

Unmasking Noh Theatre,

BY ALESSIA CARPOCA



Udaka Michishige in *Sagi* | Photo by
Fabio Massimo Fioravanti, Kyoto 2016

a sabbatical in Kyoto

Traditional Noh theatre practice may remain hidden from practitioners and scholars, with traditions passed down through generations and backstage work often shielded from the public. Noh is a truly unique and beautiful art form that needs to be shared widely to be preserved for future generations.

Introducing Noh

Japanese Noh was born from various forms of popular entertainment at temples, shrines, and festivals, with roots that extend far back to the performing art known as sangaku, brought from China around the 8th century. During the Muromachi period (1336-1573), these varied productions were codified into elaborately devised entertainment for military leaders, some of whom also performed in Noh.

The Noh stage was originally built outdoors and included a roof, four pillars and a bridge. Today's indoor stages still have a roof, maintaining the look of their outdoor origins. The stage is a sacred space, accessible only to those wearing tabi socks, positioned so that it extends into the seating. The plays dramatize myths and tales from traditional Japanese literature and often relate to dreams with a dialogue between the living and the supernatural world. The main character of Noh is often a ghost or spirit. While performers in Noh are male, in recent years, women have served as professional performers and teachers as well.

Noh robes consist of multiple layers of elegant robes, which creates a bulky figure but reflects what was traditionally worn by the aristocracy throughout Japanese history. Noh robes are made from traditional techniques such as weaving, embroidery, or surihaku (metallic leaf designs). Actors wear the costumes along with masks, wigs, and hats, and carry a prop (such as a fan), which may be used to represent an object such as a sake cup or a lantern.

The main characters of a Noh performance are the shite the main actor; pronounced *sh'tay* and the waki (who is the next



Udaka sensei as "The ghost of Lady Rokujō" from the play *Nonomiya*, | Photo by Fabio Massimo Fioravanti.

most important actor after the shite). Only the shite wears a mask.

According to Udaka Michishige (2015, 185), 60 basic models of Noh masks are extended in number to more than 200 and can be categorized into six categories, including Onna for female characters, Otoko for male characters, Jo for elderly characters, Okina for aged deities, Kishin for demons and gods, and Onryō for wandering spirits of the living or dead. It is the masks that transform an actor into the character that he assumes on stage (Udaka 2015, 186).

Intimate, Familiar, and Sacred

I was introduced to Noh shortly after arriving in Kyoto, Japan, in August 2016, where I intended to spend my first sabbatical researching stagecraft techniques for Kabuki with an emphasis on scenic painting. During the first week, I was invited by Dr. Diego Pellicchia, associate professor of cultural studies in Kyoto Sangyō University and coordinator of the International Noh Institute (INI) to watch the Gala Recital Kongō Noh Theatre performance in Kyoto. The show featured students from the INI summer workshop and professional actor and founder of the Kongō School Noh Udaka Michishige-sensei. INI still offers training in Noh chant (utai), dance and mimetic movement (shimai) and Noh mask carving.

I watched my first Noh without any expectations or knowledge. It was a surreal and powerful experience that reminded me that you don't need to know the spoken language of a play or even the cultural and historical context to be fully immersed. Within a few weeks I had watched two Noh shows, met Udaka-sensei, visited the Noh Institute's studio, and realized that my sabbatical was going to include much more than Kabuki.

The word “nō” (or “noh”) means skill or accomplishment. Noh theatre, or nōgaku (能楽) is still actively performed today with strict adherence to its earliest traditions, which is why it's been called the oldest surviving form of theatre. Noh plays involve supernatural elements and Buddhist philosophies, and the Noh stage is considered sacred. Watching Noh transports the viewer to a dream place between reality and another dimension. While I am accustomed to watching performances of any kind on

video or film, I truly believe that Noh needs to be seen live.

Today, there are five existing Noh schools, including Kanze 観世, Hōsho 宝生, Kongō 金剛, Kita 喜多, and Konparu 金春. Noh is virtually unchanged since the 14th century, and mask collections can be found in the schools and in prominent family and museum collections, considering the masks are “theatrical tools as much as art objects” (“Noumen” 2021).

Many may view Noh as both a traditional and elite art, expecting a somewhat rigid atmosphere of training. Yet this was not my impression when I first visited the INI studio (okeikoba). In the studio I found an intimate and familiar atmosphere, from the smell of wood to the respect for the art, from the teaching style to the beauty of the finished masks. I had found my people in Kyoto.

The first few weeks of my sabbatical in Japan were not easy. I did not know anyone or the language, Kyoto is hot and humid, and many daily tasks were extremely difficult to navigate—from housing to Internet to almost no English signage. But, in the studio I forgot all of that—I was observing a master generously sharing his art with his students and even taking time to talk to me, a complete stranger who probably should have not even asked to visit the studio. Udaka-sensei was not only a talented artist and performer, but also a generous teacher with a sense of humor and a kind personality.

On my first visit, foreign and Japanese students were working on different masks and all were making progress and enjoying their time. While at the studio I met Fabio Massimo Fioravanti, author of the book *The Way of Noh*, a decade-long photographic project about Noh theatre. Also on that day I met two cinematographers (Alessio Nicastro and Giulio Cammarata), who were filming a documentary based on Udaka-sensei's latest show, *Sagi*, to commemorate his 70th birthday. *Sagi (Heron)* is a special play that can only be performed as a child or in your 70s. In the final moments of the play, the heron is free to fly away toward his freedom, it's a metaphor of an actor's final performance. In the documentary, Udaka Tatsushige (Udaka-sensei's oldest son) explains that “Noh is like life, you may have only one chance to perform a

certain role.” “The Flight of the Heron” takes inspiration from Fabio Massimo Fioravanti's work.

I highly recommend watching this documentary because it's extremely rare to see the mirror room (Kagami no ma) where a Noh actor puts on the costume, the mask, and wig. The film also includes interviews with INI members and Udaka sensei's children. I was extremely lucky to watch the performance of *Sagi* live. In March 2020, Udaka-sensei passed away. He was succeeded by his three children: Noh actors Tatsushige and Norishige, and mask maker Keiko, all still following in his footsteps performing, teaching, carving masks, and sharing their art with the world through workshops and social media.

Udaka Michishige (宇高通成) was both a professional Noh actor (Kongō Noh school) and mask carver. In 1960, at the age of 13, Udaka Michishige became the last disciple, or uchi-deshi, of Kongō Iwao II. He left his home as a child to live with the Master and learn the art of Noh. He was designated a Holder of Important Intangible Cultural Properties by the Japanese government in 1991. He taught and performed extensively in Japan and abroad. Udaka's mask carving group was founded in 1978 for Japanese and foreign students.

In summer 2023, I again traveled to Kyoto, visited the studio, and saw several performances, including INI's recital for the 2-week summer intensive course. This time, it was easy to grasp the complexity of training foreign students in Noh in a two-week summer intensive. I have been studying Japanese since 2017 and have continued to read about Kabuki, Bunraku, and Noh. I was impressed by both the chanting and dance skills demonstrated on stage. The opportunity to learn directly from accomplished Noh masters and perform on stage was an exceptionally enriching experience for both performers and researchers. In conversation with some of the workshop's participants, I found that while their acting experience and previous knowledge of Noh was at various levels, all were extremely thankful of the opportunity to learn from the three INI masters (Diego Pellicchia and Udaka-sensei's sons Udaka Tatsushige and Udaka Norishige).



Stages of carving a mask: The block of hinoki was much heavier than you would expect, but Keiko-sensei lifted it for us easily. The final mask is very light, however. | Photo by Alessia Carpoca.

Heritage of Artistry

Udaka Keiko (宇高景子), born in Kyoto in 1980, appeared on stage as a child actor with her father, Udaka Michishige. After graduating from the Department of Fine Arts of the Kyoto City University of the Arts, she concentrated her efforts on studying mask carving with her father. Now teaching mask carving and leading workshops in addition to carving masks to disseminate and popularize Noh and Noh masks (能面), Keiko is passionate about her work, describing the process of mask-making as impactful as the finished product. “In the case of creating masks, there is this sense of infusing the soul, gathering life in the mask,” Keiko says. “It is not only a technical process, but also a spiritual one for the artists. Noh masks have a shape that has been passed down for hundreds of years and set measurements. Based on that, the silhouette of the Noh mask is drawn on the material. Then, the mask is carved in detail. The actual way of carving depends on the individual, but the final result should be a copy of the original mask.”

Describing the methods used, “utsu” (literally, to strike) and “horu” (to shave), Keiko refers to the chisels she uses in her work. “I draw the general shape of

the mask on the block of wood and the profile on each side of the block, and then I roughly cut the block with a saw to shape the general form. Next, I use two kinds of chisels. The ones with a metal ring on the handle are for the rough carving in the early stages and I hit them with

a mallet (utsu, to strike, or more precisely gama utsu, beating/hitting). The other kinds of chisels are used by hand to carve or dig (horu, to shave). So these chisels are used for the fine carving and smoothing.”

Her father also speaks to the process of shaping and carving a mask in his book *The Secrets of Noh Masks*. “As the mask begins to take shape, a paring chisel (tsukinomi) and a carving blade are also used for the finer work,” he writes. “Working from the center to the outer edges of the face, the mask-maker delicately wields his tools to complete the overall shape of the mask. Features such as the eye sockets, the cheekbones, the tautness of the temples, and the flesh of the chin are carved with the actual human skull and musculature in mind. When all the corners have been smoothed and the overall shape is complete, openings are made for the eyes, nostrils, and mouth, and features such as the eyelids and teeth are added” (Udaka 2010, 190).

Noh masks are made from a block of hinoki wood over 300 years old (hinoki, Japanese Cypress, is a strong, stable wood with few knots. The block is approximately 22x15x7.5cm in size). Hinoki is found only in a region of Japan called Kiso, located near Nagoya. Hinoki has an excellent grain structure with few knots. This wood is also used in traditional Japanese architecture and for



Chisels used for the initial rough carving (or striking the mask). | Photo by Udaka Keiko, Instagram.



Keiko-sensei holding the mask in place on the carving board with her foot. | Photo by Diego Pellecchia

the Noh stage itself. Trees are cut in the Kiso valley, then floated down the river to Nagoya, where the trees are left in salt water to “mature” for another 10 to 20 years. Then they are dried out for again 10-20 years. In carving, hammers, saws, and chisels of various sizes are used. No electric-powered devices are used in the process of making the masks.

For the first stage of rough carving, mask makers sit cross-legged on a long, flat, wood board with a smaller piece of wood nailed crosswise to the end; the smaller piece of wood forms an edge to support the mask, which the artists use to hold the mask with their feet while hammering. The Japanese saw works better with a pull motion than a push motion, probably because of sitting on the floor instead of standing. The full carving out of the back is generally left to the end but the mask maker may chisel away some of the back to make it easier to hold during the rough carving. Mask makers constantly refer to the original mask when carving a new one, and it is believed that a good Noh mask cannot

be achieved by looking at photographs. While measuring is important, master and student do touch the mask and try to understand the shape, angles, and size with their fingers.

In their final form, the masks often have an asymmetry that allows the masks to appear more expressive as they are manipulated. Solrun Pulvers describes this phenomena: “Symmetry is not a goal for the Noh mask; the same can be said in most other traditional Japanese art forms. Frequently, the left eye (as seen from the spectator’s point of view) seems to look slightly downwards and the left corner of the mouth curves down, as well. This may give a sadder expression than the right side where the eye looks straight out and the mouth has more of a suggestion of a smile. There are no rigid rules, however, and the asymmetry is not always consciously applied. The lack of symmetry serves to heighten the impression that the mask changes expression as it moves” (Pulvers 1978, 8).

This idea of masks being copies is different for Noh masks, Keiko says.

“There is also a different mindset between Japanese and foreign art, or more specifically, the difference is in the framework on how we see creativity,” she says. “Originality is the key concept in what is called ‘art’ overseas, I believe. However, in Japan, art is a reflection on the past and many people are devoted to this aspect. I think copying is really challenging and, ultimately, it is also a form of tradition. In our masks, there’s something inherited from our teachers, and the techniques are predetermined, but how we use these techniques changes with each person. Even in that inheritance, what I find particularly attractive, for example, might be different for someone else. The act of making the mask is as important as the mask itself. I find joy going through the process and it is also a different challenge every time. This type of formality is common to Japanese arts. Each artist discovers their way of carving and painting the mask. The making of a Noh mask requires not only technical skill but also an understanding and appreciation of Noh itself.”

From about 1600 on, Noh mask makers focused on making exact copies of earlier masks (utsushi). These copies are based on masks called honmen, a mask designated by one of the five schools of Noh as a superlative example of that particular type of mask. According to *Masks (面, Men): The Spirit of Noh Theatre*, “Each troupe will have one honmen for each major type of mask and several superlative copies of the same mask. Most honmen are from the Muromachi period and are worn in a performance maybe only once in 5 years, if ever. One benefit of utsushi reproductions is that they solved the conflict between the need for conservation and the desire to use the best masks in a performance. Utsushi allows nō mask masterpieces to be both preserved and appreciated. Especially since the true character of a mask only reveals itself in a performance. Utsushi copies were made in several grades: exact copies including damage and aging, close copies without the damage and aging, and rough copies. It is important to note that these ‘copies’ have never been viewed as fakes or forgeries because they were never meant to deceive. They are viewed as reproductions. Today some utsushi copies are only a few days, months, or years old, while others are hundreds of years old” (Dym 2018).

Though in the past some actors were also mask-carvers, today the two professions are separate. By the Edo period (1603-1868), mask-makers established lineages and often signed the back of their masks or added an identifying mark. Unlike costumes, which are subject to wear and tear, and old ones cannot generally be used in contemporary performance, masks dating back to the Muromachi period (1392–1573) are still used on stage today.

Keiko carved her first mask around age 12 but only became seriously interested in the craft after graduating from college. Her father didn’t teach her Noh mask making with specific lessons; rather, he would show her a mask and ask her to copy it. “I would show him how I was progressing and he would point out areas that needed improvement,” Keiko remembers. “I would watch how he was carving, and I would try to ‘steal’ from him. It was a constant cycle of learning by observing, emulating, and then questioning. I’ve had instances where I asked



Fine carving chisels (used only by hand). | Photo by Alessia Carpoca



Katagami paper templates: Keiko Udaka inherited katagami from her father and uses with her students. Each template is marked for the area of the face it applies to (G4, G12, etc.), for right and left, and of course for the type of mask. “We do not know who invented this technique and you definitely cannot understand how to make a mask by using only katagami,” she says. “However, they do make the process easier for my students. An amateur will not have a collection of katagami. Placing them at the wrong angle, you will get a different result.” | Photo by Alessia Carpoca

a specific question but there was a little bit of reluctance to share techniques easily. The sentiment expressed was, ‘If there’s a shortcut, it’s better to figure it out through your own efforts.’ Initially, I was perplexed by this stance, but I came to realize the profound truth in the idea that knowledge, earned through trial, error, and individual ingenuity, is the most enduring. So, the journey was filled with observing, contemplating, and embracing the lessons from mistakes. It was a transformative training.”

Her teaching takes a similar approach with some students and diverges with

others. Some can understand without being told, she says, while others need an “explanation with more logic.” This approach even extends to how students grip their tools.

“Some of our foreign students dig with a bit more force than the Japanese and they grip the chisels differently, which makes it difficult to carve smoothly, and their grip almost restricts the range of motion,” Keiko says. “So changing your way of gripping tools becomes quite a challenge. Using sandpaper to sculpt the rounder parts is totally okay. Especially considering how many students can only



Udaka-sensei showing how to use katagami. | Photo by Fabio Massimo Fioravanti

stay in Kyoto for a short term, trying to enforce strict rules under such circumstances can lead to stress and hinder progress. It's better to allow a certain level of flexibility and avoid demanding top-notch quality right from the start, but instead focus on the essence of creating."

Creating a Noh mask requires a great deal of time and patience. Facial expression is crucial—creating balance is a delicate process. "The shape of the eyes and the position of the nose are crucial," for example, says Keiko. "Form holds importance, yet the ultimate magic lies in achieving the right balance and arrangement. Human faces, it turns out, are remarkably delicate, and pondering on this reveals a fascinating aspect of our existence. Even if the shape is good, it's true that if the placement of eyes and nose

are different, the balance may be bad, so the shape is important, but of course balance and arrangement are, too. On a Noh mask, the expression, of course, doesn't change, but depending on the angle, the facial demeanor seems to shift. Within the world of Noh masks, this becomes the most crucial point. Especially those masks with a serene expression leave room for the audience's imagination as the story progresses. In terms of movement, a subtle tilt of the mask, the way light and shadows hit the mask, completed by dialogue and gestures, creates a dynamic shift. The change in facial expression is vital in conveying the essence, especially on stage, where life needs to be infused into the characters."

The expression on a Noh mask is meant to change when the mask is

moved at different angles due to a play of light and shadows when the mask is on stage. Pellecchia and Bethe note that "If the carving is successful, a skilled actor will be able to create the effect of sadness, hope, or anger from the same object" ("Mask making").

Holding up and moving a Noh mask at arm's length can show some of the subtle changes that will be visible on stage. As we have learned in lighting design classes, even the most blank and expressionless face will take on different expressions when lit from above, below, or at the sides. However, in the case of Noh, it is not the lighting designer that initiates a change, but rather a very skilled performer using an exceptionally well-carved mask under a brightly lit stage. As Pulvers explains, "when the mask is moved up or down, 'lit up' (terasu or teru) as the head is lifted and light is allowed to play on the face, giving it an expectant or joyful expression or 'shade over or cloud' (kumorasu, or kumoru) as the head is bowed and shadows fill the hollows, giving a sorrowful or demure expression. The usual movements from side to side of the mask are referred to as 'to use' (tsukau), whereas the very rapid and sudden movement expressing agitation or strength, common to god, deity or warrior masks is 'to cut' (kiru). This terminology came into use with the full formalization of Noh in the Edo period" (Pulvers 1978, 10).

In some cases, especially with young women and young men, the masks present a more "neutral expression" between joy and sorrow. Pulvers discusses how playwriting impacted mask-making by including a broad range of emotions. "With the increase of plays that emphasized human emotions, at the time of Zeami, the need for masks with less fixed or clearly definable expressions became stronger. In the play *Kantan*, by Zeami, the shite goes through moods of troubled uncertainty, weariness, pleasure, blankness (as when coming out of a dream), and the final calm elation of enlightenment. This is quite a register for one mask" (Pulvers 1978, 81).

In addition to conveying expression, the Noh mask also plays an important role in the actor's voice Keiko explains. "The back of the mask has to be carved carefully as it is very important for a Noh performer that the mask feels



In addition to the original mask and katagami templates, students also look at research pictures of the mask from several angles when carving. | Photo by Alessia Carpoca



Young women masks. | Photo by Alessia Carpoca

comfortable. I paint the back of the mask with urushi lacquer. Urushi is made from the sap of the Japanese urushi tree. It makes the mask strong and protects the mask from the performer's perspiration."

According to her father, Udaka Michishige, "The slightest alteration to the way the wood is shaved from the back of the mask can profoundly influence how easy it is for an actor to chant or speak, and without ample space around the mouth, the voice will not carry properly. In otoko-men especially, the depth of the mouth influences how the voice is projected in lower registers; thus to those on stage, are also musical

instruments" (Udaka 2010, 105).

Today, masks are not usually made to fit a specific actor's face. Small cushions made of paper or cloth (men-ate) are attached to the back of the mask to keep it from being in direct contact with the skin of the actor and adjust the angle. This prevents sweat from damaging the masks, but also helps the actor breathe with more ease. In addition, the space between mouth and mask allows the voice to reverberate. Usually, three cushions are used—a larger one for the forehead, and two smaller for the cheeks. Using a mirror and consulting with assistants, actors check the uke (angle) of the mask.



Shikami mask made by Udaka Keiko. | Photo by Diego Pellecchia

Two cords of braided silk are attached to small holes at the sides of the mask and tied behind the actor's head.

Noh masks are actually quite small. "Japanese faces are in general small, but Noh masks are made even smaller than that. From the audience's distance, especially taking to consideration the size and bulk of the costumes, the face appears small," explains Keiko. "It is an aesthetic choice emphasized by the size of the costume. It also helps to reinforce the theme of the supernatural. If the face of the actor is long, the mask is then tied up high to still show the chin. Having a small face is a standard that sets someone apart as not being an ordinary person. It's about creating an illusion, making it more beautiful or seems like something other than human. When I use a mask in demonstrations, my face gets fully covered. When women perform Noh, sometimes they use a slightly reduced size for their faces, masks created specifically for them. It's about making them appear smaller, perhaps around four heads tall, creating a certain visual effect. However, sometimes, this reduction can feel a bit awkward. So, for women, I've created a slightly reduced size to provide them a similar effect. Beauty standards in Japan generally favor a long neck, small face, and tall stature. Also, a flawless light skin complexion. The number of women performing Noh is increasing, but women have been performing Noh since the Showa era."



The inside of a mask painted with urushi lacquer | Photo courtesy of The International Noh Institute (INI).



Detail picture showing the carving of the inside of a mask made by Udaka-sensei | Photo by Fabio Massimo Fioravanti

An Outsider's Insight

Dr. Diego Pellecchia, who coordinates the International Noh Institute in Kyoto and was licensed by the Kongō school of Noh in 2020, is perhaps the only foreigner that is a scholar, a performer, and a shihan teacher of Noh. His approach to Noh is truly comprehensive from the inside and from the outside as a foreigner looking in. He has published books, articles, and interviews on Noh and Noh's challenges in the contemporary and global context.

Pellecchia was first introduced to Noh while conducting research for his

Master's dissertation on Kurosawa's film *Throne of Blood* based on *Macbeth*. "The film is heavily influenced by Noh, so I went to see Monique Arnaud (a licensed instructor of Noh living and teaching in Milan) and ended up participating in her class," he recalls. "What made it click for me was the atmosphere. I was very much impressed by the respect Monique and her students had not only for each other in the practice but for the art itself. The practice of Noh was very ritualistic...you greet each other at the beginning and then you greet each other at the end with a bow. I was coming from

a completely different environment. It didn't feel like an art class, it felt like they were handling something supernatural.

"Of course, part of that fascination came from the fact that I had no understanding of the Japanese language at the time and the chanting was in Japanese. I guess because you don't know something you feel like you want to know more about it. It is a mixture of the charm of the unknown, but also the fact that Monique was presenting all of this with a good amount of irony and likeness, explaining what they were doing and the Japanese text that they were using. Monique acted as a bridge between my word of total ignorance of the language and content and this mysterious word of masks and abstract movements. She made me feel comfortable being in the environment."

A few years later, Pellecchia had his first experience with Noh in Kyoto and met Udaka Michishige, who would become his teacher. "I had waited to see Noh live for a long time and so I was flooded with emotions during that first performance. I was overwhelmed."

After that experience, Pellecchia began studying Japanese and studying with Udaka-sensei. "Udaka-sensei did communicate in English. He treated his students as being part of a family and at the same time there was, I think, a distance because his charisma created an aura around him," Pellecchia says. "The way I was taught helped me to understand how to teach non-Japanese people, which is what I do now. It is important to understand what you should say and shouldn't say. Teachers have different approaches, you know. Udaka-sensei was very poetic. He gave you many images and metaphors for things rather than explaining things scientifically. I try to do that as well when I teach but, of course, I am also taking from Monique and from my current teacher, and so I try to merge all the different style of teaching I have experienced as a student."

Pellecchia's training, while rigorous, certainly differs from that of Noh actors, who may begin daily practices as early as the age of 3. He acknowledges that "these types of cultural activities in Japan have no real ending, so you can continue as long as you physically can or want to. I am still studying, now with Tatsushige

who's the older of the two of Udaka's sons. I think that all artists keep training to evolve and grow so that their art develops with them. What may be unique to traditional Japanese arts is the fact that there is no sense of 'I'm now an accomplished person so I don't have to study anymore.' On the contrary, there is an emphasis on feeling humble toward the art and going back to the basics precisely because you're getting older.

"I remember Udaka-sensei—he was already 60 and he would keep practicing standing and walking, which is the foundation of Noh. If you don't put an intention in it and if you're not aware of it, you are not going to perform as well as you would and because everything originates from those standing and walking, you must keep an eye on these two basic things. I need to make sure that I know my stuff, that I know how to present it to my students. So yes, especially teachers, study forever!"

"In a Noh family, training starts when kids are three to five years old, and then they keep going until the end. In traditional arts, often there is a system, there are some plays that you're supposed to perform when you're younger and some plays that you're supposed to perform when you're older, for example *Sagi* (*The Heron*). The iemoto family line performs that play as a child's role but it can also be performed in your 70s as was the case for Udaka-sensei."

About *Sagi*, Udaka Michishige said in an interview that "In the past, it used to be a play reserved for the iemoto, and only recently have other actors been allowed to perform it. The story of the white heron flying into the Emperor's garden, only to submit to the Emperor's will and allow itself to be captured, is rather unrealistic, and yet the play is charmingly genuine. The highlight of the play is a dance called midare. Speaking of realism, I remember that when the previous iemoto performed *Sagi*, he went to the countryside to observe how herons walk. I was still an apprentice under him, so I could watch him closely while he practiced. That was very realistic: He really looked like a bird. His intention was to let the audience see a real heron walking in shallow waters, on the theatre stage" (Pellecchia and Teele Ogamo 2021).

Speaking of the actors' movement,

Noh actors' basic stance is referred to as *kamae*, while their way of walking is called *suriashi*, sliding one's feet when walking, keeping a low center of gravity. "There may be multiple interpretations but having a controlled walk on stage to

keep the mask steady, avoiding a change of angle or tilt, is very important. The body of the actor is like a mannequin on top of which costumes are layered and so when we practice, we make our body stand in a certain form to support



Men-ate paper pads applied on the back of the mask | Photo courtesy of The International Noh Institute (INI).



Udaka-sensei | Photo by Fabio Massimo Fioravanti

that costume and make the costume look good so that is why we have kamae,” Pellecchia explains.

“In addition to that, there are also aesthetic values in suriashi and kamae. In particular, suriashi is a very unnatural way of walking and, of course, everything that happens on the Noh stage has to be supernatural, so we don’t care about realism in the word of Noh. Kamae is the first thing you learn in Noh dance, then you learn suriashi, the unique way of walking as if gliding on stage. Dances are divided into segments called kata.”

In fact, suri-ashi is a term used in Japanese martial and performing arts, wherein the body moves forward smoothly without changing the upper-body posture. In Noh, in the neutral standing position, the center of gravity is outside the body and the body is slightly leaning forward with the body weight on the balls of the feet. The upper-body is stabilized and erect by the engagement of the core. The International Noh Institute website explains that “many kata are abstract movements, such as the common shikake-hiraki (four steps forward, point with the fan, three steps

back as you open both arms and return to your starting position), which takes different meanings according to the verses that accompany it.” One of the “fascinating aspects of Noh is the possibility for the performer to portray characters, paint landscapes, or evoke emotional universes, just by using your body” (INI “Noh Chant and Dance”).

For example, actors use the mask for kumoru (to cloud), teru (to brighten), and kiru (to cut, moving the head sharply right and left). Actors are careful about wearing the mask on stage, moving the head up to let the light shine on the mask in different ways, Pellecchia explains. “Noh masks, especially the ones for women, have softer features and are very sensitive to light and shadows that appear on them when they are hit by the light.” Tilting the mask slightly up and down produces different types of shadows on the mask, and depending on where you are in the audience, you may be able to catch these changes. Also the proportions of the mask, the eyes, nose, and mouth distance, for example, changes as you tilt the mask up and down, and those are intentional movements. Mask



Okina Mask, NHK Cultural Center Exhibit 2023, Kyoto Mask Carver Tanaka Tomoo | Photo by Alessia Carpoca

carvers also make masks knowing that they will be used in a certain way on stage, and well-made masks will allow for a wider range of expressions. When you have the stronger masks, kiru movement is used more frequently, cutting right and left, which is not particularly difficult to perform. I think kumoru and teru really

**POWER & FLEXIBILITY
AT YOUR FINGERTIPS**

Expand Your NX2 with NXP!



. 64 Universes . Motorized Playbacks
. 2 Touch Monitor Expansion Ports
(TOUCH MONITORS NOT INCLUDED)

OBSIDIAN™
CONTROL SYSTEMS



Distributed by:

ELATION



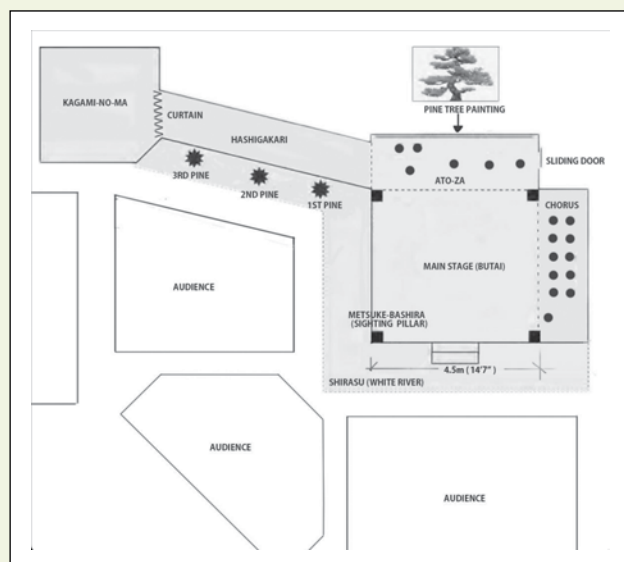
The Noh Stage

Little has changed about Noh over the centuries, and that includes the standard stage, which dates from circa 1550 as an outdoor stage. In 1882, the stage was moved indoors. It looks as if a theatre has been placed inside a theatre. Or, you could consider that the set design is the building itself and it is not specific to the play performed in the same way, as the Globe theatre's structure has been recreated in many places in the world to stage Shakespeare's plays.

Noh is first and foremost an evocative dramatic art form rather than a representative one, and in Noh, every small detail of the stage has a precise meaning. Arata Isozaki, the visionary post-war Japanese architect, describes the backwall of the Noh stage: "a wooden wall called Kagami-ita (Mirror wall) harbors the divinity: an aged pine tree painted on this wall symbolized the residence of the Kami [god]. The stage represents the world of the present, and the backstage the world of the dead".

The indoor Noh stage incorporates pillars that assist in the actors' orientation on the stage, which is also a raked stage. "The stage is on a slight rake," explains Diego Pellecchia. "The pillar in the corner that goes inside the audience is the lowest part of the stage and the bridge that connects the stage is also slightly raked going down toward the curtain."

He adds that the two front pillars on stage are used by actors to "find" where they are on the stage. Because the



Traditional Noh Theatre Ground Plan | Drawing by Alessia Carpoca



Final moments in dressing Udaka-sensei in the mirror room National Noh Theatre Tokyo | Photo by Fabio Massimo Fioravanti

masks are smaller than a human face, the eye holes are also narrower than what is typical for eyes in order to maintain proportions. This limits the performers' vision behind the mask, throwing off their depth perception." (Dym 2018). The shite's feet are almost always in contact with the floor, and that prevents them from tripping over anything or anyone who may be on stage. Several Noh actors in interviews mention that wigs and the mask are not very comfortable to wear. However, performing without a mask is harder because the actor has to maintain a neutral facial expression. When actors perform without a mask it is called hitamen.

The mirror room (kagami-no-ma) is the room behind the hashigakari where the actor gets ready to enter the stage. While it is the equivalent of a dressing room, it bears a completely different significance and function. Rebecca Teele Ogamo in her essay "Introduction to *The Way of the Noh*" notes: "The actor quietly observes the mask reflected in the mirror, the face of the character emerging. The mirror reflects not only physical forms but the soul of the interpreted character. The profound transformation occurs in a moment of stillness. It's no longer the actor; now, it's the mask that sees."

Photographer Fabio Massimo Fioravanti in his book "The Way of Noh" concurs: "It's undoubtedly the most secret and magical place in Noh. I'll never forget the excited anticipation when entering the grand kagami-no-ma at the National Noh Theatre in Tokyo. I vividly recall the Master before the mirror, assistants giving final touches to his costume and mask—so many skillful hands around the actor!—discreetly stepping away, leaving him alone. The transition from words to silence, the dimness, musicians sitting on the ground before the performance, assistants gradually stepping aside, the tension and focus of the shite behind the curtain, and then the opening of the agemaku, a blade of bright light filtering into the theater, striking the shite, who begins to sing and slowly—solemnly—steps onto the hashigakari, the curtain closing, cutting off the light, and the return of darkness!" <https://temizen.zenworld.eu/paginezen/approfondimenti/la-via-del-noh-intervista-a-fabio-massimo-fioravanti>.



Dr. Diego Pellecchia getting dressed for the rehearsal of the Noh Kiyotsune | Photo by Stéphane Barbéry

require you to know exactly how high or how low you should go. Actors put a lot of effort in finding the right angle when they put the mask on.”

Pellecchia points out that ballet may also feel unnatural for the body. Noh is similar; only, “instead of going up and elevating, Noh goes down to the ground. In Noh you have this thing that comes on stage covered by layers of costume with a mask, and it looks like a statue, and that statue which is really three-dimensional moves on stage almost as if it is on its own. You wonder if there is something underneath and the only thing that gives away the fact that there’s a human behind it or inside is the hands and the chin. The entire body is covered by something, a mask or a costume or the wig, and so only from the hands and from the chin you have a little humanity. Also, the way we chant is so unnatural that even the speech is stylized.”

Such an approach varies significantly from western theatre where costumes support the actor. “If you start thinking that way when you watch a performance, you kind of see it, you don’t see the actor wearing the mask, you see the actor offering his head as a support for the mask to come on stage,” Pellecchia acknowledges, “and if you connect this to the fact that some of the masks used in Noh are century-old masks and that some of them are even more than just old, they’re considered parts of a god. The Okina mask used in the *Okina* play, for example, with round eyebrows and the beard and the

detached chin [is one of them]. Masks of that kind are preserved as ritual objects, they are sacred things. The mask is the medium through which the deity connects to the audience. You as an actor are carrying the mask on your face. So, you’re offering your body as a support for the mask and the costume.”

Like masks in Noh theatre, many of the costumes are inherited items as well. “Typically, costumes belong to shite actors and they have their own collection,” Pellecchia says. “They are extremely expensive items so if you start from zero, and you do not come from a Noh family, for example, you would need to make

your own collection if you want to own them. However, it is not necessary to own costumes, because you can typically borrow them. If you start from zero, it means that you will be a first-generation actor and so you will somehow depend on your teacher or on the family to which you will be associated, and they will probably have a collection of costumes so you would borrow from them or you would borrow them from the iemoto.

Pellecchia further explains in “Using the Mask” that “Each play has a prescribed set of possible mask and costume combinations. Typically plays have one ‘standard’ and a number of ‘variant’ (kogaki) ways of being produced. Such types of mise-en-scene also differ from school to school. However, actors may be able to choose from several masks of the same type (for example, several different renditions of Ko-omote or Waka-onna). As a consequence, the shite may choose which mask best suits the performance but freedom to choose masks also depends on the experience and seniority of an actor. Not all actors have a large collection of masks and costumes. More often, actors rent masks and costumes from the iemoto of a family, who often owns the best collection.”

Costumes are chosen following tradition. Certain rules prescribe which costume may be used for a certain character in a particular play. Who chooses depends on the situation and on their seniority, Pellecchia explains. “There is



Diego-sensei practicing under Udaka-sensei | Photo by Fabio Massimo Fioravanti

almost no size difference, everything is shortened or adjusted depending on the situation.”

The responsibilities of the main Noh actor are extensive and go well beyond acting, from finding musicians to deciding on staging, costuming, and which mask to use, and even being financially responsible for the production. In Noh theatre, the main actor is may essentially become the producer, director, and stage manager of the show. In some cases—though this largely depends on the actor’s heritage. As Pellecchia explains, if you’re born into a family of actors, “you have that heritage on your on your back that you need to carry. The Iemoto has the heaviest burden because he is the art, he embodies the art, and he has the responsibility for the whole several hundred years of history that create that art that he is the highest representative of. And so on the one hand, I think that there is the responsibility of maintaining and conserving the art and on the other hand, there is the responsibility of transmitting it to the future generations and to make sure that in this transmission there is not just an imitation but there is

also a sense of making it meaningful and important for the people who are there in that specific moment.”

While some actors may choose to carry on traditions exactly as they came before, others may choose to make the art more meaningful for contemporary audiences and practitioners, Pellecchia says. “That responsibility is huge. We have fewer and fewer actors and this applies also to the whole population of Japan that is also shrinking. So, I think there is a sense of needing to transmit the art to new generations who will become the future bearers of this heritage.”

Preservation of Noh is a concern for Noh actors, especially younger generations who are intent on attracting new audiences. “Many actors now put a lot of effort into trying to present their art in a different way—for example, organizing performances that are shorter in length, with only one Noh play, or holding performances in the evening rather than on a Sunday afternoon,” Pellecchia says. The way to present it may be changing, but the art, I’m not sure how much effort is being put in changing the way one sings for example or changing

the way one dances in a way to accommodate contemporary audiences. It’s a big debate right now, how much do you change Noh and still call it Noh. Is the VR Noh really a Noh or is it a VR Noh? Is the super Kabuki, the Chō Kabuki, still Kabuki? It is possible that maybe a new genre will emerge with other types of plays alongside the traditional repertory. Also, there is a big debate right now about should you change the art, or should you educate your audience to appreciate it the way it is?

“Here in Japan, there is an expectation that the more you know, the more you appreciate, and that ignorance leads to frustration,” Pellecchia continues. “I see that in my teaching at the university. Noh actors always create informative material so that people can understand the play before they come and watch the show. So in a way, I think that people coming from outside of Japan, we take for granted that we don’t understand Noh and so we don’t really care too much about not understanding. We just embrace it for what it is and enjoy the fact that it’s so far from us. But here in Japan, I think that people are kind of familiar



Now Hiring!

Onboard Positions Including:

- Senior Production Manager
- Production Manager
- Lighting Techs
- Audio Techs
- Automation Techs
- Video Techs
- Stage crew

Apply Today!
www.princesscruisesentertainment.com

Come sail away with

PRINCESS

I Love This JOB

Unleash the Extraordinary with Enhance a Colour



Scenic Designs & Stage Decks for Ballets, Operas, Theaters, & Mobile Tours

Fabric Backdrops: 16 ft. wide by any length, 8-color printing with UV Blacklight options for captivating visuals.

Opaque Vinyl Flooring: Custom UV full-color printing on white opaque vinyl, available in 10 ft. and 16 ft. wide by any length. Durable and easy to clean.

Clear Vinyl Flooring: Vibrant 8-color UV printing available 10 ft. wide by any length.

Why Choose Us?

Exceptional Quality • Innovative Technology
• Proven Success



For more information and samples please
call Suzette Plank - Branding Specialist
800-894-0264



www.eacgs.com

with it, but not quite... and they have some prejudice as well about it because it's something that is difficult. So these prejudices really are to the detriment of the enjoyment of the performance. We have less of those prejudices because we have not been exposed to Noh and so I think in a way we have an advantage coming from our side of Japan."

You need imagination to appreciate Noh. In Noh there are no fancy sets and few special effects. Noh is evocative and powerful even when the shite stands still. Noh suspends disbelief and moves the viewer out of this world into the mythical world. Noh forces the audience to slow down and sometimes experience an uncomfortable silence. Time in the theatre becomes extraordinarily slow and concentrated. The Japanese proverb "ichi-go ichi-e" 一期一会 can be translated as "one opportunity, one encounter" or "never again" or "one chance in a lifetime." It emphasizes the importance of cherishing each moment as a unique experience because such moments may never be repeated. Watching *Sagi* from Udaaka-sensei in 2016 was Ichigo Ichie, not just a once in a lifetime chance for him to perform that role, but also a once in a lifetime chance for every one of us in the audience to see and experience that performance. I later learned that each Noh is ichi-go ichi-e, because each stage performance happens only once, making it a unique and unrepeatable event.



Alessia Carpoca is the head of the Design and Technology program at the University of Montana. She teaches scene and costume design, and scenic painting. Carpoca has professional design experience in Canada, Italy, Germany, and the Czech Republic, as well as in several theaters in the USA. She is an active member of USITT, serving on the Conference Committee and International Committee. She was the Assistant Project Coordinator for the 2011 USITT-USA Prague Quadrennial exhibit. Carpoca's research field lies in her passion for Japanese theatre. She spent two sabbatical semesters in Kyoto thanks to the Art Research Center at Ritsumeikan University. She also studied Manga with the Kyoto Art School. Her paper on Japanese Anime: Visual and Cultural Influences on Italian Contemporary artists of the "Goldrake Generation" was published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing. In 2020, she participated in the ACE-IIGE Rapid Response Workshop about Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) and has taught several workshops on COIL after collaborating with Prof. Murai from Sophia University. She has worked with the Global Engagement Office to create UMOVE - The University of Montana Online Virtual Exchange. Some of her design work can be found at www.alessiacarpoca.net/

Works Cited

Dym, Jeffrey A. 2018. *Noh Masks (面, Men): The Spirit of Noh Theatre*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qsMnyrxqe6w&t=3s>

Fioravanti, Fabio Massimo. 2014. *La Via del Noh*. Casadeilibri.

International Noh Institute (INI). "Noh Chant and Dance." <https://internationalnohinstitute.com/study-noh-with-the-ini/noh-chant-and-dance/>

"Masks." The-Noh.com <https://www.the-noh.com/en/world/mask.html>

"Noumen." 2001. JAANUS. Japanese Architecture and Art Users System. <https://www.aisf.or.jp/~jaanus/deta/n/noumen.htm>

Pellecchia, Diego. 2023. Interview with the author.

Pellecchia, Diego. "Noh, an art of contrasts." Noh Reimagined. MUArts. <https://noh.muarts.org.uk/noh-an-art-of-contrasts/>

Pellecchia, Diego and Monica Bethe. "Mask-Making." JPARC. Japanese Culture Research Institute, Kyoto Sangyo University. https://jparc.online/nohgaku_top/performance-nohgaku/masks/mask-making/

Pellecchia, Diego and Teele Ogamo, Rebecca. 2021. "On Ataka: Interview With Udaka Michishige and Sugi Ichikazu," *Mime Journal*: Vol. 27, Article 8. DOI: 10.5642/mimejournal.20212701.08

Pulvers, Solrun Hoaas. 1978. *The Noh Mask and the Mask Making Tradition*. MA thesis Asian Studies Australian National University.

"Question 90: Does the Noh have a flat stage?" 2010. The-Noh.com <https://www.the-noh.com/en/trivia/090.html>

"Question 126: How are costumes used for many years cared for?" 2014. The-Noh.com <https://www.the-noh.com/en/trivia/126.html>

Rath, Eric C. 2016. "Interlude Iemoto : The Family Head System." from *A History of Japanese Theatre*. Ed. Jonah Salz. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 99–101.

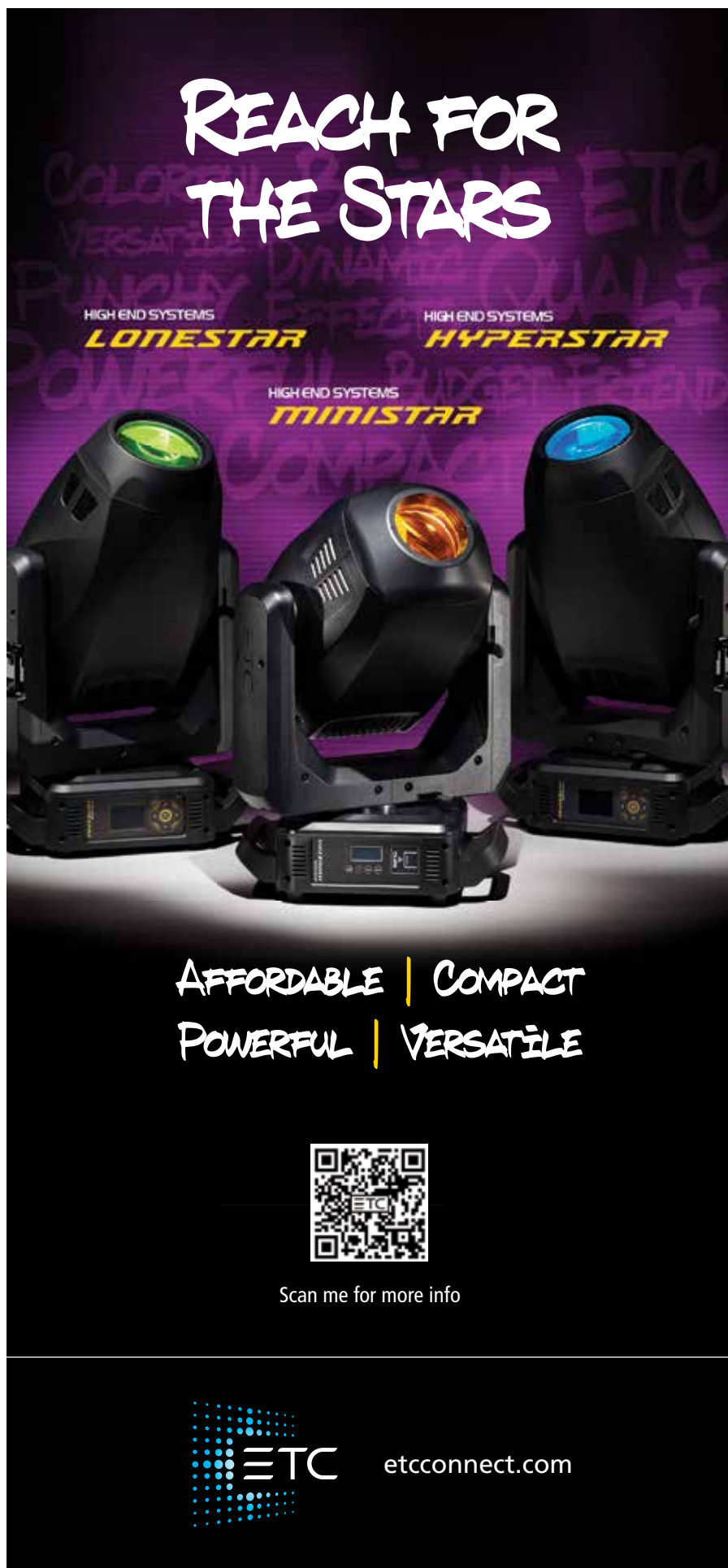
Suzuki, Keiun. 1970. *Noh Mask*. Wanya Shoten, Tokyo, Showa 45.

Teele Ogamo, Rebecca. 2014. "Introduction to *The Way of the Noh*" in *The Way of the Noh/ La Via del Noh* by Fabio Massimo Fioravanti. Casadeilibri.

Udaka, Keiko. 2023. Interview with the author.

Udaka, Michishige. 2010. *The Secrets of Noh Masks*. Kodansha International, Tokyo.

Zen, Pagine and Rossella Marangoni. 2016. "La Via del Noh, intervistano Fabio Massimo Fioravanti, fotografo, autore del libro 'La Via del Noh. Udaka Michishige: attore e scultore di maschere.'" *Temì Zen*. <https://temizen.zenworld.eu/paginezen/approfondimenti/la-via-del-noh-intervista-a-fabio-massimo-fioravanti>




REACH FOR THE STARS

HIGH END SYSTEMS
LONESTAR


HIGH END SYSTEMS
HYPERSTAR

HIGH END SYSTEMS
MINISTAR

AFFORDABLE | COMPACT
POWERFUL | VERSATILE



Scan me for more info



etconnect.com