

An American Experiment in Noh

In 1916 Ezra Pound published the notes of Ernest Fenolosa, together with his own translations of some selected Noh plays, and it is interesting to notice that at that time Fenolosa claimed that he was one of the two foreigners who had ever been taught the techniques of the Japanese Noh theatre, and that he, Fenolosa, was the only foreigner who was actively practising these techniques. Since that time, of course, there has been a slowly growing interest in the Noh theatre. Western scholars and artists have been drawn to it by its great grace, by its formal qualities of precision and discipline, and by its power to evoke the most poignant and the most sublime emotions. A Noh performance seems truly to portray poetry in motion, as well as poetry in repose.

Now in the last half century there have been many books written about the Noh and many translations of the plays, and visitors to Japan have had the opportunity of seeing for themselves an authentic Ban-gumi, or Noh programme; furthermore, we know that Yeats was influenced by the Noh theatre in his own plays, and we know that Jean-Louis Barrault goes to the Noh theatre when he is in Tokyo, and we also know that countless actors and directors and playwrights have been profoundly moved by the simplicity and tradition of this great ancient art form.

However, for all of this interest that has grown up in recent years, the Noh theatre has preserved its unique character, and Fenolosa's claim, still reasonably respectable is that he was one of the very few outsiders who were permitted actually to learn, and then to practise, the art of the Noh. That is, until just recently.

Because now there is a group of American professional actors that can say it has also been initiated into the Noh. As part of an educational adventure sponsored by the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Theatre Arts in New York, in association with the Japan Society, two Noh actors came from Tokyo to the United States. Here, for the first time in history, they directed non-Japanese actors in a production of *Ikkaku Sennin*, a classical Noh play. The directors were Sadayo Kita, a sixteenth generation Noh performer from the Kita troupe of the Noh, Tokyo, and his assistant, Akiyo Tomoeda, also of the Kita troupe. The American actors were selected from the New York theatre, and some of them were appearing in Broadway shows while they rehearsed the Japanese play. For more

than six weeks, everyone worked at the Institute, imitating body movements, learning dance patterns, and practising what to do with the hands, what to do with the feet, and what to do while one was simply standing still.

What is so very difficult about the Noh? Well for one thing, the tradition of the Noh theatre is over 600 years old, and there is that much ritual and tradition behind each gesture, each inflection of the voice. For another, the Noh is known as "the immeasurable scripture," because it is a synthesis of all the arts; it includes song, dance, poetry, drama and religion. "We work in pure spirit," said Umewaka Minoru, the nineteenth century Noh actor. And this pure spirit is shown through restraint and containment, so that each performance of a Noh play is a manifestation of ultimate control. There is a Noh saying, "The heart is the form." During the rehearsals at the Institute, Sadayo Kita once commented: "To watch Noh is like creating oneself on stage, and then watching it." And finally, the Noh is a certain disposition to endure; it is the stoic patience of waiting for long periods of time on stage; it is the silence of sitting alone and knowing that no one in the audience is going to get restless or upset if there is not a great flurry of distracting action, if there is not a lot of instant "entertainment" served up on the spot. Because the Noh theatre is *yugen*, that indefinable experience of the spirit which an actor realizes in his performance; it is the dark and obscure happening that animates the way he moves, the way he feels, and the way he is. Since in the Noh theatre the audience must provide its own imaginative energy for each performance, the audience must also work to realize the mysterious *yugen* of the Noh.

When the American actors had completed their basic training in Noh movement, the Institute provided them with authentic Noh costumes, colorful robes and great flowing wigs and hand-carved masks, either grotesque or beatific, depending on the character. Then the Institute constructed a stage made of white pine, built to the specifications of the Noh theatre—only two feet larger, to compensate for the fact that American actors were slightly larger than their Japanese counterparts.

All rehearsals of *Ikkaku Sennin* at the Institute were open to members of the New York theatre profession. One observer, Jerome Robbins, was on his way to Tokyo to stage the Japanese production of *West Side Story*. He

was greatly interested in the rehearsals at the Institute and in the instructions of Mr. Kita and Mr. Tomoeda. He spoke of the Noh actors in an interview published in the *Herald Tribune*:

In a way their style is the opposite of ours. It has thrown a whole new light on theatre for me, particularly on American acting styles. Our acting is limitless, casual, sloppy, anything-you-want. But this style refines and refines and refines movement. It gets to the point where an actor, just by the simple fact of making an entrance, can have a tremendous dramatic effect.

What did the American actors feel about the experience? Coming from the complete freedom of the American theatre, how did they adjust to the extreme discipline of the Noh? One actor, Peter Blaxill, commented on the conventions which seemed to restrict his interpretation, but also forced him to discover new sources of interpretation: "I wear a mask, and still I must emote. I've learned to use nuances of acting on which I had never depended." Another actor stressed the selfless spirit of the Noh, as opposed to the egotism in American theatre.

When the rehearsals were completed, *Ikkaku Sennin* was performed at the Institute in New York through the month of November, to an invitational audience composed mostly of theatre people—actors, directors, playwrights, producers and agents. Almost everyone who saw the production was amazed that the American actors had absorbed so much of the techniques of the Noh in so short a period of time. Those members of the theatrical profession who were searching in their own work for something beyond mere naturalism were especially delighted by this reproduction of an acting style which was so poetic and controlled. Many commented that they intended to use the

principles behind this production in their own future work.

What did the Japanese directors feel about the experience? First of all, what did they think of teaching American actors? Were they concerned about breaking the age-old secrecy associated with the Noh theatre? Sadayo Kita commented:

Still, I would never teach certain things. I would never teach the secret of my lion dance. Or how to roll the hair of the lion in little ringlets. That is a Kita secret.

So there was no great anxiety about violating the integrity of the Noh tradition. But did the directors feel that the experience had been successful? At first Sadayo Kita had had some reservations: "I had been disturbed by the fearful thought of spoiling all the fragrance and depth of the Noh form." But as rehearsals progressed, and as the Japanese masters saw that the American actors sincerely desired to learn the fundamentals of this most difficult art form, their fearful thoughts diminished. By the time the production opened, Sadayo Kita was able to write:

I would like to stress that I admire and thank with all my heart the devotion and effort that my American actor-friends have offered in learning and understanding Noh. I shall never forget their willing help in scrubbing the stage floor with left over bean-curd early in the morning. I had not dreamed of such a thing as being possible.

Thus a truly historic occasion had taken place, and there was no telling what results it might have. The American theatre, with such a deep need for style and tradition, could acquire a great deal from the discipline and technique of the Japanese Noh theatre.

William Packard