

THE NOH THEATRE AS INTERCULTURAL PERFORMANCE - A CASE STUDY

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Abstract: *The present paper explores the way in which theatre was used as a bridge between two cultures, both in the 16th century Japan, where the traditional Noh theatre was used - in the form of kirishitan noh - to expound Christian doctrine, by foreign missionaries and Japanese, as well as more recently. At the beginning of the twentieth century the Irish poet and dramatist W.B. Yeats was greatly influenced by the classical Noh theatre, while the new form of shinsaku noh was emerging to span a new bridge between traditional Japan and the West – bringing foreign elements into the Noh and helping spread Japanese traditional acting techniques in contemporary theatre .*

Keywords: *intercultural performance, shinsaku noh, kirishitan noh*

The Noh theatre is a classical art form with a tradition of over six hundred years (if we take the year 1350 as approximate date of its appearance as performance). Since its beginnings in the 14-th century it has produced almost three thousand plays of which 250 are in the current repertoire (*genkō kyoku*), and can be considered as “perfect gems, refined by long years of repeated polishing”, to cite the great master Umewaka Rokuro¹.

Some 150 years since its appearance, the Noh theatre has its first major encounter with another culture. The first Europeans – the Portuguese missionaries of Saint Francis Xavier – arrived in Japan in 1543. Gaining the support of the local nobility, the Christian missionaries were very successful in spreading the new religion to a people who was well accustomed to a multi-layered, syncretic religious experience, and where medieval Buddhist sects like Amidism had already introduced a salvation doctrine similar to the Christian one.

In this period, called the Azuchi-Momoyama (1573-1603), it seems that Japanese believers and foreign missionaries used the medium of the Noh theatre (which was very popular at the time) to create *kirishitan noh* (切支丹能), plays with subjects inspired from the Christian doctrine, somewhat like the medieval European mystery plays. There seem to have existed quite a few of these plays, but, due to the interdiction and then severe persecution of Christianity from 1614 onward, all records about *kirishitan noh* have disappeared. The subject of *kirishitan noh* came back into public discussion in the late 2000-s, when a few *noh* plays with Christian subjects appeared. We can thus cite the performance of “*Sei Pauro no kaishin*” (「聖パウロの回心」) staged on the 6th of March 2012 in Tokyo, by the Kanze School Head, Kanze Kiyokazu, in the memory of the victims of the March 2011 earthquake. With this occasion, Mr. Kanze declared in some interviews that he had known about *kirishitan noh* since childhood, from

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¹ “kanpeki ni katto sareta daiyamondo nagai jikan wo kakete kurikaeshi kurikaeshi migakikomareta, utsukushii hōseki”, in Hikawa Mariko, *Umewaka Rokuro – “Noh no shinseiki”*, Shogakkan, Tokyo, 2003, pag. 23

his father (and predecessor as Kanze School Head), and that:”In a distant past Noh merged with Western culture. Wondering how it was enacted in those times, my curiosity and imagination were stirred, and it became my dream to be able to play like this some time.”²

From the three thousand Noh plays written and performed since the Muromachi (1337-1573) period all through the Edo (17th and 18th century), the 254 that are in the current repertory (*genkō kyoku*) are mostly Muromachi plays, with a deep philosophical/moral content, refined and polished through more than five hundred years of performance, as Umewaka Rokuro has noted. Plays written in the Edo period were called *shingi nō* or *shinsakubutsu* (“new pieces”) at the time³, however most of them are not considered very interesting now⁴. In the Meiji period there appeared in the world of Noh the idea that by repeating only the perfect plays in the repertoire the artistic creativity of the Noh could be lost. So, after the Meiji period new plays came to be written and many innovations made their way into the dramatic representation (instruments like the organ appeared onstage, new scenography was introduced). These new Noh plays written after 1916 are called today *shinsaku nō* (*noh*).

As for the subject matter of these new plays, religious content, i.e., episodes taken from the Bible, appear in many plays (*Iesu no senrei*, “The Baptism of Jesus”, or *Luteru*, “Luther”, to cite some of the most recent), but also many other new themes.

Shinsaku noh written before the Second World War are inspired from the previous Russo-Japanese or Sino-Japanese wars (and then even the Pacific War), then another large category are the plays inspired by twentieth century Japanese literary works (the classical works like *Genji Monogatari* being exhausted as a source of inspiration in the Muromachi period). In this category we have plays like *Chieko shō*, “About Chieko”, inspired by the work of poet Takamura Kōtarō, *Kusamakura*, inspired by Natsume Sōseki’s novel of the same title, or *Eiketsu no asa*, “The Morning of Eternal Separation”, inspired by Miyazawa Kenji, or even a play from the ballet *Giselle*, or plays inspired by *manga* (*Kurenai Tennyō*, from “*Garasu no kamen*”, or *Nōmai Evangelion*, from “*Shinseiki Evangelion*”).

These recent innovative Noh plays reflect a very fertile cross-cultural exchange. Before going into more detail about them, I would like to present a beautiful case of influence from East to West and then back to the East that happened between Noh, Yeats’ theatre and again Noh.

In his mature years W. B. Yeats came to be drawn to the world of theatre, which could be a powerful tool in the Irish Revival (among others he was one of the founders of the Abbey Theatre in Dublin). His friendship with Ezra Pound and Ernest Fenollosa⁵, who

² “Haruka mukashi, nō ga seiyō bunka to yūgō shiteita. Ika ni enjita no darō. Kōkishin to sōzōryoku wo kakitaterare, itsuka jibun no te de jōen dekitara, to musō shita.” *The Asahi Shimbun* of February 9th 2012, digital edition, <http://www.asahi.com/culture/update/0209/TKY201202090238.html>

³ Nishino Haruo, *Shinsakunō no hyakunen* (2), in *Nōgaku Kenkyū* No. 30/2005, Hōsei Daigaku Nōgaku Kenkyūjo

⁴ Noh Theatre Workshop, Orleans Conservatory, May 5th 2012

⁵ Ernest Fenollosa (1853-1916) was professor of philosophy and economy at Tokyo Imperial University but during his stay in Japan he also became an enthusiast orientalist. In the climate of Meiji Japan when learning the Western ways was a priority almost to the detriment of native ways, his interest in and study of the Noh helped preserve traditional Japanese art. His great merit is in explaining and bringing Noh into Western culture.

translated and promoted the Noh theatre in the West, introduced him to this form of art. Yeats incorporated many elements from Noh into his series of plays based on the legends of Cuchulain, the mythical hero of Ulster: *At the Hawk's Well* (1917) and *The Death of Cuchulain* (1935)⁶.

Yeats declared that he wanted to establish a “strange intimacy” in his plays as opposed to the “familiar distance” evoked by the contemporary naturalistic productions of his time⁷. The form of Yeats’ plays is stylized, symbolic, ritualistic, with the bare stage and the patterned screen of Noh. Actually, these four plays based on the Cuchulain story were called “dance plays”.

“Critics have differed in assessing the degree to which the Yeats work captures the effects of the Noh and complain that Yeats misunderstood it because he did not replicate it. It is important to keep in mind that Yeats had a limited knowledge of Noh. Everything he knew was based on Ezra Pound’s work and Ernest Fenolosa’s translations. Yeats conceived of his plays as a new form, not a copy of the Japanese form but the same in spirit. Yeats, having never seen a Noh play performed, neither aspired nor attempted to recreate replicas of Noh plays in his *Four Plays for Dancers* (*Four Plays*). Yeats was an artist not a copier. In 1916, in one of his most famous essays of drama criticism, “Certain Noble Plays of Japan”, Yeats described his revolutionary conception for a new form of drama:

*With the help of Japanese plays ... I have invented a form of drama, distinguished, indirect and, symbolic, and having no need of mob or press to pay its way – an aristocratic form – W.B.Yeats, 1916*⁸

So this was a first stage in the “Westernization” of Noh. But the fascinating cross-fertilization between the arts of East and West is illustrated by the fact that, in a way, *At the Hawk's Well*, became a part of Japan’s modern Noh repertoire in the post-war period. Yokomichi Mario, a great Japanese Noh scholar, adapted the Japanese translation of the play into a *shinsaku nō* in 1949 - *Taka no izumi*, and then reworked and modernized it in 1969, as *Takahime*, “The Hawk Maiden”. *Takahime* was a most debated performance in Japan. It was played by some of the great masters of Noh, for example the role of the Old Man was performed in the 2005 Tokyo Summer Festival by Kanze Hideo, who, among others, was Professor at Kyoto University of Art and Design, and wrote serious scholarship in English explaining Noh, and as a performer strived, through cross-collaborations, to bring Noh to an international audience.

Considering what I have mentioned earlier, namely that the subject matter of *shinsaku nō* dealt only with events from Japanese history, or Japanese literature, plus the Bible, *Takahime* was a revolutionary play, being the first to take a foreign work of art as inspiration. But the trend of internationalization of Noh was taken even further this spring, when, in May 2012, at the Jeanne d’Arc International Festival organized in Orleans, a Noh play featuring for the first time a foreign historical character, namely Joan of Arc, was performed in Orleans (and then Paris and Aix en Provence), for 600–th anniversary of the heroine’s birth.

⁶ Yeats wrote five plays based on the legend of Cuchulain: *At the Hawk's Well*, *On Baile's Strand*, *The Green Helmet*, *The Only Jealousy of Emer* and *The Death of Cuchulain*

⁷ Sands, Maren. *The Influence of Japanese Noh Theatre on Yeats*, in *Phantasmagoria*, Carol M. Cantrell (ed.), Boulder: Colorado State University, 2005, p. 1

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 7

Just like *Taka no Izumi* in the post-war period, *Jeanne d'Arc* was written by a great specialist of Noh, Professor and former Director of the Hosei University Noh Institute, Haruo Nishino. The play is staged by great masters of the Kita Noh school, namely Tanshu Kano, the Head of the school and Living National Treasure of Japan, and Kyogen Master Yamamoto Tojiro, also Living National Treasure, and features the story of Joan of Arc, in traditional Noh style.

Master Kano has declared after the performance: “The pure love that Joan of Arc had for her country and her people, the strong love that her mother had for her, is the same in the Christian culture and in the Japanese culture. I hope that the universality of Noh has been able to convey this through the character of Jeanne d'Arc.”⁹ As Master Kano says, this performance of *Jeanne d'Arc* is also dedicated to inter-culturality, to promoting a valuable exchange of aesthetic principles between cultures as different as those of Japan and France.

I attended the performance of *Jeanne d'Arc* and I was greatly impressed both by the traditional beauty of the performance – I really sensed the flower of *yūgen* bloom onstage – as well as by the ingenious innovations in the mise en scene and the structure of the plot. The innovation in structure is that at the beginning of both acts of the play, a French actor¹⁰ who has been long trained in the art of Noh, Raphael Trani, makes a speech in French about the life, battles, and death of the heroine. This part is a courtesy for the French public and will be omitted from the Japanese representation of the play.

The *shite*, played by Master Kano, enters the stage as an old woman who comes to pray in an old church, where strangely, there is a shining helmet right in the middle. As he passes by the *shite-bashira* he slowly makes the sign of the cross and then changes his staff from on hand to the other and, slowly leaning on it as he walks, goes to sit on the chair that is placed for him at the center of the stage. Even though *shite's* recitation was absolutely extraordinary, for me the moment unspeakable grace – *yūgen* coming alive from within the covers of the books – was the sign of the cross. Right there in the beginning, just as fervent Christians start an important undertaking with a “So help us God!” the slow, symbolic gesture reminded me that silence is the language of God and everything else is but a poor translation.

Extraordinary as it was, the performance of *Jeanne d'Arc* in France was not the only event that marked a very fertile year for inter-cultural exchange. In February 2011 Warsaw's Witkiewicz Studio Theatre hosted the premiere of the first Polish Noh production, *Stroiciel fortepianu*, “The Piano Tuner”, performed by the Tessenkai Theatre Company from Tokyo. As Dr. Diego Pellechia remarked in his review of the play, “Intercultural theatre plays involving Noh and other performance forms are not mere artistic endeavours but acts with strong political relevance.”¹¹ The play is written by Jadwiga Maria Rodowicz, a Noh scholar and, at present, the Ambassador of Poland in Japan. Ms. Rodowicz was also a long-time member of the experimental Polish theatre group Gardzienice. The plot of the play enacts a symbolic meeting of Frederic Chopin and

⁹ “Jeanne d'Arc ga hitobito ya kokka ni daiteita junsuina aijō, Jeanne d'Arc no haha ga musume ni daiteita tsuyoi aijō wa, kirisuto-kyōteki bunka demo, nihonteki bunka demo onaji. Nō ga motsu fūhensei wo, Jeanne d'Arc wo tsūjite hyōgen dekireba” to katatta, in the article *Futsu de “Jeanne d'Arc” kōen – Kanō san fushi*, Kumanichi News from 2012/05/08, <http://kumanichi.com/news/local/main/20120508004.shtml>

¹⁰ Raphael Trani is an actor and director at the Theatre de l'Eventail, Orleans,

¹¹ In the article *Polish-Japanese Noh Diplomacy: Chopin and “The Piano Tuner”*, in **Gaikokujin to Noh, My Journey into Noh theatre**: <http://nohtheatre.wordpress.com/2011/02/19/polish-japanese-noh-diplomacy-chopin-and-the-piano-tuner/>

Eugene Delacroix in the garden of George Sand at Nohant. They engage in debates about art and music, and about Chopin's attempts to harmonize his Polish and French identities. To quote again Dr. Pellechia, "the plot and the characters clearly reveal the attempt to make interculturalism the main theme of this play."

The combination of all the elements involved – the position of the author as Ambassador but also member of the experimental Polish theatre, that was since Grotowski's time influenced by Noh, "contains an east/centre/west triad that marks the sign of the times".¹²

The endeavours of *shinsaku* Noh creators continue, as specialists of Japanese culture who are also artists or literati produce plays: *Kawakatsu* (2007) by Umehara Takeshi, or *The Linden Tree* (2011) and *Crazy Jane* (2001) by David Crandall.

The issue is: will these plays remain in the repertory? Just as during the Edo period thousands of plays were produced once and never again repeated, many of the *shinsaku noh* have the same fate. It is a matter worth further study to see which of these plays will be re-enacted and what are the elements that secure for these plays a place in the repertoire. However, the very idea of *shinsaku noh* and the perseverance with which Japanese artists continued to enrich their tradition is a remarkable instance of interculturality.

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¹² Ibidem