

## WHY WRITE A NOH PLAY?

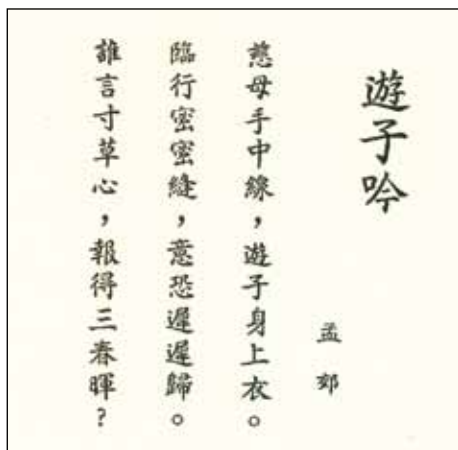


The character for 'noh' in Chinese means 'can' – the verb used to indicate that it is possible for something to be done.<sup>1</sup>

I was fortunate to meet the Oshima family at their theatre in Fukuyama in November 2007 at a time when I was working on a piece for Western musical theatre. It was the Oshimas' interest in this work, their kindness in thinking that my story might make a noh play, and their dedication to their art, that inspired me to consider taking this fascinating journey into the world of noh. 'Serendipity' is the 'discovery of something fortunate', and the 'gift for discovery'. Both underpin the making of *Pagoda*.

The Oshima family and friends introduced me to Richard Emmert, one of the few Westerners with the skills, experience, passion and generosity of spirit to collaborate on such a project. Rick first encouraged me to attend a noh Writer's Workshop that he was running in the USA, and then, with the help of twenty-first century technology (the Internet), acted as my mentor in this classical art form – Rick, working from his base in Tokyo and myself working from the French Pyrenees. For nearly four months I shut myself away to let the beauty of the mountains combine with my thoughts of the life-changing experiences that happened to me more than 30 years ago. Rick helped me understand how I could use the structure and discipline of noh to interpret these into a noh play.

I wanted to draw on two stories that had stayed with me all this time. The first was how I found my father's birthplace in China in the 1970s at a time when China was virtually closed to the West, and what I learnt about his childhood and family. The second was the legend of a Pagoda local to his native province. The stories had a common subject – courageous women – one rich, in the case of the Pagoda legend, and one poor, my Chinese grandmother, who both lost loved ones in tragic circumstances, and never gave up hope. But, the story of *Pagoda*



Above: Mask from the Oshima family collection

Below: Tang dynasty poem: *The Roving Son* by Meng Chiao (751-814) a reference used in the *Pagoda* text

noh also has a subtext – identity and migration. People of mixed race often wonder about their identity. The writing of *Pagoda* has enabled me to explore who I am and where I have come from. It has also helped me to understand that migration is as old as mankind itself.

When I first saw noh performed I was not aware that it was a 'cultural treasure', nor was I particularly concerned that I did not understand it, or its stories. I just considered it a beautiful art form. In the noh world, artistic practice generally precedes meaning – though the search for harmony between form and function is as important to noh as it is any art form. However, noh has many structures and conventions. Writing for noh involves respecting these, but at the same time, within these conventions, the writer has a great deal of freedom of expression. Once familiar with the conventions of noh the art form reveals itself and no longer seems impenetrable and esoteric, but rather liberating and unrestrictive.

I have learnt much about noh and the structural elements of noh by 'doing' ie writing a noh play. Interestingly, writing for noh has also enabled me to explore aspects of Chinese as well as Japanese culture<sup>2</sup>. But those with whom I have been fortunate enough to work over the last two years have devoted their entire lives to 'perfecting their art'. They have enabled me to get close enough to the art of noh to allow it to captivate me and tease out the images in my mind to tell this story in the way noh allows.

I will continue to worry about whether the *jo-ha-kyu*<sup>3</sup> is right, and whether I have been sufficiently faithful to the traditional noh conventions for *Pagoda* to be 'accepted' as a noh play. Perhaps this personal story will be as inspirational to the performers of *Pagoda* as the complete adherence to the rules of noh. It is for others to judge whether we have managed to respond well to both

challenges. I hope, like me, our audiences will grow to understand a little of what noh has to offer – to art and to our understanding of life.

### Jannette Cheong



<sup>1</sup> Royall Tyler, in his introduction to Japanese Nô Dramas states 'noh which means 'accomplishment' or 'perfected art, is no doubt an expression of practical as well as aesthetic ambition'.

<sup>2</sup> Many classical noh plays draw on Chinese poetry, especially from Wakan-roei-shu (a Collection of Japanese and Chinese poems for chanting - 1013). Chinese poetry had the same standing as Latin poetry in Europe at the time noh flourished in Japan.

<sup>3</sup> *Jo-ha-kyu* Important underlying structural concept: "Jo, literally 'preface,' means the opening of the process, and it is generally characterized as smooth and even. *Ha* means 'break' and indicates a change in tone from the *jo* as well as the main body of development of the play's theme. *Kyu* means 'fast' and is taken as 'fast finale', the climax of the play. Zeami came to see *jo-ha-kyu* as a universal organizational principle for all things existing in time, and he applied the term not only to the play as a whole, but to *shodan* and even individual syllables of a text." Hare, Thomas Blenman. Zeami's Style: The Noh Plays of Zeami Motokiyo. Stanford University Press, 1986, pp. 291-300.