supporting actor who merely runs errands for his master or acts as an intermediary between him and whoever he is talking to. He is considered the most typical of all kyogen characters, and this is underlined by his name. 'Taro' is a very common name for a man in Japan, and 'Kaja' means a boy who has just celebrated his coming of age, so the name implies a lively young servant, who is a bit of a rogue and will have popular appeal - a kind of 'Jack the Lad'. References in the plays suggest that he lives in poor lodgings in the middle of Kyoto. In one play he says, 'My house is such a run-down hovel that whenever it rains three drops outside, we get ten drops inside - so my wife and children have to huddle in the corners to keep dry'. In ways like this, despite his self-assurance, he clearly reveals that he represents the poorer classes of the city. His master, who is the supporting character in these plays, is usually a small landowner who is quite poor and most of the plays, like *An Umbrella Instead of a Fan*, involve Taro Kaja being sent off to buy something, getting swindled, and coming back with the wrong article, which makes his master very angry. In the end Taro Kaja usually manages to get round him in one way or another - but this is not always the case.

A good example of a Taro Kaja play is *The Ring of Bells* in which his master, in this case a wealthy man, declares that he intends to present his son with a sword at his coming-of-age ceremony and that he intends to inlay it with gold. He sends Taro Kaja off into the town of Kamakura to find the cheapest gold that he can, and, because gold was assessed by the way it sounded when it was struck, he uses the slang term 'the ring of metal' (*kane no ne*) to mean 'the price of metal'. Taro Kaja of course misinterprets this in its more usual sense of 'the sound of a bell' and without questioning the order for a moment, goes off to town to find his master the best-sounding bell that he can. After arriving he goes to listen to the

bells of four temples, each represented by one of the corners of the stage. He creates the sounds that he hears for the audience, of course, and decides that the bell of the Kencho Temple is best. He then returns to his master, and describes the sound of each of the bells, steadily making him more and more angry. Eventually when he finds out that Taro Kaja has not brought him any information at all about the price of gold, his master chases him out of the house. Realising he has made a mistake, Taro Kaja decides that, because his master is cultured, the way to get round him is to make up a song and dance about his experiences in the town, but this time it does not work and the master comes out and drives him away.

In fact, Taro Kaja is usually chased away or scolded at the end of the pieces in which he appears, because he has either got his orders confused, or tried to bluff his way out of a situation in which he has been very cowardly, or caused an uproar after stealing *sake* from his master's storehouse and getting hopelessly drunk - but however unreliable he may be, he is basically a kind-hearted young man who is never malicious, nor does his master ever treat him harshly. Indeed, there are a number of plays where Taro Kaja shows great love and respect for his master, and some where he even takes a scolding for mistakes that his master has made.

Sometimes he is accompanied by a second servant named Jiro Kaja who is subordinate to him, and the two of them often combine their forces to achieve some mutual objective. For instance, in the piece called *Tied to a Stick*, where their master ties the two of them to the opposite ends of a pole so that they cannot get at his *sake* while he is away, they work together to move the jug into a position where they can each get hold of it and take a swig in turn.

### Sentimentality in kyogen

Some kyogen pieces can become quite sentimental. For instance there is a 'daimyo' play called *The Monkey-Skin Quiver*. In this case the lord is a 'famous hunter' travelling with his servant. On the road they meet a monkey-trainer and

his monkey. They fall into conversation and the trainer tells the lord that the monkey can perform tricks. The lord notes what fine fur it has and begs the trainer to grant him a request, getting the man to swear that he will grant it before he tells him what he wants. The trainer agrees, somewhat unwillingly, and the lord then tells him that he would like the monkey's skin to make a cover for his quiver. Because he has promised the lord to give him what he wants, the trainer tries to bring himself to kill the monkey, but he cannot do it, and finally breaks down. He tearfully tells the lord's servant (Taro Kaja) about all the care he has lavished on the animal since it was a tiny baby. The lord overhears him and is moved to spare the monkey's life. The trainer is so happy about this that he insists on getting the monkey to thank the lord and his servant, by bowing to them. He then gets it to perform a celebratory dance in accompaniment to a song he sings, and the lord is so impressed that he first gives the monkey his fan, then his sword, and finally his cloak and his long over-trousers. At the end of the dance the trainer gets the monkey to look at the moon while shading his eyes with his hand and the lord is so amused that he imitates him. The trainer then gets the monkey to shade his eyes with the other hand, and the lord does the same. Finally he gives the monkey a sacred Shinto scroll to wave, and the lord imitates him using his quiver. Finally, at the end of the dance, the lord and the monkey both strike a happy pose each with one knee on the ground.

The daimyo's change of heart in this play is typical of the sentimentality that is often found in his character, and the play as a whole is very typical of the benevolent spirit of the kyogen.

### Stupidity in kyogen

Sometimes the characters lose out in kyogen because they behave in a very stupid manner. One of the 'farmer' plays, called *The Foxes of Sado*, illustrates this well. In the kyogen, unlike real life, farmers are always happy and satisfied, and the first farmer always begins with the words: 'In this happy age of ours when the whole

world is at peace...' The shape of the plays is always the same. A farmer from one part of the country meets a farmer from another part of the country. Both of them are on their way to the capital to pay their annual taxes. When they reach the mansion of the tax-collector, they are usually asked to perform for him, and most of the pieces end with a cheerful dance, or a song, or a good laugh, or a lively tune on the flute, to underline their celebratory nature.

In the case of *The Foxes of Sado*, a farmer from Echido meets a farmer from the small island of Sado just off the coast and, when they start to discuss what disadvantages the island of Sado might have, the Sado farmer boldly claims that they have everything there that the mainland has. 'Foxes too?' asks the Echido farmer. 'Yes. foxes too' says the Sado farmer after a moment's thought. Now at the time the play was devised it was believed that there were no foxes on Sado, so the Echido farmer challenges the Sado farmer to make a bet on it. They agree to bet their swords, which would be very valuable from a farmer's viewpoint, and decide that the tax-collector shall settle the bet.

We next see the Sado farmer asking the rather disgruntled tax-collector to help him. After slipping him a bribe under his sleeve he asks, 'Are there foxes in Sado?' 'No' says the tax-collector. 'What should I do, then?' says the farmer, 'I've taken a bet that there are.' At this the tax-collector takes pity on him and describes a fox - smaller than a dog, slanty eyes, a grinning mouth, a long bushy tail, and light red in colour. Using this information the Sado farmer answers all the Echido farmer's questions and seems to have won the bet, but as he is carrying off the swords the Echido farmer stops him and insists that he answers just one more question: 'What kind of sound does a fox make?' 'Smaller than a dog?' suggests the Sado farmer and then he inappropriately goes through the complete list of descriptive features he has just learnt from the tax-collector, greatly increasing his interrogator's suspicions. Finally, when he finds that none of them is right, he is completely at a loss and says 'cock-a-doodle-doo'. At that the Echido farmer immediately claims the two swords and carries them off with the complaining Sado farmer in hot pursuit.

### Presumption and hypocrisy in kyogen

Then there are plays dealing with presumption and hypocrisy, most of which are associated with priests. In fact, plays involving priests are almost as numerous as those dealing with Taro Kaja. This is probably because the Kamakura and Muromachi periods (1185-1573), when kyogen was taking on its modern form, witnessed the introduction of several new Buddhist sects and a growth of interest in all sorts of faiths and philosophies. At the same time it was a period of great social insecurity and confusion and these unstable conditions produced many 'false priests', who were basically confidence tricksters who travelled round the country in priestly robes begging for their living, either because their business had failed or because they needed to escape from some other unpleasant situation. As a result, priests are usually satirised when they appear in kyogen.

For instance, there are plays about the yamabushi or warrior priests mentioned earlier. These semi-Shinto, semi-Buddhist ascetics spent long periods in prayer deep in the mountains, but at other times they would travel about the countryside, 'helping' the local peasantry by chanting what they believed to be potent incantations. Kyogen plays present them as very egotistical men, dressed in pompous costumes, who cast magic spells, and make grandiloquent claims about their powers, but when it comes to the point of proving what they can do, they usually fail and become the object of taunts and sarcasm. For instance, in *The Hooting Warrior Priest* the characters all become possessed by the spirit of an owl, because once the yamabushi priest has aroused the mischievous spirit, to take possession of a younger brother, it also takes over his older brother, and finally the priest himself, and they all go off together hooting merrily.

In another piece of this kind, called *Mushrooms*, the priest starts the mushrooms growing and then cannot stop them. Don Kenny tells us that when this piece was performed in the United States, the mushroom spirits, with their flat round straw hats, which appeared first through the curtain and eventually through an upper sliding-door as well, led Americans to think that the play was a

satire on the war in Viet Nam. They saw the yamabushi priest as representing America and the mushrooms the Viet Cong - an interpretation which would certainly never have occurred to any Japanese.

Other types of priest are usually attacked for greed and hypocrisy, just as they were in many western plays of the middle ages. For instance, there is a priest in *A Sermon Without A Donation* who is absolutely determined to get his regular donation out of a parishioner who has forgotten to present it to him. He visits the parishioner frequently, hoping that this will remind him of his lapse of memory, and then, when the parishioner finally realises why he is paying him so many visits and actually offers him the donation, he pretends to refuse it and has to be persuaded to take it, thus showing that he is nothing but a hypocrite.

In a rather different vein, there is a piece called *A Religious Dispute*, in which two priests of different sects have a ridiculous argument about the way in which Buddha should be described, until they finally realise that whatever adjectives you add to his name, Buddha always remains one and the same. This play provides a sharp criticism not only of petty religious disputes but of all forms of narrow-minded sectarianism.

Lustful priests also make an appearance in one or two of the plays, but the subject is treated lightly, and most of them are young novices who have only just taken their vows and still find it very difficult to ignore attractive young women. Their advances are invariably unsuccessful and often involve them in getting drenched with a bucketful of water, or suffering some other misadventure that points the moral in an equally harmless way.

### Kindly demons

Some plays of the Muromachi period clearly reflected the views of one or other of the recently introduced sects. For instance, despite the fact that hell played a very important part in some forms of popular Buddhism, demons in kyogen are on the whole presented as weak and ineffectual and only too happy to let their victims

off the hook. This ridiculing of the idea of damnation can be seen as a by-product of the teaching of the Pure Land (Jodo) sect that all true believers would go to paradise - a promise that rendered hell an inconsiderable factor in the eyes of its followers.

A 'demon' play which gives a good impression of these hopelessly inefficient devils and the benevolent atmosphere of the plays in which they appear is *The Bird Catcher in Hell*, which also happens to be a direct parody of a certain kind of noh play.

It starts with Emma, the King of Hell, patrolling the 'six ways' of the underworld with his demons, waiting to catch the souls of the wicked. Then along comes the soul of a bird-catcher. A minor demon sees him first and asks him what his job was on earth. When he tells the demon that he was a bird-catcher, the demon says that since he has been constantly involved in taking life, against Buddha's law, he must go to hell. The bird-catcher objects that he doesn't think he's bad at all, and that he'd much rather go to heaven.

The demon refers the matter to Emma, who reaffirms that since the bird-catcher took life in his earthly incarnation he must go to hell. However, the bird-catcher argues that he did not personally kill the birds he caught, but sold them to gentlemen, who fed them to their falcons, so their deaths were ultimately the falcons' fault and not his. Emma agrees that there was nothing wrong with such a course of action.

He then has a sudden craving to taste the birds that are continually flying around him on the Hill of Death and asks the bird-catcher to snare him some. This he does and, after he has roasted them, Emma finds them very tasty. The bird-catcher offers them to the other demons as well, who eagerly snatch them and also enjoy them thoroughly.

Emma then declares that the bird-catcher has given them all such a treat he is going to send him back to earth to go on catching birds for another three years, and the chorus wind up the play by telling the audience that Emma not only sent him back to earth, but presented him with a jewelled crown as well.

## Women in kyogen

Women often appear in kyogen, although they are played by male actors, of course, as in all Japanese traditional drama. Plays of this kind usually deal with the relationship between married couples and though the women are relegated to supporting roles they always leave a strong impression. A description of the type of action in some of these plays will give a flavour of the whole category. In *Caught in a Sack*, a man divorces his wife but tells her she can put anything she likes into a sack and take it away with her, so she throws the sack over his head and drags him away. In *The Mirror*, a man buys a mirror in the city for his wife, but she has never seen one before, and when she looks into it she thinks he has brought home another woman and they fall out about it. In *The Drunken Wife*, a husband decides to divorce his wife, who is a drunkard, and go to the temple to pray for a new one but she follows him there in a veil and pretends to be the new wife the gods are providing for him. She drinks so much, however, that the husband becomes concerned and snatches away her veil to see her face. Finding it is his own wife he becomes very submissive and she berates him, stamping repeatedly and shouting 'How angry I am! How angry I am!'

Kyogen women are often described as 'noisy' because of their tendency to shout when they catch their husbands out but they are all of them much stouter of heart and sturdier of intellect than their spouses. In *An Unsuccessful Suicide with a Sickle*, the wife threatens her spineless and suicidal husband with his own sickle until he agrees to go off to the mountain and do some work after all. In *Cautious Bravery*, she vigorously encourages her husband, who is a complete coward, to take revenge on his so-called 'friends' who have kicked and trampled on him. In *Visiting Hanago*, where he pretends to be spending time in Zen meditation so that he can slip away to see his mistress Hanago, she is quick to sense his unfaithfulness, takes the place of the servant he has left 'meditating' for him under a cloak, and gives him a thorough scolding when he comes back and 'unveils' her. In *The Trial Rehearsal*, she is the one who has been unfaithful but she manages

to bluff her husband literally out of his senses and in *A Demon in Love*, a demon, who ought to know better, gets involved with a woman and is humorously tricked and unceremoniously chased away.

### The celebratory nature of kyogen

All kyogen plays are optimistic and have a 'fortunate' aspect to them, through showing instances of either good luck, reconciliation, forgiveness, happiness, or wealth - or through presenting kindly Shinto gods like Daikoku with his magic hammer, Ebisu with his sea bream and fishing-rod, Bishamon, dressed in his armour and helmet and carrying a halberd, or Fuku, the God of Happiness, himself. When each god appears, he explains why he is auspicious, tells the story of his origins, and bestows blessings on all the people. In kyogen masters are kind and servants are well-meaning, even if they are subject to temptation, while the song and dance which is used by the servant to get himself back into his master's good graces after misbehaving himself or making a silly mistake, provides an extra note of celebration, which is reinforced by the fact that his master often dances with him. In the god plays these final dances are even performed to the accompaniment of the four-piece orchestra which is found on the noh stage and the chanting of a chorus, which makes them much more impressive. In fact, kyogen always seeks to raise the spirits of its audience, in the tradition of Uzume, and send them away from the theatre with feelings of optimism and kindness.

### The staging and acting of kyogen

Although kyogen has for centuries been played on the same stage as the noh drama (see Figs 3 and 4) for which, as was explained earlier, it serves as a kind of comic counterpoint, there is no indication that it was originally performed on anything but a simple platform stage, though probably it was a roofed stage in the open air, like the *kagura-den* used for Uzume's sacred dance.<sup>7</sup> Indeed kyogen acting often

breaks the noh conventions, as happens in *The Ring of Bells* where the actor playing Taro Kaja uses all four corners of the stage to represent different temples in the town. whereas, according to noh practice, the corner upstage right, from the audience's viewpoint, is a 'dead' area so far as acting is concerned - but it is only natural that, having extra facilities available, the kyogen actor will use them. This is demonstrated again in the performance of *The Half Delivered Gift*, where the entire length of the entry 'bridge' (*hashigakari*) leading offstage to the audience's left, together with the full width of the stage, is used to represent a snowy mountain track up which Taro Kaja drives a herd of imaginary cows in a highly convincing manner using nothing but a stick to aid him. In noh, such a journey would have been represented more simply by a 'circular' motion around the stage itself, accompanied by a descriptive chant.

Vocally, kyogen actors use patterns of chant which are similar to those of noh, although they are much less elaborate, and, like noh performers, they do not change their voices very much to characterise any kind of role. However, despite their frequent use of dialect words, most of what they say can easily be understood by a modern audience, unlike the more 'antique' speeches of the noh. The language also contains humorous elements that could never arise in noh, amongst them the onomatopoeic words the actor uses to provide 'sound effects', a technique which seems to be unique to kyogen. When opening a heavy door, for instance, the actor vocalises the creaking sound as *gara-gara-gara*: when using a saw, it is *zoka-zoka-zoka*: when pouring sake out of a jug it is *dobu-dobu-dobu*: when pouring out the last few drops of sake from the same jug it is *p's'to-p's'to-p's'to*: and when playing the shamisen, it is *tereten-tereten-tereten*. A particularly effective example of this vocal technique are the sounds used for the bells of Kamakura in *The Sound of Bells*. According to Taro Kaja, the bell of the Jufuku Temple goes *jan-mon-mon-mon*, just an average bell; the bell of the Enkaku Temple is *pecan-pecan* - a very thin-sounding bell; the bell of the Gokurako Temple is *jaga-jaga-jaga* - a broken bell; and the bell of the Kencho Temple is *kon-mon-mon-mon* by far the best sound of the four.

It is often suggested that while noh is a theatre of music and dance, kyogen is mainly a drama of words and conversation, but it is really only a matter of degree. There is no doubt that kyogen began as a 'song and dance' form. There is even a small group of 'dance' pieces (*mai kyogen*) which take the same dramatic form as the 'noh of ghosts' where a travelling priest prays for a restless spirit and raises it to dance and sing and re-tell its story of the days long ago. There are only seven such pieces, but one of them, *Rakuami, the Flute Playing Priest*, is probably the earliest example of kyogen we have and dates back to some period before the middle ages. There is also a large group of songs which are drawn upon randomly to accompany the drinking-party scenes that often appear in the plays and their name, *koruri otai* ('small dance songs'), implies they are all meant to accompany dances. Some kyogen pieces, like *Spring, Girls, and Sake*, are highly lyrical and made up almost entirely of sequences drawn from these songs and dances. In other pieces a song is often used to state the theme or to stress a few important phrases or lines and a good melody can make even an essentially indecent and vulgar offer of love sound quite acceptable, as happens in *A Demon in Love* and *Visiting Hanago*. So it is not surprising that, upon close examination, even the most 'realistic' kyogen gestures and vocal modulations can be clearly seen to derive from the singing and dancing techniques that are hammered into the young actor during his training.

Kyogen uses mostly simple hand properties, but it uses a much wider range of them than the noh, including swords, hand bells, Buddhist rosaries, pilgrims' staffs, shovels, hoes, sickles, barrels, gourds, chopping boards, butchers' knives, and many other objects which were related to the daily life of the common people. However, there are two properties which are used symbolically to represent many other articles - these are the fan and a two-foot-high cylindrical black-lacquered box with a lid called a *kazora-oke*. The closed fan can be used to represent a whip, hammer, saw, knife, lance, halberd, sword or bow - and even a hand-drill in one play - and when it is opened, it can represent a wine-pitcher, wine-cup, door, archery target, and any number of other things. The *kazora-oke* is used mostly as

a stool to sit on, or a large box or container, but its lid sometimes becomes an extra-large wine cup.

The plays are usually performed with a face bare of any make-up or covering so that the actor's expressions can be enjoyed by the audience, but there are about fifty plays in which one character or another is masked. For example, there is a mask known as 'the whistler', which has pursed lips as if it was whistling. It is very like the comic mask which is used in the ancient *kagura* dances, so it could be very early indeed, perhaps even antedating *sarugaku*. It is used for an extremely large variety of characters: a scarecrow, an octopus, a locust, the spirit of a mosquito, the spirit of pine resin, and the spirit of a mushroom - and though its pursed lips make it seem a bit starved, its character is always cheerful. Then there is a mask used for comic demon roles, which is also sometimes used simply as a mask to frighten people, as it is in *The Angry Aunt and her Sake* where a young man wears it to scare his aunt out of the house so that he can drink her liquor. There are also masks for the gods and some animals, like the monkey mask which is used in *The Monkey-Skin Quiver*, and finally there are a rather exaggerated but realistic old man's mask, which is used for grandfather roles, and two masks for women, one representing a sweet and innocent, but rather plain, young girl and the other an older woman who is always angry.

The costumes used, like those in *noh*, are known as *shozoku* (which means 'robes'). They tell us nothing about the personality of the character wearing them but only about their social position. They are stylised versions of medieval costume. A daimyo wears his tall, black, triangular hat (*eboshi*), a kimono with broad horizontal stripes, a cloak with broad sleeves (*suo*) on top of that, and long over-trousers that drag on the floor behind him. A master wears the same long trousers and horizontally striped kimono, but he has a sleeveless cloak with stiff shoulders and he does not wear a hat. Taro Kaja wears a kimono with a plaid or checked pattern, shorter trousers and the same type of sleeveless stiff cloak as his master but decorated with a bolder and gaudier pattern. A woman wears a brightly patterned kimono tied with a narrow sash and has a white cloth wrapped round

her head with the ends hanging down on both sides. Priests and demons, too, are easily recognised from their costumes.

The main way in which kyogen differs from the noh, apart from its consciously childlike simplicity, is in its naked expression of emotion. When a master is annoyed with his servant he shouts, 'Hey, you rascal!' and when a woman is angry she stamps her foot on the ground and screams, 'Oh, how angry, how angry I am!' People drink and sing and dance together, and they often laugh loudly at the end of the play, from sheer joy. Conversely, in some plays, like *The Monkey-Skin Quiver*, a character becomes very sad and weeps noisily.

All this helps to arouse the audience's sympathy, and one thing at least is clear: although kyogen may be simple, it appeals to the audience. It is the only form of Japanese traditional drama which is not only flourishing, but steadily becoming more popular. More and more amateurs in Japan are studying it, and the current leader of the Nomura clan has recently devised several new kyogen, like *The Cowardly Samurai* which is based on the misfortunes of Sir John Falstaff in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In a poem which was included in a collection of Japanese and Chinese Poetry called the *Wakan Roei Shu* put together in 1013 AD.

<sup>2</sup> Arthur Waley quoting from the *Uji Shui* of 1215 AD, in Waley, p 15.

<sup>3</sup> Manzo Nomura in *Kyogen no michi (The Way of Kyogen)*; in Kenny (1989) p. xvii.

<sup>4</sup> Don Kenny in his introduction to *The Kyogen Book*, The Japan Times, 1989, p. xvii.

<sup>5</sup> Komparu (1983), Chap 1, pp 3-4.

<sup>6</sup> This paragraph and all that follows is drawn mostly from *Kyogen*, by Tatsuo Yoshikoshi & Hitashi Hata, translated by Don Kenny.

<sup>7</sup> The sacred *kagura-den* is a slightly larger version of the worship pavilion (*hai-den*) illustrated in Fig 2.