

JAPAN

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

(updated information)

The Shaping of Daimyo Culture 1185-1868

THE KANZE SCHOOL OF NO AT THE NATIONAL GALLERY

SPECIAL TORCHLIT NŌ PRESENTATION ON THE MALL

The Nō Performances

National Gallery of Art
Washington
October 25-
November 5, 1988

Washington, October 18, 1988 - A troupe of distinguished players and musicians of historic Japanese Nō theater, led by the Kanze school, will perform Nō plays in the opening weeks of the exhibition, JAPAN: THE SHAPING OF DAIMYO CULTURE 1185-1868 at the National Gallery, the highlight of which will be an outdoor performance on the Mall. Nō, the oldest form of professional theater in Japan, became an established art in the fourteenth century. The plays, "Dōjōji" (the name of a famous Buddhist temple); "Tsuchigumo" (The Ground-spider) and "Funabenkei" (Benkei in the Boat) will take place on a stage constructed on the East Building Mezzanine. The troupe will also present one Takigi Nō, or torchlit evening program on the Mall. The Nō performances and specially constructed stages are made possible by The Yomiuri Shimbun, Nippon Telegraph and Telephone Co., Suntory Ltd., Sumitomo Life Insurance Co., Takeda Chemical Industries Ltd., The Nikko Securities Co., and All Nippon Airways Co., Ltd.

The visit of the performing artists to the National Gallery will mark the first time Nō has been performed by one of the five professional Japanese Nō companies in a non-theater building in the United States. The formidable task of constructing and installing a Nō stage in a non-theater setting has required the concerted effort of a production team composed of

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Weather permitting, the schedule of four public Nō performances will begin with a presentation of Takigi Nō, an outdoor performance lit by wood-burning torches, on Saturday, October 29. Raindates are Sunday, October 30 and Saturday, November 5. Telephone (202) 842-6721 or listen to radio station WGMS (FM 103.5 and AM 570) after 2:00 p.m. the day of the performance for raindate information. Up to 2000 spectators can be seated for the event, which will take place on a temporary stage on the Mall south of the West Building. A preview of the exhibition JAPAN: THE SHAPING OF DAIMYO CULTURE 1185-1868 will follow the Takigi Nō performance.

The indoor Nō performances, which will take place on November 1, 3, and 5, will be preceded by an example of Kyōgen, a short comic play used in conjunction with Nō theater to offset its often tragic contents. A special viewing of the Daimyo exhibition will follow these performances.

Mr. Otoshige Sakai, managing director of the Nōgaku Kyokai, the National Association of Nō Performers, and representative of the Kanze School will play the principal role in all of the Nō plays presented, including a performance of the play "Dōjōji" as a preview celebration for lenders to the Daimyo exhibition. The principal role of "Dōjōji" signifies an important rite of passage in the Nō Theater. An actor must have mastered the art of Nō in its full essence and be at the peak of his career to undertake the role, and he may do so only a few times. Mr. Sakai, who has been designated a Bearer of Important Intangible Cultural Assets by the Japanese government, will be performing "Dōjōji" in the Akagashira style (a special variation that places even greater demands on the actor) at the National Gallery for the second and last time in his career.

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Accompanying Mr. Sakai will be other Nō performers who are similarly distinguished. Mr. Shigeyoshi Mori is the only waki, or supporting player, who has been designated by the Japanese government as a Living National Treasure, an honor reserved for only one actor or musician from each school of Nō. Mr. Yoji Isso, who heads the Isso School of the Fue, is known for his dynamic performance on the fue flute. He and drum players Mssrs. Tadao Kamei and Teruo Oe, also performers coming to the National Gallery, are among the Nō music players who have been collectively designated by the government as Bearers of Important, Intangible Cultural Properties. Mr. Kamei plays the otsuzumi, or large hand drum. Mr. Oe plays the standing taiko drum. In addition, one of the Kyogen actors who will be at the Gallery, Mr. Tojiro Yamamoto has been recognized with the same title.

The story of "Dōjōji" takes place on the day of installation of a new bell at the Dōjōji temple. A servant allows a woman onto the temple grounds, despite the head priest's injunction, so that she can perform a special dance of celebration. At the climax of her dance the bell falls with a reverberating crash and the woman disappears inside it. In the interlude following, a priest relates this incident to a story from the past, as the principal actor prepares for his transformation into a demon for the finale.

The climax of "Funabenkei" (Benkei in the Boat) takes place when a boat is caught in a sudden storm. The characters, including the estranged brother of the shogun Yoritomo, envision angry spirits of the enemies they have slain in the waves of the sea. Though his master tries to fight the demons physically, Benkei recognizes them as spirits to be conquered with prayers. The fact that the play begins with discord between the Minamoto brothers suggests that it addresses the period of transition in Japanese society of the late twelfth century when the warrior class came to rule.

"Tsuchigumo" is about a demon spirit who appears first as a priest at the bedside of the dying warrior Minamoto Raiko, and then in the form of a spider. Wounded while attempting to ensnare Minamoto in a spider's web, the attacker is chased by a retainer to a spider's mound, where it tries to ensnare the retainer and is finally vanquished. "Tsuchigumo" is famed as a spectacle of color and action, with brilliant effects from the spider's webs and flashing of sword blades.

The schedule for public Nō performances is as follows:

Sat., October 29 5:45 p.m. Ceremony followed by Takigi No
Performance (Tsuchigumo) on the Mall*
(telephone 202/842-6721 or listen to WGMS-FM 103.5/AM 570
after 2:00 p.m. that day to confirm; raindate Sun., October
30 4:45 p.m.)
Tues., November 1 7:30 p.m. Kyōgen/Nō Performance (Funabenkei)
Thurs., November 3 7:30 p.m. Kyōgen/Nō Performance (Funabenkei)
Sat., November 5 7:30 p.m. Kyōgen/Nō Performance (Tsuchigumo)
(or, if necessary, second raindate for outdoor performance on the Mall,
4:45 p.m.)

All performances are at the National Gallery, East Building Mezzanine, unless otherwise stated. The indoor performances will accommodate an audience of 200 on a first-come, first-served basis. The East Building will open for seating at 6:45 p.m. prior to each indoor performance. The hour-long performances are free of charge. Except in the case of an emergency, the audience must remain seated for the entire performance. The exhibition JAPAN: THE SHAPING OF DAIMYO CULTURE 1185-1868 will be open for viewing following the Nō performances.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION: Please call Ruth Kaplan or Katie Ziglar, National Gallery of Art (202) 842-6353.

*Seating will be on West Building steps facing Madison Drive. Cushions will be available for purchase.

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NŌ THEATER

Backgrounder

The Japanese word Nō roughly translates into English as "talent." Nō theatre is the oldest form of professional theater in Japanese culture. It attained its present form during the Muromachi period, more than 500 years ago. The extremely varied artistic origins of Nō include Shinto dance ritual, kagura; Buddhist liturgy; "variety music" from eighth-century China; and fūryū, an eleventh-century dramatic dance accompanied by flute and drum.

Nō is best described as a form of poetic drama led by a dancer, the shite or principal character, often masked, who sings and declaims verse, assisted by a supporting player, the waki; a chorus; and stage musicians whose voices, drumbeats, and high-pitched flute notes give rhythm to the action. Nō often differs from Western theater in its use of a single, powerful emotion, such as love, jealousy, or revenge in place of a dramatic plot. Nō is renowned for its delicate balance of static and dynamic action.

Actors and musicians are divided into three categories according to the types of roles they play: principal (shite), supporting (waki), and musician (flute and three types of drums). They are specialists in their respective fields and never take up roles in a different category. Though there are many roles for women, Nō was restricted to male actors until 1945. The Nō repertoire contains over 200 plays, categorized according to the role taken by the lead character: (1) god plays; (2) ghost plays about dead warriors; (3) woman, or wig, plays (4) a miscellaneous category in which the main character is often a mad woman deranged by the loss of a loved one; and (5) demon plays.

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In all but a few plays, a mask is required for the principal actor. The shite covers his face when he is playing the parts of women, old or young men, and supernatural beings. He dispenses with the mask only when he plays a healthy, middle-aged man. The eight- or nine-inch masks normally do not hide the chin or sides of the face. Their tiny eyeslits restrict the actor's vision, and require a programmed sequence of stage movements. The actor's choice of mask is of critical importance. His selection determines which costumes he wears as well as how he interprets his role.

Nō theatre as currently performed involves the main actor wearing rich and heavy costumes; however, this was not always the tradition. Early Nō theater was often enacted with the players in street clothes. This practice changed under the influence of daimyo patronage.

Two figures, Kan'ami (1333-1384) a famous actor-dancer; and his son, Zeami (1363-1443), are seen as responsible for the synthesis of diverse forms and music that is Nō theatre. Kan'ami originated the important No principles of monomane (imitation or mime) and yūgen (mystery and profundity). The performances of Kan'ami and Zeami at the Imagumano Shrine in Kyoto in 1374 so impressed the shogun Ashikaga Yoshimitsu that he became a great patron of their troupe. Yoshimitsu was the first shogun patron of Nō theater and his support demonstrated the increasing importance of bun, or civilian arts, in a martial society dominated by bu, or martial traditions.

In the almost constant warfare of the sixteenth century, the study of music, theater, tea and calligraphy offered spiritual solace to the warrior class, and daimyo patronage of Nō increased. The hegemon Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537-1598) even played the lead in autobiographical Nō plays he commissioned.

A Nō performance typically consists of two plays interspersed with a shorter, farcical play called Kyōgen ("mad speech") to balance the more solemn and often tragic content of the No works. The stage is covered by the traditional cypress-bark roof of a Shinto shrine. The conventions of its setting, formalized in the Edo period, retain the characteristics of the outdoor location traditionally associated with Nō. A stylized pine tree painting on the back wall is the everpresent backdrop. Other stage features include: a bridge (ten meters long) leading back to the "mirror room" from which the performers emerge; three pine trees planted to the side of the bridge; steps leading from the stage to the audience -- traditionally allowing the patron to bestow gifts upon the performers; and a gravel rim around the stage area at audience floor level, symbolic of interaction between audience and players.

Five schools of Nō are active in Japan. By far the largest, including over half of all the Nō actors practicing, is the Kanze school. There are 1400 members of the National Association of Nō Performers, the Nōgaku Kyōkai. Nō performers develop their art through intensive solitary training; their engagement on the stage is a spontaneous event, highly charged. Nō theater is quite popular, and is in fact, experiencing a revival in Japan today. One particular form of Nō presentation which is thriving in Japan is the Takigi Nō, or open-air, torchlit play.

Although the conventions of Nō have not been affected by outside influences, Western playwrights in a few instances have used the model of Nō. An example is W. B. Yeats, who planned his Cuchulain plays to echo Nō conventions because he recognized a parallel between the Irish mythology he sought to portray and the Japanese mythology at the heart of much in the repertoire of Nō theater.