CHAPTER 4

The nature and history of the noh play

Noh, the drama of 'skill', whose origins were touched upon in the last chapter, is normally acted entirely by men [1] on a unique kind of stage (see Figs 3 and 4). The stage and the raised causeway that leads to it (the *hashigakari* or 'bridge') both have a roof over them. This is because, in its original form, noh was played in the open air, and the stage part of the theatre, which probably then lacked a 'bridge', was a pavilion erected for the performance of the sacred *kagura* dance, the four pillars supporting the roof being used to define the consecrated space in which the dance took place.[2] This sense of sacredness has persisted even into modern times, and a new noh stage still requires to be blessed before any performance can be given on it. The stage is made out of Japanese cypress wood (*hinoki*), and the theatre as a whole has proportions that are very satisfactory to the eye. The floor on which the performance takes place looks as if it is highly polished, but the bean-curd residue called *okara* with which it is annointed daily actually provides a slightly sticky, non-slip surface.

The stage area has virtually no decoration, except for the painting of a pine-tree on the back-wall and stems of bamboo on the wall which stands at right-angles to it, to the right of the rear stage (all positions on stage in this account are described from the audience's point of view). These decorations are traditional, and some Japanese believe that they simply recall the original open-air nature of the setting, when noh plays were performed under a famous pine-tree near the Kasuga Shrine in Nara, and clumps of living bamboo were used to mark out the entrance and exit points for the actors. However, both the action and language of noh plays are very symbolic, and according to the classical conventions of poetic imagery, the pine-tree implies 'pining' for the past - the Japanese word '*matsu*' having the same two meanings as the word 'pine' in English - whilst the knotted stems of the bamboo are used to symbolise the trials and tribulations of the world. Since these two elements - the sorrows of life and regrets concerning the past - seem to characterise the majority of noh plays, the decoration may well be thematic.

The performance of noh

The performance begins with the entry of the musicians - three drummers and a flute-player - who approach the stage along the *hashigakari*, dressed in formal court costume of the late middle-ages, with its broad, stiff shoulders. They take up their position on the rear stage, in front of the painting of the pine-tree - the hip-drummer and shoulder-drummer on stools slightly to left and right of centre respectively, whilst the two other musicians squat down on the stage floor beside them, the stick-drummer to their left and the flute-player to their right (see Fig 4). Next to appear are the members of the chorus, who also wear formal court dress. They enter quickly through a low sliding door (*kirido*) at the back of the right side of the rear stage, below the painted bamboos. This 'concealed' entrance, which is often jokingly called 'the bellyache door' because the actors have to double up to get through it, is mostly for chorus use, but occasionally assistants and very minor characters make their entry there. The most important characters all make their entrances and exits along the *hashigakari*.

The first character to appear is played by the *waki*, the supporting actor, and he sets the play going with an announcement of who he is, where he is supposed to be, and why he is there. This speech is usually delivered from the 'naming place' which is beside the *shite* pillar (the pillar which rises where the downstage edge of the *hashigakari* meets the stage). After this he moves to take up a position, usually seated, just above the pillar downstage right, which is named after him. This side position probably explains his name, because *waki* means 'side' and implies that he is an observer. The principal actor, the *shite* ('shtay'), who makes his appearance later on, also usually makes his first speech from the 'naming place' but, being more important, he may come further forward to deliver it.

However, sometimes the *shite*'s first speech is not delivered on the stage proper. There are three small living pine-trees planted on the audience side of the *hashigakari* at ground level, and these mark points along the causeway where the principal actors sometimes stop to make speeches. Traditionally they symbolise the situation of mankind (the middle pine) which is influenced by the powers of heaven (the pine to the left near the entry-door) and earth (the pine to the right nearest the stage). When the actors stop alongside them, these pines can sometimes have exactly that significance. For instance a god character who is making his entrance can deliver some of his speeches from 'heaven' - alongside the pine-tree nearest to the entry - and then make his appearance on 'earth' by moving swiftly forward and taking up a position beside the pine-tree nearest to the stage. Similarly a character can stop at the central 'mankind' pine to deliver a speech reflecting their inner emotions. This can happen at any time during the performance, not only when delivering the first speech, so the *hashigakari* should be considered an occasional extension to the acting area.

The use of the stage space is very conventional. A noh play consists essentially of an interchange between the *shite* and the *waki*. Either or both of these actors may have one or more *tsure* or assistants, but the play always has two 'opposed' forces represented on stage, and this dichotomy is emphasised by the fact that the downstage-right pillar is allocated to the *waki* and the partly upstage left 'naming place' pillar is allotted mainly to the *shite*. This creates a strong diagonal confrontation, along a line which divides the stage into two halves. The triangle of space to the left and front of this diagonal is used extensively by the *shite* to move and dance in, but the triangle of space to the right and behind the diagonal, beyond the *waki*, is largely considered to be 'dead' space, and any actor temporarily sitting there is usually considered not to exist, so far as the scene being played is concerned.

The diagonal is also observed in another piece of conventional stage movement which is common in noh plays - the action of 'travelling' from one place to another - which is often accompanied by a song in which the chorus describes the features of the landscape that are being passed. The track which is travelled by the actor can have a number of different shapes. The usual trip begins from the 'naming place'. The actor then moves in a curving path past the 'sight-guiding pillar' (downstage left) towards the '*waki* pillar' (downstage right) where he executes a turn and then moves in a straight line back to where he started. This results in a path that is shaped very much like an archer's bow and avoids the 'dead' area of the stage. There is another version of the trip in which the actor does not stop at the 'naming place' on his return but enters the *hashigakari* and ends his trip at the first pine, and there is yet another in which he proceeds a few steps down stage from the 'naming place' then turns sharply to his left and goes upstage centre to stop in front of the stick-drum player.

When the performance begins, the lyrical melody of the beautifully clear but slightly reedy noh flute (*nohkan*) will be fairly accessible to any western visitor, but when the actor's voice is first heard, either unaccompanied or added to the music, they will be struck immediately by the strangeness of the chant which is used to deliver most of the words. It is a very musical kind of chanting, very precisely pitched, which soars and swoops through a range of tones, and the western ear does not always find it easy, at first, to distinguish the chants from the songs of the piece - although the songs are, in fact, more melodic. The spectator's best policy is simply to relax and absorb the general effect and their ear will soon become attuned to the music. They will also begin to appreciate the skill of the chanter, which is all that is necessary, because on the musical level a noh play is best appreciated, like western opera, as a display of outstanding vocal virtuosity. This is true even for a modern Japanese audience, since most of the language of any noh play is far too archaic for them to understand, and like the western visitor, they need to use a plot-summary to follow what is going on.

The movement of a noh play is more accessible to a westerner than the music, although it is presented with such a high degree of control that it may initially appear stilted. The visitor is first likely to notice the smoothness of the actor's walk. He wears no footwear apart from white tabi-socks, which have a big toe separated from the others, and, when moving, the actor's heel and toe seem hardly to lift from the floor. It is a perfectly achieved kind of movement and the noh has sometimes been described as 'the art of walking'. The posture of the actor is almost always erect, both when walking and sitting, and his gestures are very limited and functional.

However, the feature of the noh play which in most cases is more important than the text and the chanting is a dance or series of dances. These, too, will seem very restrained to the western visitor, because they are almost always ground-based and have none of the lightness and upward aspiration of the western ballet, except on the occasions when a god dances after he has become intoxicated. Nonetheless, as the viewer gets to know the style better, these dances can become very moving - for instance, the sheer restraint of the ghost of a murdered man dancing out the story of his death to the chant of the chorus can give the performance an incredible degree of emotional tension.

Even silent movement, unaccompanied by a chant or music, can be extremely powerful in the noh. There is a play called *Sumida River* (*Sumidagawa*) where a mother driven mad by worry because her son has been taken away from her by slave-traders, follows their route for many days and eventually finds his grave. After she has expressed her agony at the loss, and the words of the play are expended, she walks two or three times around the stage in silence, and the effect is an extremely poignant one. By contrast an actor will sometimes stamp on the stage, particularly if he is an assertive character, to reinforce a point, and such a stamp is also conventionally used to mark his disappearance if he is a god. When this happens, the sound of the blow will be amplified by open pots placed strategically under the stage to catch and echo the sound.

The costumes of the performers can range from an austere black, or black-and-white, for priests and nuns, to rich and elaborate robes for gods, court ladies, and emperors. The more elaborate robes are made of the most beautiful brocades and printed materials. They are never gaudy, and have none of the over-theatricality, and occasional garishness, of some kabuki costumes. This is not surprising because, originally, they were often donated to the actors by rich nobles or Buddhist abbots, who had very discriminating tastes, and this tradition of tastefulness has been carried through directly into the modern noh.

A mask (*nohmen* or *omote*) will be worn by the principal actor-dancer (*shite*), and by his companion (*tsure*) if he has one, when the character that he is playing is a woman, a warrior, an old man, a demon or a god - and the subject-matter of the play will almost always ensure that the *shite* is, in fact, playing one of these roles. The rare exceptions are plays where the hero is a male character who once actually existed, and in such roles, instead of wearing a mask, the *shite* is required to 'kill the face', draining it of expression and turning it into the equivalent of a mask (*hitamen*). This practice is followed by all the unmasked performers in a noh play. When killing the face, the facial muscles must not be used to form any expression and, strictly speaking, the actor should not even allow his eyelids to blink. The 'dead' face is then used in exactly the same way that a mask is used. It may be tilted upwards to 'brighten' it (*omote o terasu*) which usually expresses joy, or tilted down to 'cloud' it (*omote o kumorasu*) which expresses sadness, or it can be turned from side to side, either quickly to show a strong emotion like anger, or slowly and perhaps repeatedly in order to show some deeper and more inarticulate emotion.

The properties of the noh stage are highly conventionalised and kept to a minimum. The folding fan which the actor usually carries is perhaps the most important property of all. It is mainly used to extend and emphasise the movements of his arm in the dance, but it can also be used to represent many objects, such as a wine-jug, flute, water-scoop, or writing brush, sometimes even a sword - though usually weapons are more realistically represented, and the short-sword, belt-sword, bow, pike, spear, and Chinese broad-sword all make an appearance. A boat or a chariot will be represented on stage by an open framework of bamboo. Palaces, houses, cottages, and huts, are all represented by four supporting posts covered with a roof, their different natures often being indicated by the degree to which the sides are enclosed to indicate constriction. Some stage-props are very specific to the plays they serve; amongst these are the grave mound in *Sumida River*, the pine-tree that the ghost of Matsukaze mistakes in her madness for her long-lost lover, or the temple bell that is brought crashing down by the vindictive serpent spirit in *Dojoji* - this last is a stiff structure made wholly of cloth, but it needs to be very large, because the *shite* has to leap up into it, and change his mask inside it. There are also two properties with a more general use: a wooden, cloth-covered platform the size of a *tatami* mat (*ichijo-dai*) which is used to represent a high place such as a dais, a hilltop, or a location up in the clouds; and the same large cylindrical container with a lid that was mentioned when discussing kyogen (the *kazura-oke*) - in noh this is often placed centre stage for the *shite* to sit on, and it is sometimes used for the same purpose in the mirror room, while the actor is waiting to make his entry. However, everything is kept as simple as possible so that it does not interfere with the actors' movement and dancing.[3]

The mood most frequently induced by a noh play to-day, when the language is not understood, except by the actors, and the chanting, dance and movement are all extremely concentrated and powerful, is a kind of detached appreciation of a superbly orchestrated multi-media performance. The spectator is drawn into a relaxed but alert frame of mind, almost a meditative state, which is extremely conducive to pondering the serious matters that the play deals with - at least this is the effect on a modern spectator.

As we shall see later on, descriptions of early noh performances suggest that in those days the plays had a very different, and much more immediate, kind of appeal.

The dramatic action of a noh play

At this point, it will be helpful to look at the shape of a typical noh play, so let us consider the dramatic action of a piece called *Nishikigi* (*Love Tokens*), which represents a type of play that is frequently presented, the 'noh of ghosts'.

The first character to appear is a priest, who is instantly recognisable from his costume. He is, of course, the *waki,* who always sets the scene. He enters down the *hashigakari* and, when he reaches the stage, tells the audience that he is taking advantage of a short vacation to do some sight-seeing in the provinces. He wonders exactly where he is and moves across the stage to his usual position at the right front, just beside the chorus. He says he has heard that the village of Kefu is on the coast nearby and wonders if he can reach it before nightfall.

Two other characters now appear on the *hashigakari*, a man and a woman. These are the *shite* and his companion. They are dressed like two peasants, but they linger near the 'heaven' tree, and exchange speeches there which suggest that they are deeply entangled in some kind of hopeless love-affair, and because they linger in that position, the audience suspects that they are perhaps not entirely beings of this world.

The chorus now intervenes to suggest that the man has offered his love to the woman for a thousand nights without being accepted and, as it does so, the two characters advance down the *hashigakari*. The priest, who now sees them, takes them for a man and his wife. He observes that the woman seems to be holding a narrow length of woven cloth and that the man is carrying a wooden rod (which the audience can see is coloured red). He asks the travellers what these objects mean. They tell him that these two things are famous mementos of an event that happened in the area. The priest asks them to tell him the story. The chorus say that it all happened long ago, and for the first time they imply that the seeming man and his wife are in fact disembodied spirits. The man tells him that it is the local custom for a suitor to set up one of these wooden rods, or *nishikigi*, inscribed with his name and a poem, as an offer of marriage in front of the door of the girl he loves. The woman then takes up the wand of the man she wants, and leaves all the others where they are. The female character tells the priest that there is a local legend about a man who never had his love-tokens accepted and after a thousand nights died of despair and was buried in a nearby cave together with all his love-wands. The priest says he would like to see the cave, which is near Kefu, and they agree to take him there.

They travel to the cave, illustrating their action with a 'journey' (*michiyuki*) round the stage which follows the usual 'archer's bow' shape, while the chorus sings a travelling song recounting the places they pass and the sights they see as they go. The song concludes with a description of the autumn weather, the shadows of night approaching, and the lonely cry of an owl. The *shite* and his companions have now reached the 'earth' end of the *hashigakari*. The two ghosts pause as the priest returns to his usual place, where he sits and takes up a sleeping posture. They then retreat up the *hashigakari* and exit. The chorus declares that they have gone into the cave.

The priest wakes; he is restless and prays to Buddha to ease the spirits of the man who died of despair and his unyielding lady-love. The two spirits reappear and thank him for his prayer, which has now united them in love after so many hundreds of years. The chorus draw attention to the cave. The priest tells us that he suddenly sees its interior glittering brightly, looking like the inside of a house, with a loom set up, and a pile of love-tokens on the floor. He begs the spirits to show him the story of what happened. They do so, in the form of a dance, accompanied by a song which they partly share with the chorus, showing him the offering of the love-tokens and the unresponsiveness of the girl at her loom. Meanwhile the chorus recounts the emotions of the man as he gradually sinks into despair, and give voice to his unfulfilled yearning to be married.

Then the dance changes and becomes more animated. As a result of the priest's prayers the miseries of the unfulfilled lovers have been brought to an end. Their spirits, which have been trapped for so long on earth by their inability to set aside their emotions of regret and disappointment, are now united and freed, and can at last be reborn. The chorus imitate the cock crowing. It is morning. The priest again falls into a sleeping posture. The two lovers move towards the *hashigakari* and slowly depart, whilst the chorus beg the audience to recall that, even though they and the priest will soon wake up again, the whole of life is as insubstantial as a dream. They declare that there is nothing left now but a bare field containing the empty cave which is hidden in its own darkness, whilst up above the morning wind is blowing through the pine trees.[4]

The structure of a noh play

The structure of this play is fairly typical. Zeami, who created the form of the modern noh drama described the ideal shape for it to take in 1423 in his *Treatise on Composing Noh Plays*.[5] There he says that a play should normally be divided into five steps or sequences (*dan*). In the first sequence, the *waki* introduces himself and explains the background of the coming action; in the second sequence, the *shite* enters and delivers a solo song; in the third sequence, there is a brief exchange of questions and answers between the *waki* and the *shite*; in the fourth sequence, there is either a musical *kusemai* (a kind of danced story) or a *tada-utai* (a popular song with irregular rhythms); and in the fifth sequence, the *shite* re-enters transformed into his real character, and there is an appropriate climactic dance or some other vigorous action. If it is a dance, it can be either *hayabushi* (rapid music, with two syllables of the text to each beat), which is exciting, or *kiribyoshi* (a slower rhythm, of one syllable per beat) which produces a calm and majestic effect.

This pattern is essentially followed in *Nishikigi*, although the two lovers are clearly implied to be ghosts from their first entrance, which is a little unusual, and they return as their 'real characters' in the fourth, rather than the fifth, sequence, which happens quite often. Otherwise the recommended structure is observed, and the dances in the last two sections differ in tempo - a slower narrative dance and a quicker dance of rejoicing - as Zeami implies they should. In other plays the transformation of the ghost from what is apparently a local peasant or everyday person into their 'real' form can be quite startling, and involve the *shite* in making a striking change of costume and adopting a second mask. For instance, a ferryman can be transformed into a fierce and emotionally ravaged warrior, or a maidservant into a savage lion. In *Nishikigi* the change is more a psychological change of attitude than an alteration of external appearance but it is, in its own way, no less memorable.

The growth and development of noh

Having looked briefly at the structure and content of a noh play, we are now in a position to discover where this form of theatre came from and how it took the shape that it has to-day.[6] We have already considered its very early origins in the *sarugaku* entertainments when we were describing the origins of kyogen. Here we need to consider what happened to it later.

In the twelfth century, when the Heian court in Kyoto was still pursuing its ideal world of music, poetry, love and fine calligraphy, a new form of drama began to spring up in the important Buddhist monasteries. It was used to round out festivals or ceremonies, or to entertain important guests, and it was provided by troupes of *sarugaku* performers who were servants of the monastery. These men were accustomed to take religious names ending in '-ami' which was an abbreviation of the name of Amida Buddha, the benevolent saviour who gathers the souls of true believers into his Western Paradise - names like Kiami ('spirit of Amida'), Zoami ('essence of Amida'), and so forth. These names suggest that the actors were considered to be lay-priests, although they never in fact took holy orders or conducted any ceremonies.

The new type of play took the form of song-and-dance pieces which showed demons being overcome by priests armed with the teachings of Buddha. These were not yet noh plays but later some of them were refined and taken into the noh repertory as 'demon plays', which were the plays usually performed to round out the day's programme. 'Demon plays' are one of the five main categories of play into which the noh repertory is divided. These new plays proved to be so popular with the general public that the actors added them to the programmes of general entertainments and farces that they toured round the countryside at times when the monasteries did not need their services. The monasteries were happy with this arrangement, because when the actors were on the road they provided their own upkeep and ceased to be a burden upon the community resources. In any case, they were only really needed by the monasteries at specific times, like local festivals or the visits of important nobles. But woe betide the actors if they did not turn up at the monasteries when they were supposed to be there! If that happened the very least the leaders of the troupe could expect were twenty strokes of the heavy bamboo!

When the time for a ceremony came round, the acting troupes often had a very important part to play. The most famous occasion, from a noh point of view, was the Wakamiya festival at the Kasuga Shrine, which in those days used to occur on the 17th and 18th of December, although nowadays it occurs in October. On the first day of the festival there was a long procession from the small temple at the Kasuga shrine to the Kofuku-ji monastery nearby, in order to transfer the image of the local god to the monastery for the duration of the festival. During the procession, various groups of performers took turns to give a series of short musical dance pieces in front of a sacred tree - a majestic and very ancient pine - that stood beside the second *torii*, or ceremonial gate, set up on the road to the main temple. This tree, as has already been noted, is regarded by some as the original of the pine-tree painted on the panel at the back of all noh stages. Performances of plays were also presented to the image of the god when he arrived at his temporary shrine at the great south gate of the monastery, with the actors facing the shrine. On the second day the god was ceremonially returned to the Kasuga temple from the temporary shrine at the monastery by means of another procession. When the image had left, further performances were given at the temporary shrine but now the performers turned their backs upon it and played to the audience outside, and the pieces given were pure entertainment without any particularly religious content.

As time passed, the contact of the actors with the scholars in the monasteries, and the noblemen who constantly attended their performances, became closer and this led them to add speeches of a poetical nature to the pieces they were presenting in order to enhance the song and dance. The first examples of this took the form of chanted monologue that was used to establish the particular setting and situation of the coming drama and, in this way, the *waki*'s role was born. More significantly, though, the contact with these same noble patrons led the actors to incorporate elegant songs and dances that were currently popular at court and, in particular, to borrow the dance techniques and style of the serious *gagaku*, or 'court music', which had been imported from China and which, even as early as the eighth century, contained well-developed theatrical elements in the form of narrative dances, performed by a single dancer in a mask, which celebrated the achievements of great military heroes and famous emperors of China or the deeds of the ancient Chinese gods. These dances eventually provided another of the five categories of play into which the noh is generally divided, the 'play of blessing' or 'god play' which was usually used to introduce a noh programme. The controlled gestures and movements of the court dances were also absorbed into the 'god play' and endowed it with an air of stateliness and dignity.

As a result of this, by the thirteenth century we see something that we definitely recognise as noh developing and, indeed, by then it is already being called by that name, which means that the actors were beginning to see themselves as 'skilled' professionals rather than priests. Yet it did not as yet have any kind of fixed shape, despite its contact with the 'court music', which had a very strong aesthetic of *jo-ha-kyu* that we will consider later. It was also during this period that nobles began to patronise the players heavily and invite them to their mansions and, as a result, they began to tell the stories of famous Japanese warriors in their plays, thus creating another of the five basic categories of noh, the 'warrior play', which usually took the second place in the programme. The actors performed in the courtyards of noble houses, and the lords, we hear, sometimes required them to enact 'warrior' pieces in full armour and even mounted upon war-horses.

Meanwhile the *dengaku* actors, who tended to be associated mostly with Shinto festivals and small rural temples in the countryside, noted the success of the *sarugaku* actors and began to develop noh plays of their own. These were, of course, still *sarugaku* noh plays, even though they were performed by *dengaku* actors, as will be seen from the description of a medieval performance given later. They seem to have differed from the offerings of the *sarugaku* companies by using simpler stories and mostly traditional songs and dances and in the early stages they certainly depended more on the participation of the whole troupe than upon the expertise of individual actors - although it was not long before the *dengaku* troupes began to develop famous *shite* of their own. Perhaps the relative simplicity of their approach appealed to the jaded palates of the courtiers, because there were violent crazes for *dengaku* performances of noh at court, particularly in the first three quarters of the fourteenth century. Nonetheless, by 1603, when Ieyasu had finally settled the country down and established the Tokugawa Shogunate, *dengaku* troupes were falling steadily out of favour, and never recovered their appeal - so all the noh troupes we have today are the descendants of *sarugaku* companies.

The establishment of an enforced peace after several centuries of violent civil war caused the samurai warriors and their lords to look elsewhere for something to occupy their minds and the result, amongst other things, was an attempt to revive the artistic values of the ancient Heian court. It was this artistic revival that directed their attention to the poetry and other writings of the period, which, like Lady Murasaki's famous novel, *The Tale of Genji*, were deeply involved with sensitive and highly emotive tales of love. As a result the play about women, the 'wig' play, came into existence, traditionally the third and most artistic category of noh, and together with it the 'madwoman' or 'lunatic' play, which formed the fourth category, and was sometimes more Confucian than Buddhist in its values.

At this time, too, the simple form of demon play which was currently used to end a performance, began to be rather looked down upon, and more refined treatments of the defeat of evil, or its conversion into good, developed, like *The Valley Rite* which we will consider later.

Subscription list (*kanjin*) performances

By this time a large number of noh stages existed but they were all located in Buddhist monasteries, Shinto temples or noblemen's courtyards. When the troupes performed in country villages on tour they used any stage that was available or even played on the ground. Noh had by now become so popular, that it began to be used by priests from the Buddhist temples to raise money for essential public works like repairing a local road or bridge or building a new one. Such shows were known as *kanjin* or 'subscription-list' performances and usually took place on a temporary noh stage erected in the countryside, most often on a dry river bed, which provided a naturally level foundation to build on. The organiser (*kanjin-hijiri*) would allow about a month for the building of a stage, if one did not already exist, and for the erection of stands and boxes, which tended to be commissioned and built by those who were going to use them. The boxes were set up in a circle around the stage at a distance of about fifty or sixty feet and accommodated the rich citizens and noblemen attending, while the poorer people sat on the ground within the circle and other nobles and gentlemen brought their carriages to any points at the edge of the audience area where there were no boxes and watched the performance from there. However, not all *kanjin* performances were presented in the open - they were sometimes given in one of the halls of a temple, probably because this did not involve the extra expense of building a stage or, indeed, of making any arrangements except those to collect the money.

Kanjin programmes were usually presented in the form of three separate one-day performances, with intervals of three or four days in between, to rest the actors and increase the attendance. After all, not everybody would be willing, or indeed able, to watch plays on three consecutive days. Sometimes, though, the gaps between the playing days would get lengthened by bad weather, which inhibited performance because in the open air nobody was protected except the actors under their roofs and the nobles in their boxes.

For many years the financial strings of *kanjin* performances remained in the hands of the monasteries but it was inevitable that the actors were going to cash in on this kind of performance sooner or later and this eventually happened when the power of the monasteries was reduced by the Tokugawa Shogunate after 1603.

An eventful performance in 1349

These early noh performances had great popular appeal, which seems rather curious to us today, because we view the noh as a highly refined and intellectual form of drama. However, the elegance and exclusiveness of the modern noh is partly the bequest of Zeami, of whom we shall have more to say later. A description we have of a *kanjin* noh in 1349 shows us the nature of an early performance and also draws attention to the dangers of public disorder in the days of the clan wars. It occurred at a time when competitions between noh troupes were becoming very popular and fiercely contended - a practice which led to noh masters passing on 'secret writings' about the art to their successors in the clan. The whole passage is worth quoting in full: [7]

'On the eleventh day of the sixth month of this year, a wandering priest, who planned to build a bridge at Shijo, brought together the *dengaku* players of the Shinza ('the new guild') and the Honza ('the old guild') and, dividing them into two companies of old and young performers, set them against each other in a trial of skill. The stands were built on the river bank at Shijo. As it was to be a rare spectacle, men and women of all ranks thronged to it in extraordinary numbers. The entertainment was to be enjoyed by nobles, including the Regent and government ministers, by abbots of noble blood, and by warriors like the Shogun. Because of this, there were all sorts of people vying with each other to set up the most impressive stands - servants, nobles, court officials, samurai from different clans, and even priests from a number of shrines and temples. Amongst other materials, pillars of wood were brought from Nagato, which, when they had been cut and shaped, were some of them five by six inches thick and others a massive eight inches by nine, and a great, imposing structure was built, four hundred and fifteen feet in circumference (*which means that the boxes were about 60 feet from the stage*) and three or four stories high.

'When the time arrived, fine carriages made from sweet-smelling wood jostled for places and there was no space left to tie up the richly caparisoned horses. Drapery leapt and danced in the wind, and all the air was filled with the fragrance of incense. The old and the young companies of performers had separate tents to the east and the west, with a bridge leading to the stage on either side. The curtains of the dressing-rooms were made of painted cloth. The hangings were of gold brocade which, as they fluttered in the wind, looked for all the world like leaping flames. The stage was spread with red and emerald rugs, and covered with folding-chairs and stools, while leopard and tiger skins hung at the back and over the rails, so that the eye was dazzled at the sight and all other thoughts were driven from the mind.

'Then, as the first sounds of stately music brought a murmur from the eagerly waiting audience, with the sound of the drums and the introductory notes of a flute coming from the dressing-rooms on opposite sides, eight beautiful young boys, all dressed in robes of gold brocade, richly perfumed and with highly-painted faces, slowly emerged from the eastern dressing-room. From the west, eight priests filed out, handsome men with lightly made-up faces and blackened teeth, all resplendent in fantastically-coloured robes embroidered with all manner of flowers and birds, which they wore over silver, patterned trousers, gathered in at the ankles where the dye was the deepest. As they came in beating time, with rush hats worn at an angle, the whole scene was truly magnificent...

'A most impressive performance followed of a *sarugaku* noh, about a miraculous blessing given by the god of Hiyoshi. During the course of this play, a child of seven or eight, wearing a monkey mask, came out of the young actors' dressing-room, reverently carrying a sacred staff. His top robe was of gold brocade on a red ground and on his feet he wore slippers of fur. Entering to a tripping beat, and travelling diagonally to and fro along the red and green arched bridge to the stage, he jumped up onto the handrail, turned this way and that, then leapt down and up again on the other side. The scene as he did so was like something from another world. The excitement was unbearable, as people told one another that the god of the shrine must surely have taken possession of the boy for him to be able to perform such marvels.

'So it came to pass that the people in the stands covering more than five hundred feet, unable to contain themselves, or even remain in their places, filled the whole arena with gasps and cries in a sustained clamour of excitement and suspense. Even beautiful ladies-in-waiting, watching from lightly curtained areas near the Shogun's box, with the hems of their shot-silk robes held high to conceal their faces, could be seen lifting the hanging curtains with their fans. Then, as everybody craned forward to look, one of the stands built of heavy beams five or six inches thick began to tilt and, before you could even catch your breath, the stands near it, two-stories high, covering an area of twelve hundred and forty-five feet in all, came crashing down one after another.

'The number of those who died among the great piles of fallen timber is past all knowing. In the confusion thieves began stealing swords. Some ran off with them but others, having found blades, stayed to lay about them. Cries and shouts rose up from people who had had limbs broken or slashed, from others, covered with blood, who had been run through with swords or halberds when they joined in the fighting, and from others again who had scalded themselves with the boiling water used for making tea. The scene might well have been that of evildoers crying and wailing in a common hell. The *dengaku* players, still wearing devil masks and brandishing red canes, gave chase to thieves who were escaping with stolen costumes. Young samurai unsheathed their weapons and went after men who had carried off their masters' ladies. Some of the abductors turned and fought, others were cut down as they fled, and lay with reddening bodies. It was as if Hell's unending battles and the tortures exacted by the demons were being carried out before your eyes.'

This is admittedly a highly dramatic account of an exceptional event but it shows how different the atmosphere of performances was in the hey-day of noh's popularity compared to the hushed and reverential atmosphere in which the plays tend to be performed today. When people went to the noh in those days they expected to be entertained by the skill of the actors and overwhelmed by the splendour of their costumes. They ate and drank and chatted with their neighbours, and cheered and shouted with excitement and approval at the parts that pleased them most, as if they were in a wrestling stadium. In fact they behaved very much like the kabuki audience did a few centuries later, because in an age when violence and war, disease, fire and famine, not to mention the inevitable earthquakes, were everyday hazards, the music and colour of noh was something which enabled the ordinary people to briefly escape from their wretchedness, and the performances must have had a vitality and force quite different to the concentrated and controlled impression that they give today.

The noh troupes establish guilds (*za*)

Throughout the late Heian period and the Kamakura period that followed it - from about 1100 to 1333 CE - the troupes of both *dengaku* and *sarugaku* performers were steadily increasing in number and, since there were only a few really profitable performances that could be given at temples and shrines, this led to increasingly fierce competition for the pickings. Because of this the actors began to consider organising themselves for greater efficiency and looking around them they found themselves surrounded by the newly developed trade guilds, each of which exerted a monopolistic influence over a specific area of production, within which it controlled the flow of raw materials, arranged for distribution of the products of its members, fixed prices, settled disputes, and so on - which was precisely what the actors wanted. So they set about establishing guilds, or *za*, of their own. In their case, each *za* tended to be attached to a powerful shrine or temple and it would be granted a monopoly over all performances within the shrine's or temple's domains, which could be extensive. In return, it was understood that the *za* would give free performances for the temple on the occasion of certain local religious festivals.

The *dengaku* players were the first in the field, in about 1200, establishing their Honza (or 'original guild') near Kyoto and their Shinza (or 'new guild') at Nara. *Sarugaku* players, on the other hand, were at first prevented from establishing guilds by the powerful Buddhist temples that employed them, which were not happy at the idea of dealing with an independent 'trade union' when they could simply keep the actors under their thumb. Eventually, though, the *sarugaku* players managed to get their own Honza established at Tamba in about 1260 and their Shinza in Settsu province a little later. Many more guilds were established after that by both types of company, and one or two *sarugaku za* have been preserved in Yamato to the present day; but, for the most part, the word *za* has come to mean the theatre in which the company is performing - their 'guildhall' as it were. The coming of the guilds had a profound effect on the development of noh, because the players began to feel that they had the guild's honour to maintain in competition with other guilds and also a guild tradition to perpetuate and noh was the most serious part of their material, where their skills could be raised to the highest level and shown at their best.

To maintain the value of their monopolistic privileges, the guilds naturally limited their membership and, even when a vacancy occurred in their ranks, they did not fill it at once but would cast about for the most useful member they could find - preferably somebody who was not only potentially a good actor but who also came from a fairly rich family. However, in various ways, *dengaku* noh guilds and *sarugaku* noh guilds differed in such matters.

So far as the *dengaku* noh guilds were concerned, there seems to have been a traditional membership of thirteen actors. No convincing reason has ever been advanced for this, although various 'reasons' were discovered later, like the fact that the Buddha had thirteen important disciples. A more likely reason is that the number represents the thirteen lunar months of the year, because we find the number thirteen linked 'magically' all over the world with groups who have religious responsibilities for sowing and reaping grain, and the *dengaku* players were originally a group of that kind. New members for the *dengaku* noh guilds were always auditioned before appointment and their temple or shrine would then ratify the choice by providing the new member with an official pass to their precincts. In fact temple authorities never tried to interfere with the choice of new *dengaku* actors but, as *dengaku* noh became more popular, rich and powerful patrons from outside sometimes demanded that temples should license particular performers.

In the *sarugaku* noh guilds, there seems to have been no traditional number of members and each guild established its own. In early times this could extend from as few as ten players to as many as thirty. Later it became much more formalised and we will consider its shape in a moment. So far as the new members of a *sarugaku* noh guild were concerned, the players always demanded a stiff entry fee and often dispensed with an audition entirely - but, then, we must remember that the companies were so professional that nobody who was not highly talented would even have dared to apply, for fear of losing face. In 1350 the fee was at least the equivalent of sixty or seventy bushels of rice for *each* member of the Upper Group of the guild, which usually consisted of six actors, so we are talking about at least 360 bushels of rice, which would be enough to completely fill a large western family house!

The later organisation of a *sarugaku* noh guild was quite clearly defined. There was an 'upper group' (or *kami za*) of six actors, referred to as *tayu* ('trustees'), one of them being the *oza*, or guild master, who was the head of the troupe and also of the clan. These terms were virtually synonymous, because any actor who joined the troupe from outside gave up his original name and was adopted into the family. After the *oza*, the other actors were strictly ranked as second, third, and so on, according to skill and experience. The 'middle group' (*naha no za*) had a leader known as the *ichiro* ('most senior') and no known limit to its membership. This group consisted of all the musicians and kyogen players of the company. Finally there was a 'boys' group', which was much less important and consisted of the male children of all the players of the guild, most of whom were studying to become actors - it was a guild tradition that a son should if possible be raised in his father's trade. They usually began their training at the age of seven and graduated to the lowest position in either the upper or middle group at the age of fifteen.

The kyogen players in the 'middle group' of a *sarugaku* noh troupe were there, as has been explained, because it was customary to perform kyogen farces between the noh plays in a programme, to lighten what might otherwise have become a very intense performance. Also, as the archaic language of the plays became increasingly difficult for the audience to understand, kyogen characters were introduced in the middle of a noh play to summarise the action in contemporary speech. When they did this, though, they were not usually intended as comic relief, and had to be careful to keep their humorous inclinations in check.

Kan'ami and Zeami - the creators of modern noh

The history of noh extends, of course, to modern times but, for our present purposes, we do not need to pursue it beyond the appearance of the two creators of 'modern' noh - Kan'ami ('the perfection of Amida') and his son Zeami ('the greatness of Amida').

Kanze Saburo Kiyotsugu, who later took the name of Kan'ami, was born in 1334, and made his reputation as a noh actor amongst the ordinary uneducated people of the time. He was outstanding in all branches of his art, as musician, playwright and actor. His son Zeami tells us that he was able to perform in styles that appealed to all ranks of society, from high to low,[8] and that he always seemed young on stage, even when he was in fact an old man.[9] The noh plays he wrote are full of dramatic tension but they are also extremely moving and have elements of humour and lively dialogue to carry them along. His willingness to experiment and his dedication to his art are shown by his importation of the *kusemai* dance into the noh play - a significant development, which enlivened the tradition and opened up new possibilities.

Kusemai was a kind of danced 'ballad' that was extremely popular, particularly in the area around Kyoto. Its name means 'unconventional dance' and it seems to have caught the fancy of the Japanese public because it was rather jazzy in style and had a powerful syncopated beat. This enthralled them, despite the fact that they found it 'strange in the extreme'. However, it clearly did not appeal to those of a staider and more Confucian turn of mind. The retired emperor Go-Komatsu, for instance, after having it performed for him three or four times, declared that it was the music of an age of turmoil and undesirably disturbing to the spirit. It was usually danced by a beautiful young woman to the beat of a drum. The dancer, who was dressed in a plain white male costume, often carried a sword, as well as a fan, and wore a ceremonial male head-dress. The movements of the dance were also very masculine and part of its appeal may have been the cross-dressing of the performer, because, although it was sometimes danced by very beautiful young men, the supreme dancers of the tradition were always female. In Kan'ami's day, many *kusemai* dancers were patronised by the nobility, and, although they had no guild, and did not fit into any convenient niche in the social scale - which worried the authorities - they often mixed as entertainers with people of the very highest rank and treated them on equal, or even positively familiar, terms.

Despite the primary appeal of the dance's rhythmical drum beat, the words of *kusemai* were also important. The performance always contained a strong narrative element, taken either from the sagas of clan warfare, like the *Heike Saga* (*Heike Monogatari)*, or from legends about Buddhist champions and famous Buddhist shrines. As a result of this it used a lot of descriptive movement and mime. Kan'ami was clearly attracted to it by its vigour and its theatrical potential and realised that it could be incorporated into the structure of the noh play as a form of narrative to the great advantage of the form. But before he could use it he needed to understand it thoroughly. This could only be done by studying under a master of the art and the traditions of *kusemai* were handed down secretly by word of mouth from woman to woman within a few specific families. Zeami tells us that his father learnt the dance from Otozuru, a member of the Kaga women's group in Nara. He spent a year doing so and it seems that he chose to study under a woman because the women dancers' performances were less harsh and crude than those of the men.

In the Japanese society of that time it was very daring of Kan'ami, as a man, to study under a woman - few Japanese men would do it even to-day. It was also very daring of him, artistically, to consider incorporating the strong, catchy rhythms of *kusemai* into the noh play, which had previously been dominated by a soft, melodic *ko-uta* style. Nor did he incorporate it immediately. He first presented it as a separate item in the programme, which was possible because a *sarugaku* performance in his day still consisted of several different 'turns', of which the noh play was merely the most important. However, he soon went on to incorporate *kusemai* into the noh itself, softening the form, Zeami tells us, so that it would blend with the current style of *sarugaku* dancing. By 1374 the dance was wholly integrated, and gave the company's performances of noh a unique 'flavour'. It now forms a significant element in about three-quarters of the noh plays that are performed and is found, as we observed earlier, in the fourth sequence of the play, the point where the *shite* and the chorus are recounting and enacting the emotional story that lies at the heart of the piece. In most cases it is kept quite short, so it does not detract from the final fast dance, but in two plays it appears in an extended form as 'a play within the play'.

It may have been the originality of his company in the matter of *kusemai* that caused Kan'ami to be called in 1374 to give a 'command performance' before the great Shogun, Ashikaga Yoshimitsu, who was then just sixteen years old. Kan'ami, who had never previously appeared before any Shogun, was 41 years old at the time, and Zeami, who performed with him, was eleven. The young Shogun immediately fell in love with Zeami, and his passion for the boy changed the whole history of noh, because, as a result, he took the company under his patronage and he and Zeami became lovers - not a new experience for Zeami, who had been sent up to a local monastery from the age of seven, with all the other beautiful boys from the village, to exchange his sexual favours for rice and fuel, which he brought back the next morning for his starving family. Homosexual liaisons were accepted without question by the Japanese society of the time but the affair with Yoshimitsu caused some comment at court because the prince had chosen to associate with an actor - and actors were considered as the dregs of society. However, Yoshimitsu ignored the courtiers' reactions and undertook the education of Zeami in court manners and good taste, turning him into a man of great restraint and refinement, who carried those characteristics through into all the plays he wrote and performed.

Kan'ami only enjoyed the benefits of the prince's patronage for ten years, because he died in 1384, but Zeami and the Kanze family company continued to perform at court until 1443, when Zeami died at the age of 80. Throughout his life, he based his work on what he had learnt from his father, always trying to give the noh greater narrative power and emotional expressiveness and a more effective shape. He also endowed it with a 'literary' flavour that would appeal to the courtiers by including references to famous poems and Buddhist writings. So far as the acting was concerned, he greatly strengthened the role of the *shite*, paying particular attention to the *kusemai* and, on the whole, reduced the importance of the chorus, which he considered a rather primitive component of the play. He wrote, composed, choreographed, directed, produced and performed in more than a hundred plays, all of them dramatic masterpieces and was also famous for his ability to write pieces for the principal dancers of other companies - by no means an easy task, since each of them had a distinctive style of his own.

Unfortunately, his later life was not very happy. After Yoshimitsu died in 1408 he received scant attention from the son and grandson who succeeded him, probably because the whole family had always disapproved of the liaison with an actor. However, as he started to find his services less in demand, he spent his time polishing his theories about the noh and writing secret treatises about it to pass on to his sons and his nephew - although ironically the tradition he created was eventually continued not by the Kanze troupe at all but by the Komparu clan, one of whose members, Komparu Zenchiku, had married his daughter. We will look at some of Zeami's theories in the next chapter.

NOTES

[1] There have however been some 'official' women performers of noh since 1900. A Japanese friend informs me that a Belgian actress, Miss Dupont, played in *Hagoromo*, which is principally a dance play - see Waley (1921), p 217 - in 1919, whilst the first 'officially approved' female performer was Kimiko Tsumura who played *Ataka* in 1939.

[2] Like the kyogen stage, as we have already noted. The sacred structure is called a *kagura-den* and it is a slightly larger version of the worship pavilion (*hai-den*) illustrated in Fig 2.

[3] Komparu (1983), Chap 16, discusses the properties and provides several illustrations.

[4] An excellent translation of *Nishikigi* will be found in *The Translations of Ezra Pound*, Faber, 1953, p. 286. The hand of W.B.Yeats can be traced in it. Yeats later used the piece as the basis for his own dance-play *The Dreaming of the Bones*.

[5] *Nosakusho*, in Rimer and Masakazu (1984), p. 149 ff.

[6] The following summary of the history of the noh is drawn from P.G.O'Neill's *Early No Drama*, Lund Humphries, London, 1958. I have outlined only the main features.

[7] The account quoted will be found in O'Neill, op. cit., pp 75-77.

[8] Rimer and Masakazu (1984), p. 124.

[9] Rimer and Masakazu (1984), p. 57.

CHAPTER 5

Aesthetic principles underpinning the noh

The successful presentation of noh depends first and foremost upon concentration and economy of means. This is particularly well illustrated by the reaction of a Japanese noh master who was attempting the impossible task of teaching some American dance students how to perform noh over a period of six weeks in 1966. Let us call him 'the Master in America'.[1] The students were learning to perform a play in which, at the moment in question, the Lady Yuya was supposed to be travelling in a chariot to view the cherry-blossoms in the capital. The student playing Yuya had been undulating his head during the song describing the journey. 'Ask him what he thinks he is doing.' demanded the master. The interpreter communicated the inquiry. 'I was justifying the journey,' said the student. 'You know. By moving my head ever so subtly I was trying to convey the feeling of motion. It's a long promenade according to the lyrics. It travels all over the city of Kyoto. A sense of advancing, of transportation has just got to be there.'

The master was curt: 'Tell him not to try anything like that... Tell him the point is that a noh performer has no right to limit the flight of the spectator's imagination by impudently and selfishly acting out the basic meaning of the text, he must show more humility... The noh audience cannot sit back and wait to be spoon-fed. They must participate vigourously in creating every scene with their imagination. The performer in turn must not move even half an inch unless he is positive that the movement is saturated with meaning, and creates a truly revealing image. Without this humility, this self-restraint, I don't think any movement can arouse a spectator's heart to the point where they feel something lying beyond the surface of the world - reaching into its other dimension.' He went on to explain that it is the audience and the actor working together who create a performance. 'Zeami said that what is called the flower of this art has no separate existence. There would be no flower at all were it not for the spectators who read into a performance a thousand excellencies.'

The term for expressive movements or movement sequences in noh (as in all dramatic forms) is *kata*, which can be translated as 'forms' or 'patterns'. These movement sequences. which distil and illustrate the essence of an emotion, consist of precise indicative gestures. For instance, joy or elation is expressed by waving an open fan twice in front of the chest, while weeping is shown by simply bringing one or both hands up in front of the eyes - the single hand implying that the character is weeping secretly and both hands that it is weeping openly. There are more than three hundred of these forms, some abstract and some concrete, and it is these that are woven together with dance, action and chanted speech to form the actor's interpretation of his role.

However, as the Master in America indicated, the form used for communication is so minimalist that, if it is not packed full of energy and intensity in performance, it will appear little more than a technical exercise. A role must be brought to life by the energy and concentration of the performer on stage, and he can only do this after he has undertaken years of strict and repetitive training and learnt and perfected the role through experiencing it frequently, by which time his performance will have become as free and instinctive as a sword-master's parry.

Buddhist principles in action

The dramatic tension in a noh play is not usually achieved, as in other kinds of drama, by the conflict between two characters who have opposed objectives - a protagonist and an antagonist - it is much more based on the frustration of the desires or purposes of the central characters, like the lovers in *Nishikigi*. All the other characters, the waki, and the chorus contribute to plotting the course of this frustration and illustrating either its final persistence or its transformation into something positive. The fact that the central characters' frustration leads to misery is, of course, sound Buddhist doctrine, because the frustration is the result of their failure to control their passions or desires, which in the case of an aristocrat often include wounded pride and a consuming preoccupation with their personal or family honour. On very rare occasions two apparently opposed characters will appear in a play, but closer examination will show that they are both seeking the same spiritual goal but are temporarily at different levels of enlightenment - so we are really faced with a comparison and not a conflict.

Such a situation is at the centre of *Komachi and the Hundred Nights* (*Kayoi Komachi*), one of Kan'ami's plays. The action is concerned with the famous poetess and courtier Ono no Komachi. Legend has it that when she was young she was very beautiful and desired by many men. She was also very arrogant about her sexual allure and ordered one of her lovers, Shosho, to visit her house for one hundred nights before she would grant him her favours. He faithfully came every night, cutting a notch on the hitching rail outside her house to keep a tally, but in the end he grew ill, and on the hundredth night he died. Komachi suffered intense remorse for what she had done and wandered the roads for many years in a kind of self-imposed penance, constantly aware of her growing age and loss of beauty and seeking to reconcile herself with the ideals of the Buddha until she too died. In the play she is a *shite tsure* (companion of the *shite*) and appears to the *waki*, who is a priest in a mountain hermitage, as a young girl who brings him fruit every day. Then on the day when the play takes place her image dissolves before his eyes and, from hints that she has dropped, he realises who she must be. He prays for her spirit to gain enlightenment. This raises the ghost of her dead lover, Shosho, played by the *shite*, who emerges in a very angry mood together with the contrite spirit of Komachi who returns with him. They are at very different levels of enlightenment, but the priest manages to get Shosho to re-live the story of his obsession, with Komachi's help, in the form of a dance which forms the heart of the play, and thus manages to bring about understanding and forgiveness on

Shosho's part and a reconciliation between the two spirits, as a result of which, in this case, they are both saved and not only obtain release from the world but also immediate freedom from the Wheel of Rebirth, thus attaining Buddhahood.

The *jo-ha-kyu* aesthetic

An essential aesthetic principle that was imported into the noh from the court music and dance of China (*gagaku*), is the sequence of *jo-ha-kyu*,[2] which meant that a dance was constructed in three sections each of which had a different quality and tempo. *Jo*, which governed the first part of the dance, means 'orderly progression' and was relatively slow and stately; *ha*, which governed the second part means 'breaking the pattern' and was quicker and more irregular; and *kyu*, which governed the last part means 'urgent' and was fast and furious. The noh presumably inherited this principle because it was itself a form of dance. Zeami certainly believed that it applied to the five levels (*dan*) of a good noh play which we have already described. The first and second steps should have a *jo* quality (the *waki*'s and *shite*'s entries), the third and fourth steps should have a *ha* quality (the spoken exchanges between the *waki* and the *shite* and the main narrative dance), and the last step should have a *kyu* quality (the relatively fast concluding dance). The fact that he uses the word *dan* implies that the steps are ranked in ascending importance, each having more impact than the one that has preceded it, although it is clear that the second step tended to blur *jo* and *ha* together, and the fourth step tended to anticipate an element of the coming *kyu*.[3]

Many scholars are convinced that Zeami is not using the terms *jo-ha-kyu* simply to indicate a graded increase of tempo and some think that they imply a structure of beginning, middle and end, similar to that suggested by Aristotle. There can be little doubt that the terms will have meant more to Zeami than simple increases of tempo, but what they meant is not so easy to define. For instance, in his own time, they were paralleled with the three stages involved in mastering calligraphy: *shin-gyo-so*. *Shin* meant the formal copying of a character exactly as it was written in the copybook, *gyo* the changing of the character to satisfy your own liking and *so*, or 'grass-like', the achievement of a fluent, natural style, where you were not constrained by any fears of 'not doing it properly'. This suggests a process of growing control and would cover Zeami's claim that the actor's training in the noh should also be seen as a process of *jo-ha-kyu* throughout his life. However, later, he goes even further and claims that *jo-ha-kyu* is evident in all natural processes, both in the process as a whole and in each of its parts.

This suggests a much more general application of the terms, the key to which can perhaps be found in his description of voice production. He says that in chanting the *jo* element is found in the gathering of breath, the *ha* element in the pushing out of breath, and the *kyu* element in the production of the voice.[4] From this one would gather that a state of *jo* involves accumulation, a state of *ha* a controlled application of the reserves that have been accumulated, and a state of *kyu* the form which those reserves are induced to take. 'Nourishment-growth-flowering' would therefore seem a better set of terms to use, since they can be applied to natural processes in general much more appropriately than 'slow-medium-fast' or even 'beginning-middle-end' which is too 'static'. It would also naturally extend into drama in the form of 'exposition-development-climax'. If this is so, then Zeami's remarks would mean the five steps of any noh play involve: exposition; development which still contains an element of exposition; pure development; further development with a hint of climax; and the climax itself. The *waki* expounds, the *shite* advances the story and expounds further, the dialogue between them develops the situation, the narrative dance expands the theme and points towards the climax, and the climax is achieved in an animated dance of either agony or joyous release.

The nature of a *goban*

This emerges more clearly when Zeami is speaking about the putting together of a noh programme (later known as a *goban* or 'five-in-order'). The first play of the programme, which is a play about a *god* and conveys a sense of blessing, should have a *jo* quality, with a simple source and no complex detail and it should be easy to understand. The second play, which is based upon the story of a *warrior*, begins to introduce a *ha* mood while still retaining some *jo* quality; it should have a specific source in history or legend and it should be emotionally powerful and dignified in conception. The third play, which will be a play about a *woman* (known as the 'wig' play because the *shite* needs to don a wig to play the part) begins the completely *ha* section and needs to break the mood of *jo* by placing emphasis upon richness and subtlety of expression, with the central character being a complex personality rather than a type. This play is the climax of the programme. The fourth piece, which will usually involve some kind of '*lunatic*', needs to continue the *ha* mood without eclipsing the piece that has gone before it and is usually more obviously moral and emotionally lighter. The function of the last piece, which includes a *demon*, is to introduce a *kyu* quality, which extends the quality of *ha*, adding to it powerful movements, rapid dance steps, and fierce and strong gestures; this final play of the programme should be characterised by agitation and excitement.[5]

In a *goban*, as a result of the five categories of character involved and the way in which they are treated, the programme takes on a particular shape, which investigates the Buddhist theory of salvation at many different levels. The god in the first play is always very positive and brings a blessing to the deserving, which is taken to include the audience: the mood then plunges from an ideal state to virtually its opposite, after which, play by play, the darkness gradually lightens, as the programme surveys a series of situations each of which is slightly better than the one before it. The warrior, who is the worst case, is usually a ghost and portrays the agonies of a spirit which is still bemused by concepts of duty and honour and trapped in the agonising memory of his death in battle; the woman, who follows him, has usually failed to free herself from the mental and emotional attachments of the world that are binding her spirit to the Wheel of Rebirth, but her state is less perilous than the warrior's; the lunatic, often a madwoman, is generally obsessed with anger, jealousy or sorrow, which is driving her away from the possibility of salvation, but there is almost always some kind of compensation in these pieces - a discovery of what was lost, an act of forgiveness, an instant of realisation, or even a moment of revenge - which makes the final state of the central character less negative than those that have gone before it; and, finally, to provide a fitting conclusion, the demon play deals with the temporary repulsion of an evil force or a demonic creature by prayer or the chanting of the Buddhist sutras - which have the power to drive away the vengeful ghosts of the dead and, in one case, even to endow a Dragon Princess of the Ocean with enlightenment and Buddhahood.

It is sometimes difficult for a western, non-Buddhist spectator to perceive the compensation present in the lunatic play. Let us consider perhaps the most extreme case, that of the mother in *Sumida River* (*Sumidagawa*).[6] She has learnt that her son is dead - and to a modern westerner the loss of a child seems the worst thing that can happen in life - but there are compensations. At least she knows that he is not being ill-treated by the slaver who abducted him or by a cruel master; she has found the place where he fell sick and is buried; and she has seen the local people gathered around the grave to formally commend his spirit to Amida Buddha. The positive quality of this discovery is shown by the fact that her madness disappears - to be replaced by grief, certainly, but grief is the consequence of an 'attachment' which can be overcome with the help of faith in Buddha's teachings and personal commitment, however harrowing the loss. A mother once came to Buddha to ask him to restore her dead son to life, but he sent her to fetch him some salt from a family where there had been no death - thus bringing home to her the universality of her experience. To accept death is to see 'things as they are' (*tathata*), and therefore to come one step closer to the necessary rejection of all attachments which, if it can be achieved, will bring the seeker to salvation.

While considering the *goban* in this way, as a sequence of varying moods, the point should be made that the application of the laws of *jo-ha-kyu* are also likely to be felt by the viewer in an emotional way and not at an intellectual level. Starting with a gently-moving god play which is lyrical and almost undramatic, the programme proceeds through an accelerating and intensifying sequence until it ends with a frenetic burst of activity in the demon play before achieving a temporary calm. The complexity of the pieces is also patterned, the first and last plays (god and demon) are usually the simplest, the second and fourth plays (warrior and lunatic) are of moderate complexity and produce a strong emotional impact, while the central 'wig' play is a subtle creation, which is full of the spirit of *yugen* and contains fine poetry, and a sensitive reading of character.[7]

It must be said, in passing, that the categories of plays are not quite so clear-cut as the ideal pattern would suggest: there is the occasional woman who appears in a warrior play, and the occasional man who appears in a 'wig' play, while category four, that of the 'lunatic', is not limited to the deranged but is used as a convenient repository for a range of plays that cannot easily be put anywhere else - for which reason it is also known as the *zatsu*, or 'miscellaneous', category. In addition, some pieces are classified differently by different companies, or have slipped in the course of time from one category into another, presumably because they have begun to be performed with a different emphasis.

When the *goban* is given in full - which nowadays occurs only on very special occasions like New Year's Day or the ritual induction of a new stage - it is customary to round off the programme with the final and most propitious part of another god play (*shugen*), or at least with the chanting of a particularly positive chorus from such a piece (*tsuke-shugen*). This implies that the sequence of plays does not end with the vanquishing of evil but continues in an unending cycle of death and rebirth - which is also an ongoing cycle of spiritual struggle and eventual salvation.

In some ways the *goban* is similar to modern 'aleatory' art, although it is not strictly aleatory, because chance is not involved. Aleatory art, most often found in music, occurs where the composer makes a provision for the players at some point to use dice (Latin 'alea') or some other chance method to determine the elements of a composition - it can even be left to each musician to choose whichever continuation they like best. However, the composer always produces a number of alternatives from which the selection is to be made, any one of which will fit into the piece at the point where the 'random choice' occurs, so that the overall shape of the work is preserved. Mozart was one of the the first people to use this idea in an amusing little work he wrote to allow non-composers to create short minuets by throwing dice and copying down pre-established bars of music, but the idea was not really exploited by musicians and playwrights until the middle of the 20th century. Its appeal is that, theoretically, you never get to hear or see the same work twice and the composition as a result always achieves a certain freshness and novelty, without losing its overall mood and structure.

Every noh company has a wealth of plays of each of the five categories in its repertory and the senior actors compose a *goban* by choosing one play of each kind - taking into account what pieces would work particularly well together and perhaps seeking to reflect the mood of the season, or the occasion on which the plays are to be performed. Whatever plays are chosen, the combination will create essentially the same overall pattern, surveying the potential range of states that the human spirit can experience - we cannot call it a soul because this is Buddhist drama and, on account of the prevalence of cause and effect, Buddhists do not accept the existence of an 'immortal' soul that is unchanging and indestructible.

Zeami on the construction of noh plays

To return to Zeami's exposition of the theory behind the plays; when he describes how the playwright, normally the *shite*, should approach the construction of a new noh play, he directs our attention to yet another trilogy of distinctions.[8] The three elements involved in composing a play, he declares, are its seed (by which he means the central character used as a dynamic impulse to action), the piece's structure, and its expression in words and music. He says that you should select a suitable central character from the classics or legends; then divide the material up into five sequences according to the principles of *jo-ha-kyu*, in the way that we have already seen; and after that compose the text and add appropriate melodies. The actions of the main character you choose need to be especially suited to being expressed by use of chanting and dance, the two basic arts of noh.

The best main characters to choose, he explains, are gods or goddesses, heroes, highly cultivated people of great elegance, women famous for their artistic accomplishments in poetry or dance, or priests who are artistically inclined. Otherwise characters should be chosen who have associations with famous historical sites.

The situations used should be easily recognisable, particularly in the first play of a programme. Poems or songs relating to the subject or mood of the play should be woven into it and a quotation from a particularly famous source should be included for the *shite* to recite. If a famous place or historic site is involved then some well-known song or poem about that should certainly be included in the last *ha* sequence, the one which contains the narrative dance and is the most crucial section of the whole play. He suggests that if you want to make a courtly woman the seed of your play, then Lady Murasaki's *Tale of Genji* will provide many excellent examples, whereas if you want to concentrate upon a warrior, then the *Heike Saga* (*Heike Monogatari*) should be your source.

He draws attention to the fact that plays can appeal to the eye, the ear or the heart - another trilogy [9] - and that the quality of a play differs depending upon which kind of appeal predominates. Plays that appeal to the eye are colourful, involving attractive dancing and music, and they appeal even to those who know nothing about the art of acting. However, they can be superficial because they lead to overstimulation of the audience and deaden their awareness to any subtleties in the performance. By contrast, plays that appeal to the ear have a serious atmosphere and if they are performed with music and language chosen to accord with the season and the time of day, they create a gentle, relaxed, enjoyable effect. In such plays maintenance of the right atmosphere is essential and, if it is achieved, the acting becomes more enjoyable as the story goes along. The third category, plays that appeal to the heart, have a more poetic quality, and usually create a mood of 'melancholy elegance'.

Unfortunately, he observes, the last two kinds of play are too sophisticated to be understood by the common people, and, though it is always possible to 'play down' to the capacities of an inexperienced and unknowledgeable audience, the praise of knowledgeable aristocrats is the only truly valuable tribute that a noh actor can obtain - so it is the aristocrats in the audience that the actor should play to and, because he wants to give them satisfaction, any imitation of them in the plays should be exact. For instance, any actor who is not sure of how to play a courtly female role should make detailed inquiries to ascertain the precise behaviour of court ladies and all actors should regularly study the elegant poetry and costumes favoured by the aristocracy. By contrast any imitation of the lower classes can, and should, remain generalised.[10]

Beauty as *hana*, *yugen* or *rojaku*

Zeami has other important points to make when he considers the acting of the noh, but before we consider these, we need to explain something that he takes for granted. He stresses both directly and indirectly that the aim of the noh is to represent the truth of the emotions in a beautiful form, but he does not explain the terms that are used to describe the different kinds of beauty involved. These are again essentially three - *hana*, *yugen*, and *rojaku*. In simple terms, *hana* is superficial beauty, which is obvious at once, like the appeal of the actor's performance; *yugen*, as we have observed elsewhere, is a mysterious, emotional beauty which can only be hinted at, not shown; and *rojaku* is a cool, quiet beauty, which is deeper even than *yugen*, and which is associated with people or places which are very old, like temple gardens.

Of these three terms, *yugen* always keeps cropping up in discussions about the aesthetics of noh acting, and it is the most difficult to define. It was originally used in poetry to describe transient but beautiful experiences like seeing the moon through moving clouds or capturing the last light just as the sun dips below the horizon - experiences which are emotionally charged but which, of their very nature, last for only a few seconds. However, in noh acting it is generally held to mean that certain sensitive types of mood or emotion can only be hinted at by the actor if they are to be effective. *Yugen*, in short, is part of the refinement which Zeami's sophisticated form of noh requires, reflecting the elegant indirectness of the court manners of his time, although it is still very important, even today. The Master in America went so far as to insist that, 'Without *yugen*, noh might as well stop existing, or merge with kabuki!' - but he stubbornly refused to define it.' 'How am I supposed to define *yugen* in a sentence!' he demanded, 'Let me ask what the point would be in spending all your life pursuing an art that can be summed up in a simple slogan?' [11]

The more immediate beauty of the *hana* or 'flower' is discussed by Zeami in some detail,[12] because it is essentially the moment when the actor's performance becomes particularly effective. The flower represents the ability to move an audience by using a technique that has been thoroughly practised to create a performance which has freshness and originality of appeal. If the flower is 'true' it will seem new and fresh to the spectator, appeal to his imagination, interest him, move him, and be appropriate to the play. The search for what is new and fresh applies to all areas of an actor's performance - chant, dance, gesture, and expressive bodily movements. The flower blooms best when the actor selects plays to perform that he knows the audience will particularly appreciate and when he fully enjoys his own performance - in other words when he has most confidence. The flower is particularly striking, though, when the audience has not anticipated precisely when and where it will bloom. The seed of the flower is technique, the various skills of the art, but the flower itself is only brought to bloom by the actor's imagination. For instance, patterns of dance-steps can be learned from others, but the emotions that they engender in the audience come from the performer. The flower's petals scatter and yet it is reborn, for the seed of any performance always comes from the flower of some previous performance.

The nature and beauty of the flower varies with the age of the actor, but even the 'withering' flower of an old actor has a beauty of its own. In general it can be said that a flower shows its beauty at the moment it blooms and its originality as the petals scatter, in other words its beauty lies in the present and its originality is realised later. The actor produces different flowers at different stages of his career, because each level of accomplishment produces its own kind of flower, with its own appropriate beauty, but all these different, changing flowers can be seen as separate manifestations of the one essential, Unchanging Flower, which is the ideal state of the art.

So the flower is the visible expression of the actor's understanding of his role and the originality of his interpretation. It is appreciated instantly by the audience and produces in them a state of fascination. However, there is a level of skill that produces an even more intense response and simply makes the audience gasp with surprise and pleasure. This level may be termed one of 'Pure Feeling that Transcends Cognition' where there is no reflection involved, and no time for the spectator to realise how well the performance is contrived. It is interesting, Zeami observes, that in the ancient *Book of Changes* (*I Ching*) the character for 'feeling' is written without the element which means 'mind' that it usually contains. This shows that it has long been realised that when true feeling is involved, there is no room for reflection and that sensation comes before consciousness. In other words, Zeami is saying that the audience needs to be surprised into a state of instinctive response, a state of 'no mind' (*mushin*).[13]

The same state applies to the highest level of performance that an actor can attain, which he calls 'Peerless Charm.' At that level, where 'the spirit and its manifestation in performance can no longer be divided', the actor performs absolutely instinctively and wholly without reservations. He has completely absorbed his art into his mind and body so that he is not even aware of it and his performance is free and intuitive, like the response of a great sword-fighter. Despite the highest degree of concentration his actions all show relaxation, again like the sword-fighter. He will perform with complete ease and act with apparent simplicity but with great depth of emotion, guided and inspired by an intuitive conception of his role that is so ingrained that it hides his skill. In fact, his art will surpass all skill and transcend any kind of intention, because he will have attained the state of 'no mind' (*mushin*).[14]

Zeami on role-playing in noh

When it comes to the practicalities of role-playing, Zeami emphasises the fact that the representation of a character can never be external, but must grasp the 'inner logic' of the part, the character's basic motivations. The Master in America was equally clear on this point: 'Zeami says that all art finds its root in the imitation of nature and human behaviour - and of course by art he means the noh. But, in the noh, the imitation is not of the exterior, but of the inner core. When you are imitating a female character weeping, to employ a shrill falsetto would be utterly out of place and even insulting to the mask: you must feel her sorrow beating in your guts. The mask refuses to flirt with superficial imitation. The noh is a masked art. Masked!' [15]

There is a story about a young actor who was about to act the part of an old woman for the first time. He felt that he did not know enough about his subject, and decided to observe how old women behaved in real life. So he fixed upon one that he thought would be a suitable subject and began to follow her about. She thought he was following her because old women appealed to him sexually, so she approached him and told him to find someone more of his own age to make love to. Overcome with confusion, he apologised and explained what he was doing. 'That's no good,' she said, 'You'll learn nothing from the outside. You must understand why an old woman does what she does...', 'and,' she might have added, 'why she feels what she feels.' As Zeami says: 'The stage of simple imitation represents a surface copy, mere externalisation. Becoming the essence of a character represents internalisation. The level of internalisation must be attained first, then it should be possible for an actor to... create the external aspects of his performance as well.' [16]

Elsewhere he talks about the 'Three Basic Role Types' [17] - the Old Man, the Woman, and the Warrior - which, between them, can provide all the internal motivations that an actor needs. When he is playing an Old Man, 'the actor must learn to keep his soul at ease and look off vaguely into the distance...' because, 'the eyesight of an old person is hazy...' He must also realise that although old men move slowly, they want to appear young, and they envy young people. When he is playing a Woman, which is the most difficult type of role for a male actor, he 'must concentrate his attention on producing an inner intensity and not place any detailed stress on his physical movements', except when he is playing a madwoman. The roles of Madwomen 'represent the disgrace of the character' and are particularly striking because they are contrary to the perceived nature of woman, which is modest and self-effacing. In mad roles the actor's face must not be concealed by a mask, as it usually is when playing a woman, because the facial expressions are crucial to the performance. Finally, when playing a Warrior, the actor must demonstrate 'physical strength, with a splintered heart' and 'although a manifestation of strength is the most important element in such a role, the subtle movements of the actor's mind must be fully exploited.' 'He should carry a bow and arrow, move his body violently, as if to fend off another's sword, and stamp about in a nimble fashion; yet, beneath his strength, the performer must show concern to maintain a certain gentleness in his posture, so as to avoid pushing himself to the extremes of violence.'

Yin and *yang* in performance

This idea of balancing weak and strong elements, *yin* and *yang*, is a very old Taoist idea elaborately expressed in the *I Ching*, which aims to show mystically all the different combinations of the two forces and their influences on life. Zeami insists that a harmonious and controlled interplay of *yin* and *yang* is essential throughout the course of any play and, for this reason, the mixing of strongly contrasted moods together, like anger and *yugen*, should be avoided. Similarly, one of the great problems for the actor is the balancing of strong and weak effects in his performance. Role playing, which is very outgoing (*yang*), and *yugen*, which is very inward and reflective (*yin*), must be balanced against one another. If you are playing warrior or demon roles, where there is likely to be a lack of *yugen*, strength and roughness must be balanced by a delicacy of style or a graceful appearance. Playing anger requires a tender heart, to avoid roughness. Even when the actor is playing the role of an outlaw 'he should always seem as if he were holding a branch of flowers in his hand'. Equally, when performing violent body movements, the actor should stamp gently, and when he is stamping violently he should let the body be still. The relationship between actor and audience is yet another *yin-yang* balance. Zeami says that the actor should play in a *yin* style in daylight, when the audience are in a *yang* mood, and a *yang* style at night, when the mood of the audience will be *yin.*[18]

The skin, flesh and bone of a performance

Beyond this, says Zeami, a performance needs skin, flesh and bone.[19] The terms derive again from calligraphy. Bone is the artistic strength of the brush-stroke; flesh is the manifestation of the artist's technique in practice; skin is the ease and beauty of his writing, which is only achieved when the other two elements are perfected. Another way of looking at it is that skin is what appeals to the eye, flesh what appeals to the ear and the mind, and bone what appeals to the heart. In dance skin is the beauty of the actor's appearance, flesh consists of the patterns of the dance, and bone is the richness of the emotions portrayed. The Master in America put the same idea in a slightly different way: [20] 'A body consists of skin, flesh and bone. A performer's skin is atmospheric beauty, *yugen*. His flesh is technique, discipline. What then is his bone? That is what is called *kiai*.'

'Kiai', is a word which combines the meanings of 'feeling', 'forcefulness', and 'stamina', and it is also used to describe the spiritual power deriving from *ki* when you allow it to flow through you in a state of *mushin*, or 'mindlessness'. The Chinese character for it contains the elements of 'mind' and 'encounter', which suggest tension or confrontation. The Master in America found that his students' performance had 'No *kiai*! No *kiai* at all!' [21] He told one student that he should fight not to turn until he actually felt frictional heat under his toes. The student was not impressed: 'Oh, come on! Tell him all I've got to do here is to turn. Why fight not to?' The Master was caustic: 'You mean that you wish to turn, so you turn? In noh that is not worthy of the audience's attention. You wish to move? There is no interest in that! But suppose there is an opposing power in the space around you that constantly holds you back - that is interesting. A movement in dance must be attained only when the dancer's desire overwhelms the hostile resistance of the surrounding space. Only then will the audience trust the dancer's performance.'

The need for concentration

Zeami has nothing to say directly about using a mask, but the Master in America revealed some of the difficulties.[22] He declared that: 'a noh dancer must place his eyes in his hips once he is masked.' He demonstrated an extended movement using the mask, and then observed: 'I had my eyes closed just now. But even if I had kept them open I should have seen nothing. All masks have such tiny holes and they are always on a different level from my own eyes. The only reliable eyes are the ones set in the centre of my moving body. Another way to see without my eyes is to keep steps of exact width, evenly paced steps, so that I can measure, and draw a mental map as I move. The first time I wore a mask I suffered nausea, dizziness, and acute fear of being lost. I must have fallen off the stage more than a dozen times since then. But now, I wouldn't mind too much if one morning I woke up blind. Perhaps I'd be a better dancer.'

It seems, from other comments he made, that difficulties, like not being able to see through the mask, are welcomed in noh because they demand an increased concentration on the part of the actor, which, combined with the intense selectivity of movement, gesture and delivery, gives the art its distinctive force. The intensity of the concentration needed for some roles was illustrated by another story the Master told. He took as his example *Dojoji*, a play in which, at the climax of the dance, the principal dancer and the drummer who accompanies him work quite independently, without any score, and the dancer cannot see the drummer because he is masked:[23]

'*Dojoji* is famous for its climactic dance: a drum-player accompanies the dancer only with his yell and intermittent drum beats. The drum-player is expected to "kill his face" by focussing on his yell and the following sounds, while the masked dancer's eyes are "buried in his hips": so the communication between them is no longer that of a co-operative duet, but nearer the life-or-death assaults of a swordfight. Each beats his drum or takes a step with fatal commitment. On the noh stage, where everything is distilled to the final essence, one wrong beat, one wrong step, can destroy the entire play. The tension that rises between the two performers as they struggle to communicate telepathically is so intense that people watching the scene have been known to faint.

'Traditionally, to rehearse this number, a folding-screen is set up between the two of them. There is no way of predicting when or how the next drum-beat will come. Exactly on the beat the dancer's foot must be jolting sharply down. This exacting timing of motion and sound adds tremendously to the theatrical impact. Again *kiai* is the thing. When I made my first appearance in *Dojoji*, grandfather sent me to the drummer who had accompanied him half a century earlier. This old man was known to us as a legendary figure. He had retired to Kyushu Island, and had never consented to work for any other master, but, at the age of seventy-four, he agreed to make a last appearance with me in Tokyo, to save my grandfather's face. The old man held my hand in his. We sat facing in different directions with our eyes closed. He cried out: "Yahatt!" Then an interminable silence followed, during which I was to feel out when the next drumbeat would be struck. On that crucial instant I was to squeeze his hand. If he squeezed mine at precisely the same second, then the timing was right.

'I stayed on the island for a month, repeating this same traditional exercise with him day and night. When I had mastered the steps of the entire dance, even if I tried consciously not to be dominated by his beat, the moment the old man's yell attacked me, my entire body had already been put into motion in spite of myself. His *kiai* was far superior to mine, and made a puppet of me. He was a great professional.'

The life of a noh actor

The Master in America also gives us some idea of what it means to be born into a noh family: [24]

'At the age of five or six, a child training for the noh, except when he is sleeping, must continually rehearse dancing, chanting, flute, drums and costuming, going from one teacher to another. A fan or a fist flies out and strikes him each time he makes a mistake. He's often sent to bed without supper if he hasn't been able to remember something or if he's been lacking in concentration. There's no room for family life!

'When I was seven, all the children in our theatre school were asked to gather together at the theatre. "Time for child-picking," people whispered. Grandfather came, watched each of us frightened children give a short performance, then went away. A week later I was sent to my grandfather's theatre with a bagful of rehearsal costumes and a fan. I was the "picked child". "Go and worm out all the old madman's secrets," my family told me.

'When I came home again after spending eight years with grandfather, I found my own father and brothers absolutely insufferable - first as artists, and then as a family - because grandfather had taught me standards to use to judge art and life that were absolutely uncompromising and made it quite impossible for me to accept the standards of others. When he dies, all the secret passages and gestures he taught me night by night, when the other disciples had been sent away, will indeed be mine, and mine alone. Any noh performer would give his right arm for those secrets. As a result, I trust nobody in my family or in my school and, naturally, none of them trust me... It is inhuman. No human law governs noh family relationships. We members of the noh families are like sprocket wheels that don't mesh with the other wheels around us. We don't fit in with the outside world.' On another occasion he quoted a poem:[25]

> *'The way of the warrior is to accept death.*
> *The noh is a lifelong - a more than lifelong - discipline.*
> *During the whole of your life, you build your own coffin.'*

'It's not a matter of a career,' he explained, 'It's a vocation. My grandfather tells me that every morning he wakes up and shudders at the thought of noh, just as he used to do as a beginner some eighty years ago.' [26]

This makes it clear that noh makes constant demands upon the actor throughout the whole of his life. Zeami tells us that a noh actor only retains his mastery through constant practice, for if he does not practise constantly his flower will die.[27] And he must always be willing to consider the possibility of faults in his performance that he is not aware of, because there is a very real danger that the skilled actor, as he grows older, will fail to constantly re-evaluate his performance, and this will result in stagnation, and make his art appear increasingly old-fashioned.

But, according to the Master in America, there are compensations: 'I've been working in the noh now for more than thirty years. There has never been any repetition, rest, or respite. Noh changes every day as I change.' and 'his face was shining with joy.' [28]

NOTES

[1] Uenishi, 1967, p 195, col 2. In the text I call this unidentified Japanese noh Master, 'the Master in America' Nobuko Uenishi was his interpreter for the course, and wrote a most useful and revealing article about her own and the students' experiences. See Bibliography.

[2] The terms '*jo-ha-kyu*' in Japanese are translations of the terms '*hsü-p'o-chi*' in Chinese, which are much older. Although they are pronounced differently in the two languages, the terms are written with exactly the same Chinese characters.

[3] This is a conflation of various ideas Zeami expresses in his treatise on writing a play, *Nosakusho*. See Rimer and Masakazu pp 148-162.

[4] From Zeami's *Shugyoku tokka* in Rimer and Masakazu p 139.

[5] The relevant section in Zeami's *Kakyo* is in Rimer and Masakazu pp 83-86.

[6] *Sumidagawa* is the play that inspired Benjamin Britten's *Curlew River*.

[7] Komparu (1983), Chap 5, discusses the categories in detail and also deals with the links between the five subject categories and the Chinese theory of the five elements.

[8] From Zeami's *Nosakusho* again. See note 3.

[9] From Zeami's *Kakyo* again, in Rimer and Masakazu pp 99-100.

[10] Mostly from Zeami's *Fushikaden* in Rimer and Masakazu p 10, p 18 & p 41.

[11] Uenishi, 1967, p 194, col 2.

[12] Zeami's reflections on the flower are spread so widely throughout his work that there would be a vast list of references here. The reader must trust me to represent him fairly.

[13] The reference to the *I Ching* is Zeami's not mine. It will be found in his *Kakyo*. See Rimer and Masakazu p 91. He is advocating a state of 'no-mind' (*mushin*) where intellection does not get in the way of action. See particularly 'The appeal of zen to the samurai' in Chapter 2, and the section before that in the same chapter on zen.

[14] From Zeami's *Kyui*, in Rimer and Masakazu p125.

[15] Uenishi, 1967, p 194, col 1.

[16] From Zeami's *Kakyo* again, in Rimer and Masakazu p 77.

[17] From Zeami's *Shikado*, in Rimer and Masakazu p 64-65 conflated with his *Shugyoku tokka* in Rimer and Masakazu pp 142-144.

[18] Mainly from Zeami's *Fushikaden*, in Rimer and Masakazu p 43-47.

[19] From Zeami's *Shikado*, in Rimer and Masakazu p 69-71.

[20] Uenishi, 1967, p 192, cols 2-3..

[21] Uenishi, 1967, p 192, col 1.

[22] Uenishi, 1967, p 194, col 1.

[23] Uenishi, 1967, p 196, cols 2-3.

[24] Uenishi, 1967, p 195, col 1.

[25] Uenishi, 1967, p 196, col 3.

[26] Uenishi, 1967, p 194, col 3.

[27] From several Zeami sources. See Rimer and Masakazu pp 42, 96, 106, & 115.

[28] Uenishi, 1967, p 192, col 3.

CHAPTER 6

The noh in action - the description of a *goban*

It seems appropriate to round out our survey of the noh by describing the five plays of a *goban*, giving some sense of how the pieces work and how, in Buddhist terms, they give the programme a universal scope and significance. We will consider an imaginary programme, consisting of *The Queen Mother of the West*, *Kanehira*, *The Imperial Visit to Ohara*, *The Bird-scaring Boat* and *Taniko* (or *The Valley Rite*).[1] The movements of the actors will be described in some detail to give the reader a better impression of how the plays would look in action.

The 'god' play - *The Queen Mother of the West* (*Seiobo*)

The first play of the proposed *goban* is of Chinese origin like many pieces in the 'god' category. The Queen Mother of the West was a pre-Buddhist Chinese deity called Hsi Wang Mu (pronounced 'Seiobo' by the Japanese) who was in charge of the rewards and punishments that were awarded to men by heaven. In her original form her appearance was demonic, with a panther's tail and dog's teeth, but in the legend represented here she appears to the Emperor Mu of China as a beautiful young girl and instead of heralding calamity she brings him a gift - a flower from the peach trees of immortality which grow in her heavenly garden. This celestial peach, which flowers only once in three thousand years, symbolises truly-deserved fame which will last for many generations. Having assumed her most regal form and made her presentation to the Emperor, the Queen then re-ascends to heaven.

of *tathata* (things as they are). The chorus, speaking for her, reiterates this image with an allusion to yet another poem: 'a fading thing is the flower of the heart of man in this world...', which at one level means that the *jijimuge* experience sadly does not last long, because no human experience lasts long, but also indirectly means that the impact of poetry or drama itself (the heart's flower) does not last long either. The chorus then proclaims her true nature on her behalf, and contrasts her immortality with man's evanescence.

This practice of the chorus picking up the *shite*'s speech and completing it is very common in noh. Sometimes, though not here, it has the effect of implying something that is thought rather than spoken. Sometimes it seems to imply a change of tone, as here where Seiobo is reflecting on the sadly brief life of man in comparison with her own immortality. Sometimes it is used to enable the *shite* to concentrate solely upon his dance, without having to be distracted by the words. Sometimes it seems to be used simply for variety.

At the end of the chorus's chant the Queen spreads her arms wide towards the stage front, and the chorus indicates that she is rising up to heaven. She turns her back, thus becoming technically 'invisible', and makes a smooth, swift exit up the *hashigakari*.

The Official who opened the play enters again and tells the audience what has happened in simpler language, a typical function of a kyogen actor.

The musicians' contribution now becomes more insistent and the Emperor and his Minister declare in unison that they can hear heavenly music. The Queen reappears at the entry curtain. She is now wearing an impressive god mask and her 'heavenly phoenix crown' decorated with hawk's feathers. She is dressed in purple and scarlet and has a sword hanging at her waist. Her attendant follows her carrying a single peach upon a tray. The attendant waits at the entry curtain, while the Queen advances to the first pine near the stage. The chorus welcomes her. She moves to the naming place beside the *shite* pillar and her attendant advances to the first pine. The chorus declares that it sees peacocks, phoenixes and birds of paradise dancing around her in the air. They describe the Queen's movements as she turns to face the Emperor and indicates her emblems of power, her crown and sword. She then goes to the *shite* pillar, takes the tray with the peach upon it from her attendant, crosses the stage on the diagonal, kneels, and places it on the platform before the Emperor. The chorus proclaim that the Emperor 'takes the drinking cup of flowers and at once becomes intoxicated'. Since intoxication is an experience which briefly detaches the spirit from its earthly preoccupations, the implication is that he finally manages to release those last elements of his ego which are still tying him down to a life of earthly power and 'importance'.

The Queen returns to the *shite* pillar and then begins to dance, while the chorus chants to accompany her, invoking the image of a drinking game where the guests float their goblets down a winding stream, seeing which goes the furthest. The image of a stream, or of any moving water, tends to mean time passing, or the progress of somebody's life in time and in this case life is passing in an ideal way while everybody is still 'drunk' or spiritually elevated. The chorus also describe the visionary birds dancing around the Queen. The dance ends with the Queen stamping once at the *shite* pillar as the chorus proclaims that she and the birds together have soared up into the sky and become lost to sight. She turns her back, becoming 'invisible' again, and quickly exits up the *hashigakari*.

It can be seen from this description that the piece is grave and stately at first but moves at a steadily faster tempo, although it is never fast, and that the poetic imagery is both allusive, for the benefit of the more informed members of the audience, and also reinforces the general message that intuitive perception (*prajna*) of the universal relationship of all things leads inevitably to compassion (*karuna*) and merciful action, from which other people benefit - in the case of the Emperor, a whole nation. It confirms that such merciful action is worthy of being remembered by using the image of the peach of immortality, and it ends with the spiritual elevation of the Emperor and the rise of the Queen to heaven, which both have an inspiring effect. So the piece carries a message of good fortune and reward for goodness which sets the programme off on a positive footing. It is a typical play of blessing.

The 'warrior' play - *Kanehira*

The second play draws its story from the *Heike Saga* (*Heike Monogatari*). Its protagonist, Kanehira, was chief-of-staff to Lord Kiso Yoshinaka, a famous Genji (Minamoto) general, who had the misfortune to offend Yoshitsune, his former ally, and become involved in a fatal conflict with him.

The play opens like so many 'noh of ghosts' with a priest (the *waki*) coming to the naming place beside the *shite* pillar. He declares that he intends to seek out Lord Kiso's grave in order to pray for him. He briefly describes his journey to the beach at Yabase, where the death occurred, and ends up kneeling at the usual *waki* position. A stage assistant then brings on a simple open-work structure representing a boat and places it near the *shite* pillar and a boatman (the *shite*) enters carrying a bamboo pole and wearing the mask of a healthy, keen-eyed old man. The boat has one bundle of brushwood attached to it, symbolically representing its whole cargo. The boatman declares that he is personally carrying the load of many years of fruitless labour, which are like the brushwood piled high in his boat, and that his heart is consumed with the flames of longing - for this is the ghost of Kanehira, though he never identifies himself. The priest asks to be ferried across the river and, with a quotation from the Lotus Sutra comparing a traveller finding a ferry at the proper place with a person meeting the compassionate Buddha in a moment of need, the boatman takes him aboard and he enters the boat structure and kneels at the front of it.

A long *michiyuki* or stage journey now ensues, although the two figures do not physically move, apart from the priest asking questions about the places they are passing and the boatman poling with his bamboo and answering. Since the traveller is a priest, all of the places he asks about are famous as the sites of temples or on account of religious observances and this gives both of them reason to comment upon the fact that, since all living creatures equally possess Buddha nature, they can all hope to achieve salvation. At the end of the journey, the chorus take up the boatman's thoughts, comparing the Buddha's law of perfect harmony with the cloudless moon in the sky and speaking of the mountain cherries of Awazu forest, whose blossoms have fallen but which are now bearing fruit, suggesting that Kanehira is beginning to reflect upon the true meaning of his earthly life. The priest disembarks and returns to his kneeling position near the *waki* pillar. The boatman exits up the *hashigakari*, the stage attendant removes the boat structure, and down the *hashigakari* comes a kyogen actor representing the missing ferryman, also carrying a pole over his shoulder.

After a brief exchange in which the ferryman tells the priest he cannot possibly have just crossed the river because he, the official ferryman, never brought him over, the priest asks him for an account of how Lord Kiso and Kanehira died - this being the first time that Kanehira has been mentioned. The ferryman gives a clear account in simple Japanese. Lord Kiso had defeated the Heike in the north and then vaingloriously marched upon the capital Kyoto, only to learn that more than sixty thousand troops were coming from Kamakura (the Shogun's capital) to intercept him because of his arrogance, led by his former friend Yoshitsune and General Noriyori. He promptly divided his own force between himself and Kanehira and set them to defend two widely distant bridges that would be key points in the coming battle, in each case destroying the bridge, thus making the crossings particularly dangerous because the rivers were in spate. Yoshitsune also divided his far superior force between the two points, opposing Kiso himself and sending Noriyori to oppose Kanehira. Despite the difficult conditions both of the attacking armies managed to cross the rivers and defeat the defenders. Kiso and Kanehira fled, Kiso regretting that Kanehira, whom he loved deeply, was so far away at his probable moment of death. However, to his great delight, the two retreating forces met and the two leaders decided to make a last heroic stand together. As the battle inevitably turned against them, Kanehira told Kiso to make his way to a nearby pine grove where he could take his life with honour, while Kanehira held his enemies at bay. However, sadly, on the way Kiso was killed by one of the enemy and, when he heard this, Kanehira took his own life. The priest thanks the ferryman for his account and says he will now pray for the souls of the two dead warriors. He tells how he was brought over the river by a mysterious boatman who vanished after setting him down on the other shore. 'I think that was Kanehira's ghost,' says the ferryman, 'perhaps you should pray for him most.'

The priest now declares his intention of praying and begins to rub his rosary with the circular forward 'winding' motions of the hands related to this action. The ghost of Kanehira enters down the *hashigakari* and takes up position at the *shite* pillar. He is dressed in magnificent robes, wearing the strong, commanding mask of a warrior in his prime and bearing a long sword. His first spoken thought is of naked blades smashing bones, of eyes being gouged out, and voices shouting like the din to be heard at the crossroads of Hell. The priest asks him who he is and he tells him not to be a fool - he is obviously Kanehira and yet, he says, the priest has already seen a truer image of him in the boatman who ferried him over the river with the brushwood. In other words the self-glorying warrior is gradually being replaced by the penitent. He prays that his boat (his life) may become a vessel of Buddha's Law and ultimately carry him to the distant shore (*nirvana*). The chorus reflects on how quickly men come and go and compares them to 'dreams, fantasies, bubbles, shadows.' Kanehira moves to sit centre stage upon a camp stool provided by a stage attendant.

He now gives his account of the last battle, which differs in detail from the ferryman's account and is in more emotional verse form. He tells of the exchange between Kiso and himself when he bade him to seek out the grove of pine trees and take his life honourably. Kiso was unwilling to go 'I fled the enemy only because I hoped to be with you,' he said. But Kanehira would not listen, driving him away by telling him what a disgrace it would be to die at an enemy's hand. He recalls the mist, the biting wind, the scudding clouds, the darkening sky. He tells how Lord Kiso, uncertain of the way, plunged his horse into a quagmire and sank, how he drew his sword to take his own life but lingeringly looked back towards where his belovèd Kanehira was holding the enemy at bay, and how that moment of delay was his death, for he was transfixed through the head by an enemy arrow.

At this point Kanehira is moved to stand up by the emotion of his tale and begs the priest to pray for Lord Kiso before praying for himself. The priest asks how he himself died. He describes how he was obsessed with the desire to be with his lord at the moment of his death, but nonetheless still fought on. He begins to mime and dance out what happened. He tells how he heard a cry from the enemy ranks that Lord Kiso had been slain and, seeing that there was nothing left to hope for, prepared to take his own life. With a roar he made his last great 'name-calling' - 'I am Imai no Shiro Kanehira, a retainer since birth of the house of Lord Kiso.' Then hewing his way through the enemy ranks he drove them down to the beach, killing men to left and right of him amidst the surf. Finally he cried out 'Now I will show you how a man should take his life,' and, placing the point of his sword in his mouth, he fell upon it. Here the *shite* drops his sword and stamps with his foot to show that the ghost of Kanehira has disappeared and the chorus ends the play by commenting on what an astounding death it was that he died.

It is clear, despite all his longing, that the spirit of Kanehira is still very far from salvation. He still takes joy in his military prowess, he has not yet purged himself of his 'attachment' to his Lord, or his despair at the dishonourable death he suffered - in fact his sense of duty (*giri*) has become the main obstacle to his salvation. He is like Lord Kiso himself, fatally looking back at the moment when he should be acting; he cannot yet let go. Yet Buddha assures us that all spirits will finally achieve salvation and through 're-living' the events and feelings surrounding his death over and over again, the earthbound spirit will at last come to realise that the selfish concepts of honour and duty are worthless in the perspective of eternity and that he is not primarily a warrior but Buddha. This will clearly be a long and slow process. His 'true form' as he suggests is the boatman for ever ferrying brushwood over the river but never being permitted to land on the 'other shore' of enlightenment: his life was spiritually impoverished, like the poorest of the poor who spend their time gathering worthless brushwood: what is more he spends his time ferrying this useless load from one place to another, just as he spent his life (the boat) in the realm of time (the river) carrying his useless concept of honour (the brushwood - tinder that will flare in an instant like blinding anger) from place to place - utterly devoid of wisdom. The Three Poisons, in Buddhism, are greed (the desire to grasp onto anything), anger (the wish to destroy because your ego has been in some way offended) and wilful ignorance (or being blinded by one's selfish concerns to the truths of life); Kanehira is affected by all of them.

The 'wig' play - *The Royal Visit to Ohara* (*Ohara Goko*)

The third play in the proposed programme is *The Royal Visit to Ohara* (*Ohara Goko*) and this, like *Kanehira*, is drawn from the *Heike Saga* (*Heike Monogatari*). It centres upon the dowager Empress Kenreimon-in, who experienced the destruction of her whole clan at the sea-battle of Dan-no-Ura, including her son, the young Emperor Antoku Tenno, who took his own life by leaping into the sea. Kenreimon-in also attempted to drown herself when she saw this but was saved from the water by one of the enemy soldiers and subsequently took orders as a Buddhist nun and retired to the Cloister of Quiet Radiance in an attempt to come to terms with her son's death and the destruction of the clan. The play deals with a visit made to her by her husband, the Retired Emperor Go-Shirakawa. It is the first time she has seen him since the disaster a year earlier and his request for an account of the battle and its aftermath brings back all the misery and horror of the occasion.

Centre stage is a small upright hut structure, with a straw roof and open sides, which at the beginning of the play is completely covered by a cloth. The play begins with a courtier, who is one of the kyogen actors, coming to the naming place and proclaiming the Emperor's intention to visit his wife in the Cloister of Quiet Radiance in the mountains. He calls for the road that the Emperor will travel to be cleared and blessed.

A stage attendant now removes the cloth from the hut to reveal the Empress (*shite*) sitting inside it. She wears the mask of a young woman that displays both elegance and beauty. She has two of her former ladies-in-waiting in attendance, Tsubone and Naiji, who wear less impressive masks and kneel on either side of her. All three of the women wear the dark robes of Buddhist nuns, with soft white hoods covering their heads and shoulders. They all carry rosaries, and Tsubone also carries a basket.

The women chant about the simple brushwood hut they live in and the 'gaping fence' made of bamboo poles 'knotted like the griefs that have come our way.' They speak of their isolation, the sound of a woodman's axe, the sighing of the wind in the trees, and the monkeys wailing, and the fact that visitors come very rarely. The tone is desolate, implying that the Empress has not yet found any consolation. She almost immediately expresses her intention of going up the hill behind the temple to pick herbs and Tsubone says that she will go with her to gather firewood and fern shoots for the kitchen. The Empress compares herself to Buddha performing the same actions when he left his father's house, although she admits that it is sacrilege to think in that way. However, the very act of comparison is the first statement of the theme of the play, which is self-deception. Tsubone hands the Empress the basket she has been carrying and they depart up the *hashigakari*, leaving Naiji seated by the hut.

The retired emperor now makes a processional entry down the *hashigakari*, accompanied by two palankeen bearers who hold a canopy over him, representing the non-existent palankeen. A Councillor follows them. The bearers and the Councillor chant about seeing the young green leaves of spring and pushing aside the deep, damp grasses on their way. The impression created is one of lushness with a hint of a very earthy sexual desire. The palankeen now stops at the pine near the stage and the Councillor goes to the naming-place and, turning to face the Emperor, gives a highly romantic description of the dew-laden garden of the Cloister, its willows and pond and high banks of golden roses, and the call of a cuckoo in the distance. All is abundant life and energy and we wonder if this can possibly be the same place that the Empress was talking about. The Emperor contributes a poem describing the cherry blossoms scattered on the surface of the pond, and declares that 'the flowers on the waves have reached their fullest glory.'

It is a poem attributed to the historical Go-Shirakawa and suggests that beauty (the blossom) is best appreciated when remembered (on the waters of time) rather than when seen. The chorus describe water falling over ancient rocks and tell us that the Cloister itself is in ruins; it has broken roof tiles and is full of mist. The Councillor reinforces this by noting the ivy and morning glory creeping along the eaves and the doorways all choked with rankly growing goosegrass. We have an image of the dominance of untamed nature, which suggests that the inhabitants of the place are probably giving way to their natural impulses and are far from the enlightenment which should be their aim.

The Councillor exchanges words with Naiji and learns that the Empress is gathering herbs. He communicates this to the Emperor and invites him to be seated and await her return. The Emperor crosses the stage to the *waki* position where he sits on a camp stool provided by a stage attendant. The Councillor accompanies him and sits on the floor slightly up-stage of him. The palankeen bearers sit down where they are, near the stage end of the *hashigakari*. The Emperor addresses Naiji who has started off to fetch the Empress. She turns and kneels at the naming-place. He asks her who she is. She tells him and says that she is not surprised that he does not recognise her because she has become so unsightly, though, in compensation, she claims that she no longer worries about whether tomorrow will come or not. She begs him to wait.

The Empress and Tsubone now return down the *hashigakari*. The Empress stops at the second pine (the pine of 'man') while Tsubone remains at the third pine, behind her. She complains that all her days close in emptiness and that she cannot forget her husband's face, which again is not a very positive attitude. She calls on Amida to accept the souls of her son and her mother in his Western Paradise. She then hears the voices of the Emperor and Naiji. Tsubone bids her to rest and brings her a camp-stool. She sits and Tsubone kneels a short distance to her right. Naiji tells the Emperor the women are returning. He looks at the two of them and asks which is the Empress. Naiji identifies them and then goes and kneels at the first pine, turning to face her mistress, telling her that her husband has come to see her. The Empress admits her feelings for him and says how difficult it is to forget one's attachments to the world of illusion. She is afraid people will be scandalised by the Emperor's visit now the two of them are supposed to be celibate devotees of Buddha. The chorus speaking for her says that she was more prepared for a visit from Amida at her death than a visit from the Emperor in her lifetime. Naiji meanwhile takes the basket from her mistress and places it in the hut and then kneels to its right, in front of the flute player.

The Empress rises and moves to the naming-place. Tsubone remains at the second pine, keeping her distance. The Empress, largely through the chorus, expresses her longing for the Emperor with images of his moon-like radiance. She mentions the lingering spring leaves (implying she still has some feelings of youth), although the blossoms are now scattered (her beauty is gone), she speaks of sunlight catching the blossoms on the pine boughs (her revived memories of the past) and late flowering cherries hidden beneath new leaves (which is a clear image of her desire). She then comes on stage still wondering if it is 'proper' for the Emperor to be waiting at her brushwood door, like a young lover. She takes a position centre stage, while Tsubone crosses over to sit beside the Councillor.

She next thanks the Emperor for his visit, comparing him to the moon shining on the capital which also makes itself visible here in her retreat. He tells her he has come because he heard that she has seen with her own eyes the natures of the Six Realms - five of them inhabited respectively by the hungry ghosts of the unappeased dead, by sinners being tortured, by the ashuras (a race of magical giants who are constantly at war with the gods), by beasts, and by men - the sixth being Paradise. The Emperor says that this puzzled him because the Six Realms should not be visible to anyone until they have become at least a Boddhisattva, and his tone politely implies that that is the last thing he could imagine the Empress becoming. When we reflect, too, that the rumour can only derive from the Empress herself - an act of sheer egotistical self-advertisement - we are quite sure she is not yet anywhere near Buddhahood and we are reminded of the seemingly innocent comparison of herself earlier to the Buddha gathering herbs.

The Empress complains that she feels that her life is aimless, like an uprooted water-plant or an unmoored boat drifting down the river. She goes on to explain, with the help of the chorus, that she has not really seen the Six Realms, but feels that her life has in effect taken her through them. Briefly she enjoyed Paradise in the early years of their marriage but the clan wars intervened. She recalls the events leading up to the battle of Dan-no-Ura: the clan tossing on the waves with no water to drink were like hungry ghosts; the shrieks and lamentations of the soldiers as the high waves threatened to smash their boats against the rocky coast were like those of the tortured souls; the clash of warriors was like the terrifying battles of the gods and the ashuras; the pounding hoofs of numberless galloping horses reminded her of the realm of beasts; and all these torments were suffered in the realm of man. She feels she is at the end of a life that has turned into nothing but pain.

The Emperor politely says that hers must indeed have been an incredible experience. Then, since he was not present, he asks her to tell him about the last moments of their son, the young Emperor. The moving account that follows takes the place of the usual climactic dance, for this is one of the few noh plays without any dances. She tells how the Heike (Taira) attempted to withdraw from the battle but found the tide against them. Then, as it became plain they would not survive the battle, one warrior cast his arms around the necks of two companions and leapt into the sea, crying 'die with me!' He was followed by Councillor Tomomori, who wound the anchor rope around himself and used the anchor to pull him down as he jumped. At that moment Lady Nii, her mother, declared she would never fall into enemy hands, nor would the young eleven-year-old Emperor, and taking him by the hand she led him to the side of the ship. When he asked where they were going, she said that they were leaving this vile world to go to the Realms of Bliss below the waves. He said 'I understand', then turning to the east he bade farewell to Amaterasu, goddess of the sun and his ancestor, and turning to the west he called ten times on the name of Amida Buddha. He then delivered a poem ending 'deep beneath the waves there lies another capital' and the two of them plunged into the depths. Kenreimon-in had tried to follow them and also jumped, but a Genji warrior pulled her out of the water 'adding unwelcome days to a worthless life.' She declares that she is ashamed to be weeping, but his visit has unnerved her. She leans forward and hides her head in her arms.

The chorus then tell us the Emperor's followers are urging him to start for home. The Councillor bows to the Emperor, who rises and proceeds towards the *hashigakari*. At its foot the palankeen bearers, who have risen with him, hold the canopy over him, and the Councillor leads the procession up the walkway. As he goes, the Empress also rises and watches him go, her hand resting on one of the pillars of her hut. The chorus ends by telling us that she gazes after him for a while and then re-enters her hut, but the image we are left with is of her standing beside the hut and weeping.

Sad though the ending is, particularly when the Emperor leaves and passes by her without even a glance, it is clear that the Empress is the victim of an improper pride which blinds her to spiritual realities. Indeed, when she comes to speak about her son's death, her emotions are so strong that it is plain she is very far from accepting what has happened. That is why the Cloister of Quiet Radiance (an ironical name) is described as being in ruins. Clearly the Emperor is rightly sceptical about her claim that she has become a Boddhisattva and she has merely been over-dramatising aspects of her own life. After giving her account of the battle she declares that she is ashamed to be overcome by emotion and therefore so far from true enlightenment: her ego, and her sexual response to her former husband, reveal themselves as obstacles in the way. Her 'whatever will people think of his coming to visit me' is completely on the egotistical plane of public image. That is why she is 'a plant uprooted from the brow of the shore' and 'an unmoored boat upon the river' which by implication means she is being swept downward by the current of time and emotion: in short, she lacks spiritual roots. But at least she is beginning to realise these things by the end of the play. The contrast provided by her young son's acceptance of his death and his certainty about the superiority of the 'world beneath the waves' is striking. The young man's wise death, consecrated to the goddess of the sun, his ancestress, and Amida Buddha, his hope of salvation, is also a contrast to the pointless deaths of the other clan members in the interests of what they believe is their 'honour': they are not seeking any kingdom beyond the waves, they are blinded by the possible shame of defeat in battle, and die for purely selfish reasons - damned like all warriors - and, indeed, according to local legends, their unquiet spirits still haunt the sea and the shore near Dan-no-Ura in the form of *oni-bi* or demon-fires flickering above the waves.

The 'lunatic' play - *The Bird-Scaring Boat* (*Torioi-Bune*)

The fourth play, the play of lunacy and derangement, is a late sixteenth-century piece called '*The Bird-scaring Boat*' (*Torioi-bune*). Untypically in this play the *waki*, who is a lord, arrives late and the *waki*'s companion (*wakitsure*), who is playing the lord's steward, takes a very active part in the action.

The play opens with the lord's wife (the *shite*) and his young son (a *kokata* or child actor's role) entering and kneeling in front of the chorus, virtually in the *waki*'s normal place. The wife wears a middle-aged and slightly worried mask; the son is unmasked. The lord's steward then enters down the *hashigakari* and stops to introduce himself beside the 'earth' pine. He tells us that his lord's fields which lie beside the river are being ravaged by flocks of birds from the nearby marshes, and that it is necessary to send out bird-scaring boats every year to drive them off. However, this year his lord is away pursuing a lawsuit in the capital and he has no servants available for the job, so he intends to ask his lord's son, Hanawaka, to perform the task. Granted the feudal society this is *lèse majesté* of the highest level, an insubordinate act of 'madness' for which the steward would normally pay with his life!

He advances to the naming-place to attract his lady's attention and, having obtained it, goes and kneels centre-stage. He makes his proposal, which is greeted by the shocked mother with a stern reminder that the young man is also his lord.

He indicates that the situation is critical. Lord Higurashi has now been away for ten years pursuing his law-case - clearly another act of 'madness' - and he fears that, if the crops are not saved, the estate will have to be closed down and both she and her son will have nowhere to live. She admits that he has a point, but says that Hanawaka is too young to go bird-scaring by himself and that she will go with him. The steward points out that whereas the use of the boy might be overlooked, the presence of a noble lady out on the marshes scaring birds would be bad for the family's reputation. Nonetheless she insists, and the steward says that the boat will be waiting for them in the morning, and retires. When he has gone the wife laments the way in which her son has fallen into servitude and declares that they are both so upset by the idea that it has made them weep. The two of them cross the stage to the foot of the *hashigakari*, make a gesture of weeping, and go off.

Lord Higurashi (the *waki*) now enters, followed by his servant (a kyogen actor). They both carry swords. At the naming-place he declares that he has come home and mentions the melancholy feel of autumn in the air. He says who he is and tells us that he has won his lawsuit after ten years and is returning in triumph. He says he can hear flutes and drums being played loudly and asks his servant to go and find out what all the noise is about. He then crosses to the *waki* position and kneels there. The servant goes to the foot of the *hashigakari* and has a conversation with some imaginary people offstage, then he turns to tell his lord that the bird-scaring boats are just being sent out and are well worth seeing. The lord agrees that they are one of the main attractions of Kyushu. He says he will go and have a look at them and orders the servant to precede him and tell people he is coming. The servant says he will and retires to the rear of the stage. As he does so a stage-assistant brings on an elaborate openwork 'boat' structure, with an arched frame in the middle of it from which hang bells, clappers and a drum. He places it near the naming-place.

The son and wife enter. They have changed their outer robes into something more practical and the wife wears a wide-brimmed straw hat like a peasant. The steward is with them carrying a boating pole and with one shoulder bared, to show that he is about to be involved in strenuous work. They enter the boat structure, with the son in the front and the steward at the rear. There is a short passage where the steward poles the boat and describes the ears of grain and the intrusive birds while the wife and son mime beating a drum to scare them off. The wife and son describe how they have built a guard hut in the marshes to live in while they are bird-scaring. The wife reflects on how human beings are as temporary as bubbles on the waves which suddenly appear and just as quickly dissolve again. She describes gulls bobbing on the water, and says that it has rained so much she thought the skies would never clear. She wishes she could sail across the River of Heaven (the Milky Way) and see her husband again - doubtless recalling the Star Festival when the Herdboy and the Weaving Maiden are allowed to meet on the bridge of birds provided by the gods.

The steward lays down his pole and retires to the rear of the stage. The wife takes off her hat and says her lord will never return and the future holds no hope for her, though it is not herself she grieves for but her son. She makes the gesture of weeping. Her son turns to her and blames the steward for being heartless. He declares that he hates him and will tell his father about him. The wife says however important the lawsuit was, they would never have had to suffer this humiliation if his father had stayed at home. They both make gestures of weeping.

The steward comes forward and speaks harshly to them, saying that the neighbours' fields are clear of birds but theirs are still thick with them. He steps into the boat. The wife and son and the chorus describe the bells and clappers and drums sounding all around, the rising clouds of birds, the wind whipping the waves to a white foam. The wife then looks at her son and, in an aside to the audience, admits her overpowering desire for her husband and her growing bitterness at his absence. She says that even the full moon cannot dispel the darkness in her heart - clearly meaning that even her kindest memories of him cannot relieve her longing. She watches the birds fly away and they remind her of parting and separation. The steward says all the birds have at last been driven off their fields and he invites them to take a rest. They all sit down in the boat.

The lord says that he has been so fascinated watching the boats that he has forgotten that he should be hurrying home. However, he is intrigued as to where the most picturesque boats have come from. He will call one over. He does so. The steward wonders who is speaking with such authority and he describes and mimes poling the boat towards Higurashi. Then he looks up and recognises his master. He drops the pole. Higurashi does not at first recognise the woman and child in the boat, nor they him, but his son Hanawaka tells him the whole story and he is very angry. He says he feels his son's keen disgrace at doing this menial task, blames himself for staying so long in the capital, and declares his intention of killing the steward. He grasps his sword and steps towards the man, reproving him for what he has done and asking him if he has anything to say in his own defence. The steward is silent. Higurashi draws his sword and moves to centre stage. The steward retreats to the *shite* pillar and bows.

At this point Higurashi's wife comes forward and tugs at his sleeve, saying that what has happened is not the steward's fault but his own for having been away so long. He turns to face her. She steps back and they sit facing one another. She compares his absence to the story about a countryman who stepped into a magical hermit's hut for what he thought was only half a day, but came out again to find that a hundred years had passed. She begs him to forgive the steward for both their sakes and she and her son put their hands together in supplication. He is convinced and pardons the steward, handing him his sheathed sword. The steward goes to stage centre and bows to him. The chorus ends the play by saying how Hanawaka in due course inherited his father's estates and became a virtuous warrior. As they do so, husband, wife and son exit up the *hashigakari*, leaving the steward centre stage with Higurashi's sword over his shoulder.

This relatively slight and simple play, with its message of forgiveness, begins to lift the heavy weight of unresolved longing which began with Kanehira's anguish. The wife does not hold the steward's actions against him, but blames her husband for his long absence in pursuit of legal redress - but the husband has already recognised his own shortcomings and it is implied that his example of honesty and clemency morally strengthened the young boy's character for the future. The compassion shown to the steward is a first step along the path of enlightenment, while the false pride attached to honour and possessions gets a drubbing and is put into perspective.

The 'demon' play - The Valley Rite (Taniko) [2]

The 'demon' play of the programme, in which evil is seen to be overcome by the teachings of Buddha, is called *Taniko* or *The Valley Rite*. It centres upon the unusual custom of a group of yamabushi (warrior priests) which is to throw any member of the party who becomes sick on their mountain pilgrimage to his death in the valley below. The play is unique because there is no *shite* in the first four sections and the action mostly takes place between the *waki* who is the leader of the priests and a young boy (another *kokata* role). The yamabushi, with their belief in their magic powers, are very appropriate characters to find in this kind of noh play because they were traditionally called upon by villagers to exorcise evil spirits, but the audience would certainly not expect what happens in this story, where the yamabushi themselves become the focus of evil.

The play begins with a young boy and his mother entering and crossing over the stage to the *waki* position where they both kneel with the son upstage of the mother. She wears a slightly-worried middle-aged mask, while he is unmasked. The leader of the yamabushi then comes down the *hashigakari* as far as the pine near the stage, where he declares his intention of visiting his young disciple Matsuwaka, who is living with his widowed mother nearby, to tell him that he is about to make his yearly pilgrimage into the mountains and to say goodbye. He regrets that Matsuwaka's mother still keeps the boy so much tied to her apron strings. He proceeds to the naming-place and faces the mother, asking if anyone is at home. Matsuwaka rises and goes to centre stage. The leader asks him why he has not come to the temple for such a long time, and the boy explains that his mother has been ill. The leader enters to speak to her and she asks him if he is going to take Matsuwaka up the mountain with him. He says he will not, because it is a very difficult and arduous trip undertaken as an act of penance and self-mortification and quite unsuitable for a young person. However, as he moves to leave, the young boy follows him and begs to be taken up the mountain so he can pray for his mother's health. Since it is a matter of filial piety, the leader returns and asks the mother for permission to take him. She is very loth to allow it, saying that he is now all she has to live for since her husband died, and she begs the boy not to go but, when it becomes obvious how keen he is, she eventually agrees, only asking him to hurry home again. He departs with his master in the direction of the *shite* pillar, while the mother rises and watches them leave, taking one or two longing steps after them - the chorus voicing her sadness at being parted from him for the first time. Master and disciple depart up the *hashigakari* and after a brief pause the mother follows them.

A stage assistant sets up a platform about three feet by six near the naming place with a sapling rising from each end of it. The yamabushi leader enters with his deputy, young Matsuwaka, and five of the pilgrims. They are all carrying rosaries and the leader is wearing a short sword. They cross to the chorus side of the stage, where the leader introduces Matsuwaka to the other pilgrims and they form two rows, to left and right of the stage, facing each other. Without moving, the leader and the pilgrims deliver a *michiyuki* speech describing their ascent into the mountains, the chill wind, the plover's cry and the coming of dusk. The leader takes a few steps forward and then returns to his position to indicate that they have reached the end of their day's journey. They describe how they spread their priestly robes on the dew of the mountain and sit down to rest.

At this point they break ranks and make a semicircle facing the audience in front of the musicians, with the leader and Matsuwaka to the audience's right. Matsuwaka tells the leader he is feeling ill, the leader hushes him and Matsuwaka removes his cap and outer garment and lies down with his head in the leader's lap. The deputy, to the audience's left, rises and asks the leader if it is not true that Matsuwaka is ill, the leader says he is merely tired. The deputy says he is glad and retires. However, one of the other pilgrims says that the leader is only making excuses and reminds the deputy that they have all taken vows to hurl any person who has become impure by falling sick into the valley below. The boy should now be cast into the valley as their traditions require. The deputy rises again and tells the leader that the Valley Rite must be observed. The leader says that he will explain what must happen to Matsuwaka. He does so and Matsuwaka says he could ask for nothing better than to surrender his life on such a pilgrimage. Gathering round the boy, they all declare how sorry they are and the leader weeps openly, raising both hands before his face. The chorus underlines his dilemma and then speaks for him. Through them he quotes a famous passage from the sutras which describes how 'all things shift with the changing world, like dreams and wraiths, like foam, light and shade, like dew or the lightning flash' - but he says he has never realised what this truly means till now. He feels like a bereaved father and the desires of humanity torment him. The deputy, however, urges him on and the chorus describe how they hurl the boy into the ravine, rolling logs and rocks after him to bury him. While this account is chanted they place the boy on the platform and push it down to the sight-directing pillar nearest to the audience on the left. A stage-assistant covers the boy with a robe signifying his death.

The deputy now declares that it is morning and they must be on their way, but the leader refuses to move and tells them to throw him into the valley after the boy, because his grief is an impurity as bad as sickness. They will not countenance that, but one of the pilgrims suggests that they should pray to the founder of their order, En the Ascetic, to bring the boy back to life. The leader agrees and they gather in a group facing the audience and invoke their founder, vigourously rubbing their rosary beads with a circular forward motion of the hands. They then return to their positions in the semicircle in front of the musicians.

En the Ascetic (*shite tsure*) now enters to the sound of a flute. He wears the mask of an angry old man, with a long white wig and a Chinese hat, and carries a pilgrim's staff. He declares that the three poisons of greed, anger and thoughtlessness are all successfully purged away by the exertion of journeys into the mountains and declares that the moon of Buddha's enlightenment will illuminate the man who has piled up merit. He declares further that Matsuwaka's life was an unequalled example of filial piety and for that reason he will restore him to life, thus showing how Buddha in his mercy responds to even the deepest needs of man. He then invokes Ginyo, the god of the ancient *gigaku* dance, to revive the child.

To a rapid flute accompaniment the god (*shite*) descends the *hashigakari*. He is richly dressed and wears a frowning demon's mask and a red wig, which is a characteristic of many noh gods. In his hand he carries an axe. As the chorus describe his actions, he first kneels before En the Ascetic; then rises and bows to him. After that he leaps up onto the platform, where he dances, miming lifting away the rocks and logs piled upon the boy and cutting down the two saplings with his axe - which are removed by stage assistants. As the chorus describe him tenderly parting the soil and lifting up the boy unhurt, he grasps and removes the robe laid over Matsukawa and the boy rises. He embraces him and takes him to En the Ascetic, near the *waki* position, who touches his head with his rosary, commends him for his loving, filial heart, and commits him to the leader's keeping. The Ascetic then exits along the *hashigakari*, followed by the god. The chorus describe them flying away over the mountains and vanishing from sight and, when the god reaches the exit curtain, he stamps to imply their final disappearance before he goes off. All the other players stay on stage till the music ends and then depart up the *hashigakari*.

It is an unusual demon play, because the demon who is involved represents creative energy and does only good. The 'evil' destroyed is plainly the death-dealing Valley Rite, which is the typical product of a sect of holy men who believe themselves to have an exclusive view of the truth and freeze what should be compassion into an inhuman 'perfection' which, in this extreme case, leads them to destroy anybody that illness renders imperfect. By swearing to do this, quite apart from disobeying their Buddhist vow not to take life, they place far too much stress on the honour of their order. The boy joins them for compassionate reasons, to pray at the mountain summit for his sick mother. Very properly, the leader is overcome with remorse when he considers what their rite has 'forced' them to do: but his proposal to be thrown into the ravine himself is an egotistical act that would have damned him and all who helped him. More sensibly, they all repent their action and call upon En the Ascetic, a being of true insight and wisdom, to come to their aid and resurrect the boy and, with the help of the god of the *gigaku* dance, his restoration to life is achieved. This is certain to set everyone involved on the direct route to self-denial and ultimately *nirvana*, a route on which the young boy, in his innocence, is already far ahead of the rest. This play, like the first, ends with an aspiration towards heaven shown by the Ascetic and the God flying upwards, and the resurrection of Matsuwaka brings the cycle of plays as close to its ideal starting point as possible.

After the last piece, to complete the programme, and emphasise the constant struggle for enlightenment, there would be the usual extract from another god play. This could well be the popular chorus from the end of the play *Takasago* :

The pleasures of a thousand autumns gladden the people,
The joys of ten thousand years give them new life.
The wind in the Twin Pines
Softly sighs, giving voice to songs of great delight,
Softly sighs, giving voice to songs of great delight.

And the audience would leave the theatre in a calm and positive mood.

NOTES

1 Those who want to read the five plays described here will find them at the end of *20 Plays of the No Theatre*, edited by Donald Keene, Columbia, 1971, pp 253-332.

2 This play inspired Bertold Brecht to create two teaching plays (*lehrstücke*) in one of which (*Der Jasager* - '*He who says Yes*') the boy agrees to his death, as in the original, and in the other of which (*Der Neinsager* - '*He who says No*') he does not.

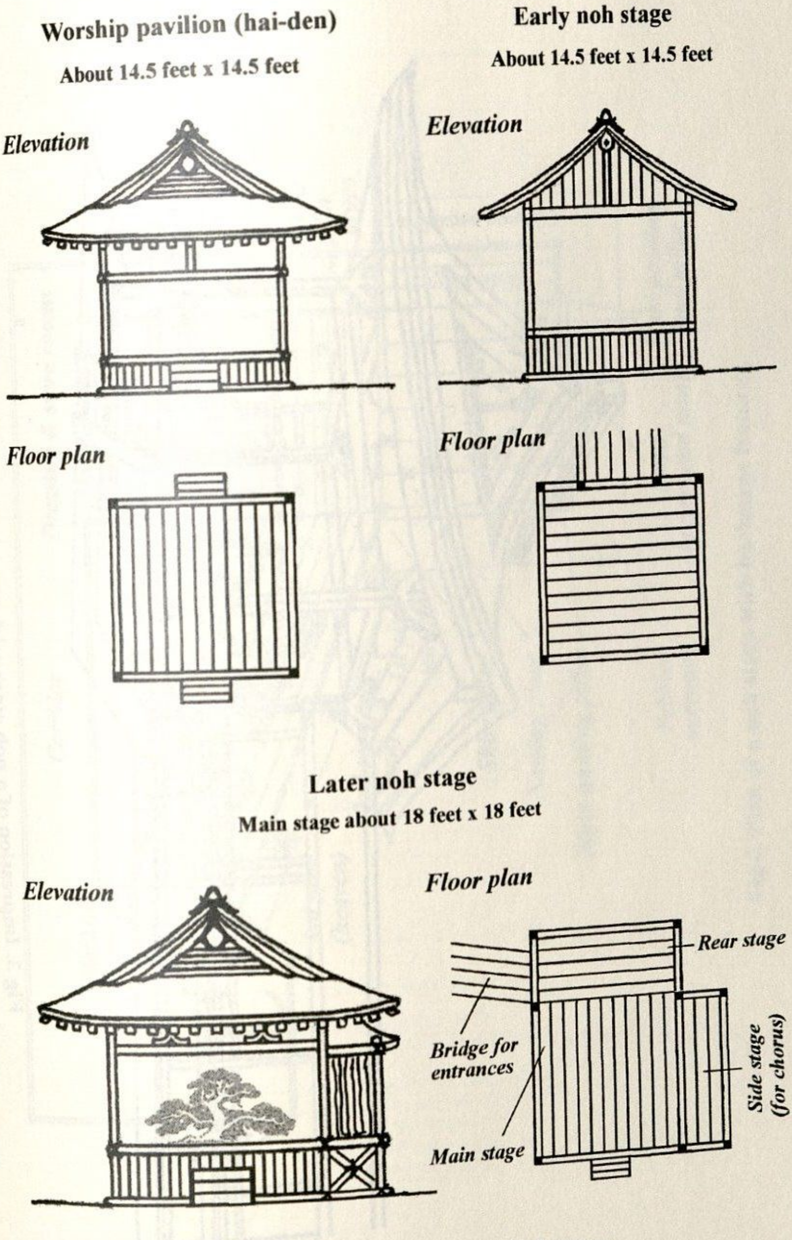
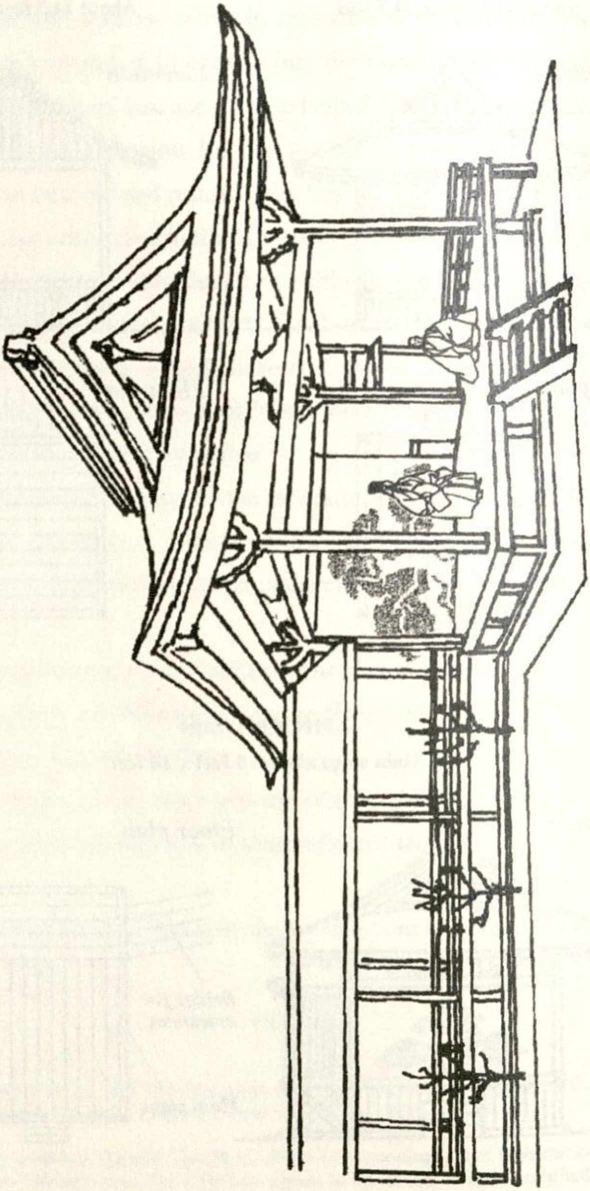

Worship pavilion (hai-den)
About 14.5 feet x 14.5 feet
Elevation
Floor plan
Early noh stage
About 14.5 feet x 14.5 feet
Elevation
Floor plan
Later noh stage
Main stage about 18 feet x 18 feet
Elevation
Floor plan
Rear stage
Bridge for entrances
Side stage (for chorus)
Main stage

Fig 2. Development of the noh stage.



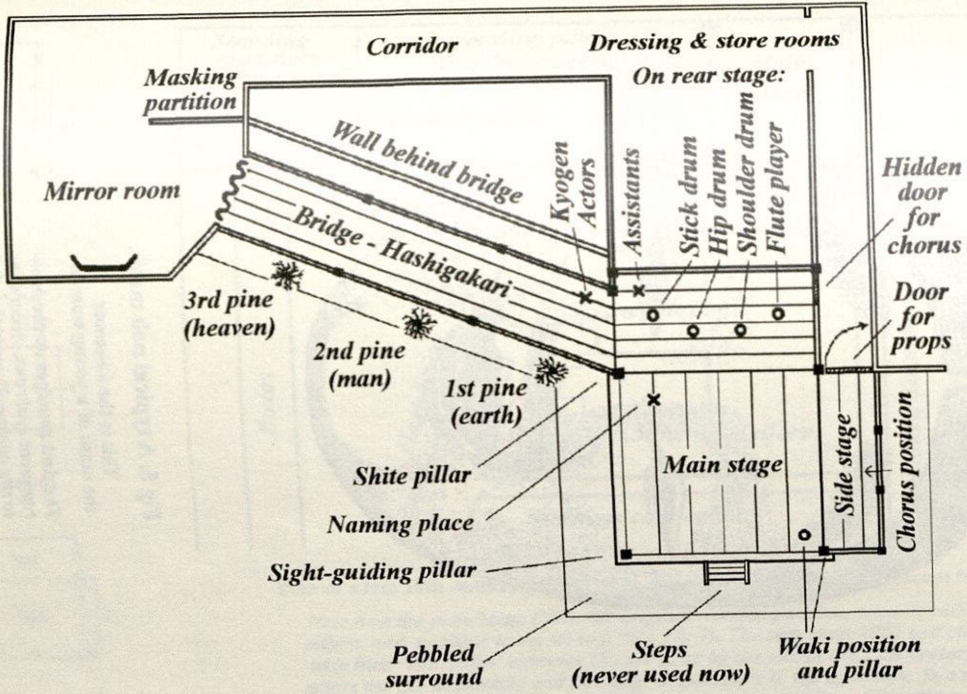

Corridor
Dressing & store rooms
Masking partition
On rear stage:
Wall behind bridge
Kyogen Actors
Assistants
Stick drum
Hip drum
Shoulder drum
Flute player
Hidden door for chorus
Door for props
Mirror room
Bridge - Hashigakari
3rd pine (heaven)
2nd pine (man)
1st pine (earth)
Main stage
Side stage
Chorus position
Shite pillar
Naming place
Sight-guiding pillar
Pebbled surround
Steps (never used now)
Waki position and pillar

Fig 4. Plan of a noh stage with backstage features.

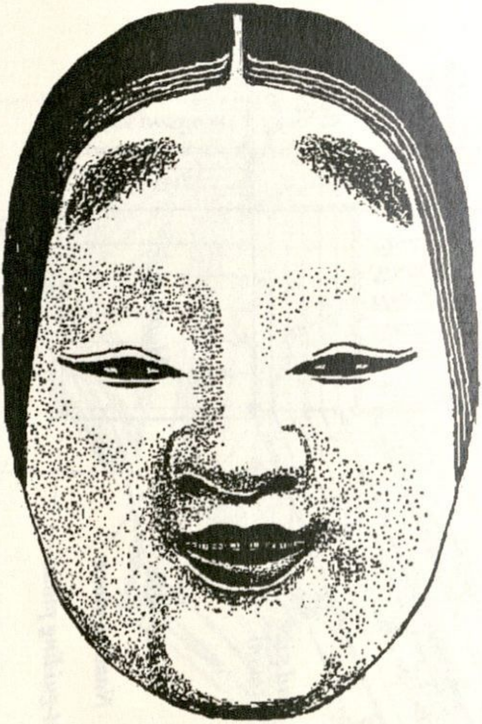


Fig 5. A typical noh mask.

This is the *ko-omote*
the mask of a young woman

The dark smudges on the brow represent eyebrows. According to the custom at court the real eyebrows were painted out and this make-up replaced them.