

THE INTELLECTUAL'S PLAY: A BRIEF DISCOURSE ON THE NOH *

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AT THE VERY ONSET, I WISH TO MAKE CLEAR THAT THE NOH, a classical theatre of Japan, is by no means a strictly intellectual play. Watching it can be a highly emotional experience and it has been my fortunate experience to watch performances where I was moved to tears like hundreds watching the play. I thought that out of the varied plays I saw, the *Noh* can be what would most appeal to this group. Therefore, putting aside the very colorful *Kabuki* or Popular Stage, the *Bunraku* or Puppet Play and the *Kyogen* or Comic Interlude, I have chosen to speak on a drama form from our own part of the world in Asia, in continuous and active existence for some six hundred years — the *Noh* play of Japan.

There are three objectives which I hope to accomplish in this brief discourse:

- 1) give you a framework by which to appreciate the intricacies of the *Noh* by means of an actual experience of a *Noh* play (through an essay which I wrote in Tokyo) and a transposition of the story of Sisa from Dr. Rizal's *Noli Me Tangere* into a *Noh* play;
- 2) based on this framework, outline the dramatic elements of the *Noh*, showing how it is solidly couched on an amazing harmonization of opposites which is firmly based on a fundamental dramatic law of conflict;
- 3) show the mathematical precision of its form and presentation and its strict demand on "eye-knowledge" and imagination.

It is my hope that a combination of these three objectives would convince you, as I have been convinced, that the *Noh*, more than any dramatic form in existence today, is the supremely aesthetic theatre that would continue to challenge and baffle the intellect.

1. THE DANCE OF LADY AKASHI

A film of the *Noh* entitled *The Frozen Moment* comments that the *Noh* play is like an iceberg because three-fourths of it is submerged under the surface. The play, *Sumiyoshi-Mode* (The Pilgrimage to Sumiyoshi) which is said to belong to the Third Group, the Kanze,

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Kongo and Kita Schools is just that, an iceberg. So very little of its tip can be seen, one wonders if one merely dreamt up the vision.

Sumiyoshi-Mode is one of the most enchanting *Noh* plays I saw during my ASPAC tour of Japan. It incorporates the rich and gorgeous costumes, the fantastic headgears and the spare, symbolic *tsukurimono* or stage properties representing Prince Genji's carriage and Lady Akashi's boat, all made of slender bamboo bandaged in white gauze with red bands for design, the combination of red and white said to symbolize for the Japanese the most happy occasions. But it is the dance of Lady Akashi which stood etched in my mind as the ultimate representation of the *yugen* in the *Noh* — the subtle, half-hid, half-seen vision, the misty image one sees but fleetingly, it is said, as a wisp of cloud passes over the face of the moon.

The story, like most *Noh* plays, is barely there because in a *Noh* play when the *Waki*, usually a travelling priest, crosses the bridge known as the *hashigakari*, white split-toed socks sliding in measured steps to the 19-meter square cypress stage, the action as we know it in the western theatre, is already past. The moment the *Waki* entones in sonorous sing-song on top of the flute and drums that he is Priest So-and-So from Place Such-and-Such, it is merely to capture a moment in the past; it is merely to search for that moment again and in so doing perhaps atone for a grievous wrong.

But *Sumiyoshi-Mode* is a happy play or as happy as a play can get, for the happiest moments in the *Noh* theatre, I discovered, are usually tinged with great sadness. But there is no revenge here, no atoning and when Prince Genji and his former mistress-in-exile, Lady Akashi, meet, it is to feast and dance, before they sadly say farewell to each other. In a way, it is different as plays of the Third Group are different for their atmosphere of gentle and elegant beauty. The characters are flesh and blood, not fleeting spirits tied to earth and begging in trembling tones for prayers that would release them.

The version at Umewaka Gakuin, one of the several *Noh* theatres in Tokyo, is a feast for the senses, the fixed stances especially took on the quality of prints on rice paper, the most memorable being that of Lady Akashi under the canopied "boat," her white *onna-men* mask shining with a ghostly sheen above the cloud of her orange and gold kimono, her image clasped by two almost identical but older masks of the *onna-men*, two "lady" (like the *Kabuki*, the actors in the *Noh* are all male) attendants, one in a richly embroidered green kimono and the other in blue and silver! For five, ten minutes, they stood in the "boat" which "sailed" along the *hashigakari*, unmoving, transfixed, their masks in frozen hints of a smile and ever slowly, imperceptibly turning toward the direction of Prince Genji who sits in prayer of thanksgiving with his servants. Except for the chanting of the chorus and the measured beats of the drums, the actors are

never heard approaching; the *Shite* or the main actor may stamp his foot to indicate he has disappeared and the resonator jars under the stage would amplify the clap of sound on the boards. But even if he completes a journey by one step, the *Noh* actor moves soundlessly, his formal white socks rubbing the natural oil of the mirror-like surface of the stage, his heels sliding first and then whole length of the foot being slapped down noiselessly, each step in precise, measured lengths. One time, I checked my book for the continuation of the play, raised my head to see a character facing me on the stage though I never even heard the rustle of the curtain being lifted at the extreme end of the *hashigakari* nor his approach! It could very well be that he appeared by miraculous fusion — his molecules quickly re-arranging themselves to re-create the man!

It was the dance, the last dance of Lady Akashi for her lover, Prince Genji, executed in muted, slow turns, like a slow motion film, that captured the essence of emotional control in a *Noh* play. Her orange kimono embroidered with gold chrysanthemum designs alternately flashed golden and blinding under the lights, her arm extended to an open fan, her face the ever-unchanging white and beautiful mask tied by trailing ribbons. It was a farewell dance which symbolized all the happy days of love between them and sadness at the parting was betrayed only once when she took a slow turn, crumpled down into a shaken heap, lifting ever so slightly a cupped hand to her forehead, a gesture all *Noh* playgoers know to symbolize that a tear is being shed. But no sound. No sound. It was as if the film projector was kept running but someone had shut off the sound track.

Hysteria appears to be an unknown factor in the vocabulary of the *Noh* play. Before Lady Akashi dances for Prince Genji, they feasted together, sitting meters apart, face-to-face, their fans spread on their laps to receive the "liquid" poured by a servant who likewise tilts his open fan (the fan in the *Noh* can symbolize so many objects). Their repast over, they get up simultaneously, spread their arms, voluminous sleeves shining like wings and as if afloat, they glide in slow motion, face-to-face, back-to-back but touching only once when Prince Genji moves behind Lady Akashi and positions an open fan above her shoulder. For a minute or so, arms still spread, they glide like two enormous birds, the sonorous chanting of the chorus accompanied by the drummers and their "i-yoi, i-yoi" cries and the flutist's plaintive tune underscoring the intensity of their emotions. How strange, I thought to myself, that being schooled in the western tradition where every dramatic impact is effected by heightening, I could be gripped by its exact opposite. I realized why most of the eyes in the audience were misty with tears. Emotional intensity restrained can be more moving than emotional intensity

released! It is a truth discovered by the Japanese dramatists centuries ago and while I have read about it, to come face to face with it was a moving experience. I was, truth to tell, quite shaken by it. The iceberg analogy, the freezing and submerging of emotions; two people, two perfectly young and healthy specimen of humanity, madly in love with each other, meeting to say goodbye and no hysteria? No outward signs of emotion, as a matter of fact! Merely acceptance, it seems, of the inevitable and gratitude for a gift of the past. It is the discipline of Buddhism which underlies every *Noh* play and can be understood by a barbarian Oriental like me only through a careful study of this great Religion.

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This actual experience of the *Noh* which I wrote after seeing *Sumiyohsi-Mode* is to introduce you to a drama so well organized, so well planned that nothing is left to chance or accident, even areas of the stage are defined and uninterchangeable. However, to give you a more solid foundation for the understanding of this theatrical form, I have worked out a framework against which to imagine the various aspects of the *Noh*. I am therefore offering you a transposition of the story of Sisa from Dr. Rizal's *Noli Me Tangere* into a *Noh* play.

2. THE STORY OF SISA AS A NOH PLAY

First of all, my apologies to Mr. Arthur Waley¹ who did the same for John Webster's *Duchess of Malfi* and whose pattern I adapted for my transposition. And, further apologies for what I hope to pass on to you, my dear colleagues, as "poetry" for this "*Noh*" play.

(I do not know if the degenerate Padre Salvi is capable of retribution, nevertheless, for the sake of an example, he is now in search of Sisa's home.)

A priest, Padre Salvi (*Waki*) comes very solemnly crossing the *hashigakari*. He wears his priestly robes, a string of rosary (Buddhist prayer beads) in one hand. As he comes to the stage, he stops and very slowly turns to face the audience, pronouncing his *Jidai* or preliminary couplet, some Buddhist aphorism appropriate to the subject of the play. Then he introduces himself very briefly:

Padre Salvi: I am Padre Salvi from the province of Laguna,
Here I am dressed in my priestly guise;

¹ Arthur Waley, *The No Plays of Japan* (New York: Grove Press, n.d.), pp. 53-54.

So quickly did I walk
That I am here already.

(He describes his journey, walking very slowly around the stage)

Over the mountains of Laguna,
Down the Makiling winds a road
White under the sun;
Through the valleys
And the soft murmur of the streams
My footfalls fell heavily
On the black ashes
Of the kaingin farms,
Outstretched like so many dark spiders
Against the hillsides.

In the bamboo groves of Biñan
I await the dawn,
Watching the mist break
Over Laguna de Bay;
The palm and bamboo
Shook their green tresses.
In the morning,
Sunlight breaks into many patterns
Varied as the patterns
Of our lives.

The Song of Travel ended, the *Waki* seats himself by the *Waki* pillar, his back to the audience. *Sisa* (*Shite*) comes in much the same manner as the *Waki*. She wears a lovely kimono of orange and gold autumnly patterns, her face covered with the beautiful mask of the *Onnamen* (in the *Noh*, poetry must be made to soar over beauty), she introduces herself:

Sisa: (It is convenient to call her this, but she is
the Ghost of *Sisa*)

Once at the prime of life
Death plucked me,
Wretched such as I
In such wretched time;

I used to quake at the sound
Of the angelus
Hearing not the bells
But the bruised hands
Of my little boys,

Crispin and Basilio
Grasping at the rope.

I raise my head as I feel
The dry winds of this early summer,
Hoping to hear
Their laughter
Once again.

She calls to the Pilgrim (*Waki*) and engages him in conversation. He asks her whether it is not at this spot where Sisa once ran from her son, Basilio. She answers him in all eagerness, her voice rising from prose to poetry. She tells the simple story of Sisa, her marriage, her uncaring gambler of a husband, the birth of her sons, around whose lives she wove her own. Faster and faster, she spins her tale of impending tragedy, agitated by the memories of betrayal and hardship. The priest suddenly asks, "Who is it that is speaking to me?"

And the woman, shuddering (for it is hateful for a ghost to name itself) answers, "*Hazukashi ya!*" I am the soul of that unfortunate woman, she of the *kayumangging kaligatan* complexion, she whose sweet singing voice once moved the cruel Doña Consolacion to speak her native Tagalog again. I am the soul of she who was once called Sisa. Love still ties my soul to the earth. *Toburai tabi-tamaye!* "Pray for me, oh, pray for my release!"

Here ends the first part of the play. In the second, the ghost, her memory quickened by the Pilgrim's prayers (and this is part of the medicine of salvation), endures again the memory of her final hours. She mimes the action of kissing the blood-smearred face of her son Basilio, finds it very cold:

His face is cold,
My son does not breathe
He must be dead!
Ay, my boy
Ay, my master!

She narrates each scene of torture so vividly mimed that though it exists only in her brain, it is as real to the audience as if the figure of the unconscious Basilio lay propped upon the stage, or as if her executioners, Padre Salvi the curate, the sacristan, the guardias civiles and the loose women of the town were actually walking and jeering before her.

Finally, she acts the scene of her death:

I thought I felt his boyish kisses
 Raining on my face,
 His breath drawing mine;
 But here he lies, dead
 Ay, my son!
 Ay, my master!

Faster and faster I shall dance
 My own dance of bewilderment,
 Not knowing whether Crispin
 Lives or dies.

I shall dance when the sting
 Of the *buntot page* lashes
 My skin,
 I shall sing
 When they command
 Me to sing.

And now that I am tired,
 I shall close my eyes
 And see no more,
 No more.
 No more!
 No more!

The chorus taking up the phrase "No more!" chant a phrase from the *Hokkekyo*: *Sangai Mu-an*, "In the three Worlds there is no quietness or rest."

But the Pilgrim's prayers have been answered. Her soul has broken its bonds: is free to depart. The ghost recedes, grows dimmer and dimmer, till at last

use-ni-keri
Use-ni-keri

it vanishes from sight.

3. *The DRAMATIC ELEMENTS OF THE NOH*

As this transposition shows us, the *Noh* can have only two characters, the *Shite* (the ghost of Sisa) and a *Waki* (the travelling Padre Salvi). The *Shite* is the main actor or the "Doer" while the *Waki* is the secondary actor or the "Assistant" or as his name implies, "Stands Aside." On this first level alone, we can see that the reduction to the lowest possible number of two (sustaining an interaction) can be the severest test on the ability of both the dramatist

and the actor. While the western dramatist invariably finds the need for a third, even if it is only an inanimate third like a telephone in Bertolt Brecht's *The Jewish Wife* or a bench in Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story*, the *Noh* transcends the need by enlarging on the scope of the dramatic action so that the universes of both the living and the dead are encompassed and the past and present are finally, unmistakably merged. Nowhere is the poignancy of distance between the living and the dead more starkly delineated than in the touching exchange between the *Shite* and the *Waki* and possibly, it is only in the *Noh* where the indefinable realities of life and death are truly spanned on both spatial and intellectual planes all at once.

How is this achieved? There is the spare form of the drama itself set against an equally austere *Noh* stage. There is the strict symbolization of gestures, the stark linear simplicity of the costumes, masks and stage properties. There is the unrelenting penetration of the choral chanting and instrumental music underscoring the simple, direct poetic lines. Furthermore, all of these are spaced by the so-called intervals of "no-action" where "tension is not relaxed when the dancing and singing comes to an end or at intervals between the dialogue and the different types of miming but (the actor) maintains an unwavering inner strength."²

What holds these parts together, according to Zeami, is the mind. He explained it thus:

"Life and death, past and present —
Marionettes on a toy stage.
When the strings are broken,
Behold the broken pieces!

(Dr. Donald Keene notes that this is a poem by an unknown Zen master and that the last two lines may mean, "When life comes to an end the illusions of this world also break into pieces.")

"This is a metaphor describing human life as it transmigrates between life and death. Marionettes on a stage appear to move in various ways, but in fact it is not they who really move — they are manipulated by strings. When these strings are broken, the marionettes fall and are dashed to pieces. In the art of the *Noh* too, the different types of miming are artificial things. What holds the parts together is the mind. This mind must not be disclosed to the audience. If it is seen, it is just as if

² Zeami Motokiyo, "On the Art of the No," in Donald Keene (ed) *Anthology of Japanese Literature to the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Harmonsworth: Penquin Book, 1968), p. 250.

a marionette's strings were visible. The mind must be made the strings which hold together all the powers of the art. . . ."³

It is this primacy of the mind in the Oriental theatre which struck Antonin Artaud; he noted that "Drama is the mind's most perfect expression." (and that) "The most beautiful manifestation of pure theater" is to be found in the Oriental theatre where what is disconcerting to Europeans like himself (and to western-oriented drama students like us) is, unlike the Occidental theatre, the Oriental theatre exudes an "admirable intellectuality that one senses crackling everywhere in the close and subtle web of gestures, in the infinitely varied modulation of the voice, etc. . . ." And that in this theatre, "everything is calculated with mathematical meticulousness."⁴

"*Everything is calculated with mathematical meticulousness.*" Surely nothing truer can be said of the *Noh* theatre! There is the *Noh* stage, a majestic structure which wears its own roof like a crown under the ceiling of the theatre which houses the auditorium and the various tea and souvenir shops. The stage itself has unchanging dimensions, 19 meter square, joined to the dressing rooms by a bridge known as the *hashigakari*. The two structures combined have the appearance of a huge dipper, both glowing with the warm color of cypress wood, the newer *Noh* stages like the Kanze Nohgakudo have a pale milky appearance and the older ones, like the Suidobashi Nohgakudo, a pleasing warm reddish hue. The ornate eaves under the upturned roof are tipped with white, otherwise no paint mars the lovely cypress wood. The *Noh* stage, unlike the western stage, is never violated by pounded nails, overhanging counterweights and rope riggings, unsightly flats and curtains. Except for the Ginza Nohgakudo, a *Noh* theatre located between the 8th and 9th floor of a modern building in the midst of Tokyo, which has three plastic pines, real pine trees are planted at regular intervals alongside the *hashigakari*, on a gravel path which separates the audience section from the performance area. At the far end of the *hashigakari* is a colorfully stripped brocade curtain topped by satin ropes and tassels and lifted by means of two bamboo poles. The stage itself, under the unchanging lights of neons and birdseye lamps, is unadorned except for the huge mural of the traditional Yogo pine tree which occupies the entire back wall, its scraggly branches supporting voluminous clouds of pine needles.

4. THE HARMONIZATION OF OPPOSITES

Against this stage is played an understatement of sensations, conjured, it seems, by judicious blending of monochrome and blinding

³ *Ibid.*, p. 251.

⁴ Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and its Double* (New York: Grove Press Inc., 1958), p. 57.

colors, monotones and shrieks, plaintive flute music and *staccato* drums. Reposeful gestures serve as counterpoint to violent ones which are forever toned down by slowing the violence, nay, the very speed of the motion. Even the contour of the human figure is changed, magnified by the stark, linear simplicity of the costumes, masks and stage properties, the body itself is enlarged to twice or three times its original size by the flared *hakama* or reed pantaloons and the various layers of billowing kimonos. The face which is subject to excessive expressions and to the vagaries of aging is negated behind an unchanging mask of a beautiful woman, a devil or a warrior. And even this masked figure is played against the scrubbed, shiny, brown-complexioned face of the *Waki* who wears no mask, no makeup and only neutral-coloured kimonos.

This playing of opposites against each other, this direct collision of contradistinctive elements, this clashing of extremes is carried to the opposition of action of the body itself. "*Yugen*" (in acting), according to Zeami, "can be attained only as long as the actor never loses sight of the beauty of effect and bears in mind always the correct balance between his mental and physical action and between the movements of his body and feet..." or as his theory points out, "... if the body and feet move in the same manner, the effect will be crude. Thus, in an agitated passage, when the feet are stamping wildly, the movements of the body should be gentle..." In the continuum, the opposition of action and "no action" is to be seen in the intervals of dancing and singing, miming and chanting as opposed to intervals of "no action" which occur in between. These stretches of "no action" hemmed in by actions before and after, "must be linked," according to Zeami, "by entering the state of mindlessness in which the actor conceals even from himself his own intent. The ability to move audiences depends, thus, on linking all the artistic powers with one mind."⁵

Aside from the smaller elements which make up the dramatic presentation, there are two bigger bases for harmonization of opposites. These are: 1) adapting the playing thus, the actor must do "negative" playing to counteract the "positive" day and "positive" playing to counteract the "negative" night-time. Or, if there is "an outburst of positivity" at night, then this must be dampened by "negative" playing and so forth; and, 2) the "aesthetic unit" itself in which staid pieces like a god-play or a play of prayer and a play inculcating virtues of benevolence, justice, politeness and wisdom is

⁵ Zeami, *op. cit.*, pp. 250-251.

played against pieces of violence and death like a warrior play, a "wig" play or a mad woman play and a demon play.⁶

Clearly, this is one theatre where the actor is an equal creator with the dramatist, if not his superior. For it is through the instrument of his body and his mind that all artistic powers are finally linked: to sense "positivity" in the "negative" night-time or "negativity" in the "positive" day, to play instances of heightened emotion so many decibels lower where it can be controlled and muted and in the supreme test of oppositions, man against himself, a state of mindfulness against mindlessness, overt action against covert action all demand of the actor an intellectuality which is what Artaud sensed "crackling" throughout the performance.

In my attempt to show how these harmonizations of opposites in the *Noh* theater have resulted in some elegance of certain formulae, I may be accused of stretching its meaning beyond mere juxtaposition of elements. A number of authorities, Dr. Donald Keene, among them, explained these contradictions as historically and aesthetically based. For instance, he wrote that historically speaking, "the *Noh* may owe more to Zenchiku than Zeami; the bare stage, the insignificant props, the movements of the actors, recalling at once the Zen priest and the warrior. The overpowering sombre tones of the plays certainly bring to mind not Zeami's 'flowers' but the gloom of a monochrome, flowerless world."⁷ Or, the aesthetic explanation for the small mask and voluminous costumes in the *Noh*, "originated in an aesthetic ideal of the Japanese for a small head on a large body."⁸

But even while the historical and aesthetic explanations may sufficiently support the presence of these elements, I perceive a deeper, philosophical meaning for these contradictions which appear everywhere and throughout the whole of this challenging theatrical form. Being a playwright, I cannot help but attach meanings to them through the very laws which govern dramatic action in the theatre which Artaud succinctly expressed as the "profound clashing and combining of distinct forces."

Lastly, on considering its greatest and strictest demand on the mind of the audience, I wish to say that you and I who often balk at frequent excursions to mindscapes of monochrome and silence would find in the *Noh* the full import of the admonitions of Zeami to his fellow artists that art is a lonely and secret undertaking.

⁶ For a more thorough explanation of these harmonizations through "positive" and "negative" playing and the "aesthetic unit" as propounded by Zeami, please see Waley, *op. cit.*, pp. 27-29.

⁷ Donald Keene, *No: The Classical Theatre of Japan* (Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd., 1973), p. 36. In his analysis of the art of acting, Zeami enumerates the nine levels of actors as the nine arts of the "flower."

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

Possibly what is appealing, what is challenging in the *Noh* is precisely this, that as surely as a sailboat is launched on a limitless lake, the mind is launched on its lonely excursion, above and beyond the boundaries of understated visual and aural aspects of the drama. In other words, unlike the western theatre, the poetry of this Oriental drama which treats of action as it occurs in the mind of the *Shite*, requires at its fullest concentration what Zeami himself calls "eye-knowledge" which comes, "not to all who see but to him who sees well." This inner eye or the "mind's eye" as Hamlet calls it, this requirement of the finest of sensibilities, the extremest discipline in the exercise of the imagination is what would appeal to the academician to whom the exercise of this faculty is a constant and regular undertaking. In short, the *Noh* theatre is truly a vehicle for the intellect. The symbolic gestures, the spare stage properties, the slow calculated dances, the barest hint of bridging between poetry, dance and music against the repose of the chorus and orchestra foisted on a bare stage and throughout, the unrelenting harmonization of opposites all zero in on the imagination as in no other theatre and call to fore the asceticism of a true scholar who can discard all worldly possessions the better to concentrate on his one precious, his one great asset — the human mind.

It is fervently hoped that with the gradual awakening of national interest in the rich tradition of Asian art, that no Oriental, especially one who is a member of this premier academy in our Asian country, would ever again say what I overheard said with such biting sarcasm, "Who would be interested in a literature course if it is only *Asian*?" Because it is only when we realize the depth, the astounding intricacies, the richly textured Asian theatre in particular and Asian Art in general, that we will realize that to say such an outrageous statement is not only a grave misreading of the current temper of our students but a revelation of an ignorance so improbable, of a colonial mentality so unbelievable that it dawned on me, upon hearing that remark, that sadly, truly, what a long trip the return of a native is; that a trip curved back toward our own direction constitutes a more arduous and longer line of progression.

But undertake it we must, step by painful step, beginning from the Drama which is the most penetrating of all artistic activities.

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