

## ENGLISH NOH - A BRIEF (AND BIASED) HISTORY

Theatre Nohgaku got its start in 2000 when I invited English-speaking advanced noh students, including those from my Noh Training Project workshops in Tokyo and Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania, to gather for a week in Bloomsburg to work on W.B. Yeats' *At the Hawk's Well*, music for which I had composed in noh style in 1981 and which had several subsequent productions. The rehearsals were an initial attempt to see whether noh in English could be both interesting and viable enough to create a company of English noh performers.

### YEATS AND NOH

The history of plays in English being called 'noh' seems to have originated with Yeats when he wrote his *At the Hawks' Well* in 1916. Its production, however, did not use a noh musical style, but original music composed by Edmund Dulac.

Here, immediately, a misunderstanding was created of what noh is. Noh plays are not the same as Shakespeare plays which can be performed in a variety of ways and still be considered Shakespeare. Noh instead is like opera. Taking the text of a Verdi or Mozart or Britten opera, discarding the music and performing it in a style other than opera, would create a performance based on opera lyrics. But is it still a Verdi opera when the lyrics are just spoken? Is it still a Mozart opera if the text is done in Beijing opera style without Mozart's music? Is it still an opera if it is done in the style of noh?

I don't think so. An opera is done in a style that we recognize as opera. Likewise, a noh play (and 'play' is a misnomer — it is more a musical or dance-drama) is done in a style that can be recognized as noh. A Mozart opera performed without Mozart's music in the style of noh, is noh. A performance using the libretto of the classical noh *Kiyotsune* sung in opera style is not noh, but is opera.



Though Yeats called his play a 'noh' play, it was, in my opinion, a Western musical performance whose text was influenced by noh. But it was not noh. That had to wait until the Japanese noh scholar, Yokomichi Mario, made an arrangement for *Hawk's Well* in Japanese in 1949 which had a production by noh professionals, and then yet another version and production of it in 1965. Both of these have been often performed since. In the noh world, these are considered noh, but a version using the original music by Edmond Dulac is not.

The version I composed in 1981, followed both the Yeats English and the musical style of noh. It was, to my knowledge, the first time that anyone had written strict noh music to go with the original English of Yeats' play. It was an English noh.

## OTHER ENGLISH NOH

After Yeats, there no doubt have been others who have written texts influenced by noh, and likely even called them 'noh plays'. Of course, in my view, they are not noh until they are performed at the very least in the musical style of noh.

One that came very close to being noh was the play *St. Francis*, written by Arthur Little with music by Leonard Holvik. This was performed in 1970 at my alma mater, Earlham College in Indiana. It was my second year, and these two professors conducted a noh seminar which I took. The seminar featured readings of noh texts in translation, listening to recordings of noh music and seeing the one available film about noh. We then began to rehearse the work which the two professors had created. The structure followed closely some of the typical structures of classical noh. The music suggested noh, but was written so American students not trained in noh techniques could still perform it. I was chosen to be the main actor for the production, hardly imagining that this would be a first step in what would become a lifetime relationship with noh.



Left: Akira Matsui Right: Richard Emmert

Later when I went to Japan, I met a young noh actor — Akira Matsui who is on this tour — and began to take lessons with him in traditional noh chant and dance. Then, I studied the four instruments as well and began to develop an understanding of the music of noh, in particular the relationship between the drums and the text and how text and rhythm are so important in creating the style of noh.

While studying noh in Japan, I was told by several people that the music of noh developed from the Japanese language and could not be done in other languages. Despite this, as I began to feel the rhythms of noh in my body, it seemed natural for this native English speaker to begin to think of English text and how it could fit with these rhythms. When Jonah Salz, a young American director based in Kyoto, asked me to write music for a production of *At the Hawk's Well*, it was easy to throw caution to the wind and to dive in and write music for the Yeats text in traditional noh style. Performances followed in Kyoto, Osaka and Tokyo. Yokomichi Mario, the director of the earlier *Hawk's Well* versions in Japanese and my professor of noh studies at Tokyo University of Fine Arts, told me at the Tokyo performances, that my version was 'too noh-like'. On reflection, his criticism suggested that I could have explored the noh style in a way which departed more from typical noh, but it clearly recognized, if there was still any doubt, that yes, noh can be performed in English.

Over the next years, I composed music for and directed and performed in several English noh. They were: 1) a Tokyo production of American Janine Beichman's play *Drifting Fires*, a story about space travelers in the distant future visiting the place which once was the planet 'earth' and there meeting the spirit of the last human being (1985); 2) an Earlham College production readapting *St. Francis* in a stricter noh style (1988); 3) a University of Sydney production of Allan Marett's *Eliza*, a story of a British woman shipwrecked off the coast of Australia and



Above: Akira Matsui, performing in Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania, USA

Below: Theatre Nohgaku, Noh Training Project in Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania, USA

forced to live with aboriginal people, and who in turn came to appreciate their unique sense of dream and time (1989); 4) a San Francisco Theatre of Yugen production of *Crazy Horse* by American Erik Ehn which collaborated with Native American performers to tell the story of the great Native American chieftain (2001); 5) a Vancouver production of Canadian poet Daphne Marlatt's *The Gull*, a play about cultural identity issues of Japanese fishermen along the British Columbia coast and touted in Canada as 'the first Canadian noh' (2006); and 6) a University of Hawaii production of my own English translation of the classical Japanese noh *Sumidagawa* (2009).

During the 1980s, there were two others in Japan who made productions which can be considered English noh, or at least noh-influenced English plays. First, Kuniyoshi Munakata Ueda, a Shakespeare specialist at Nihon University, began using noh with Shakespeare, notably *Hamlet* and *Othello*. Although the plays sometimes lacked a clear sense of the relationship between poetic text and drum rhythms that give noh its vitality and intensity, they did include chant and movement in noh style and used noh musicians. Second, my good friend and now fellow member of Theatre Nohgaku, David Crandall, wrote and directed two plays, *Crazy Jane* and *Linden Tree*, both which had a strong noh structural feel in terms of text and movement but employed his own musical composition for a Western instrumental ensemble.

## THEATRE NOHGAKU AND ITS WORK

In the above list of English noh, there is a large gap between the noh plays I wrote music for in the 80s and the next one which followed in 2001. After working on English noh in the 80s, it seemed clear that if it was to become viable, it was necessary to have a group of English speakers trained in noh. In 1991, I started an ongoing semi-intensive Noh Training Project in Tokyo,



Photographs from the Noh Training Project/Theatre  
Nohgaku performance of Funa Benkei, August 2009



and then in 1995, a summer intensive Noh Training Project in Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania. Both continue today.

Thus, after some years of planting the seeds, Theatre Nohgaku was born. We had our first tour in the United States in 2002 of Yeats' *Hawk's Well*. In 2003, we began an annual Writers' Workshop geared to playwrights and poets interested in writing in the style of noh. In 2004, we collaborated with the Noh Training Project for its 10th anniversary performance in Pennsylvania of the classical noh *Kurozuka* in Japanese. In 2006, we toured Theatre Nohgaku member Greg Giovanni's *Pine Barrens*, a story of the devil said to roam the pine barrens of New Jersey. In 2007, we toured David Crandall's *Crazy Jane* which he readapted to be sung in noh style with a noh ensemble. And finally, this past summer, we again collaborated with the Noh Training Project for its 15th anniversary by performing the classical noh *Funabenkei* in Japanese.

This production of *Pagoda* in collaboration with the Oshima Noh Theatre is another step in our development as a company. But perhaps more importantly, it is a step in making noh an accessible art form for the English-speaking world.

**Richard Emmert**



Photographs from Greg Giovanni's *Pine Barrens*