

Elements of Performance

Noh and kyōgen belong to a single performance tradition, although they enact radically dissimilar types of texts. The same musicians, using different styles, perform in both genres, and kyōgen actors have roles in most noh plays. Noh actors, however, have nothing to do with kyōgen, a practice that reveals the perceived hierarchy. Noh, as the “serious” art, has always considered itself, and has generally been considered, superior to the comic kyōgen—a prejudice against comedy that is certainly not uncommon in the history of world theater. In this introduction to part 2, I describe the two genres together, emphasizing the similarities in their performance practices. The translated plays reveal their differences.

The two genres share the same stage, and their plays are usually presented in a single program, which, in its fullest form, includes the ceremonial piece *Okina* (see the introduction to *Sambasō* in part 3), five noh plays, and four kyōgen plays. At the beginning of each year, the various noh and kyōgen schools cooperate to present a full program, which requires about ten hours to perform. Most programs today, however, are much shorter. Regular monthly performances by schools, or subgroups thereof, present two or three noh, a kyōgen or two, and some danced sections from noh plays (*shimai*). These are usually scheduled on Saturday or Sunday afternoons and last four to five hours. Weekday-evening programs may consist of only a single noh or a few kyōgen.

Approximately seventy active noh stages exist in nineteen Japanese prefectures, twenty-six of which are in Tokyo, nine in Osaka, and seven in Kyoto. The six smallest theaters seat fewer than fifty people, with the dozen largest having capacities of five hundred or more. In addition to professional noh and kyōgen performances, the stages are used for training, rehearsals, and amateur recitals, but rarely for other types of theatrical performances. Noh and kyōgen plays are often presented in other

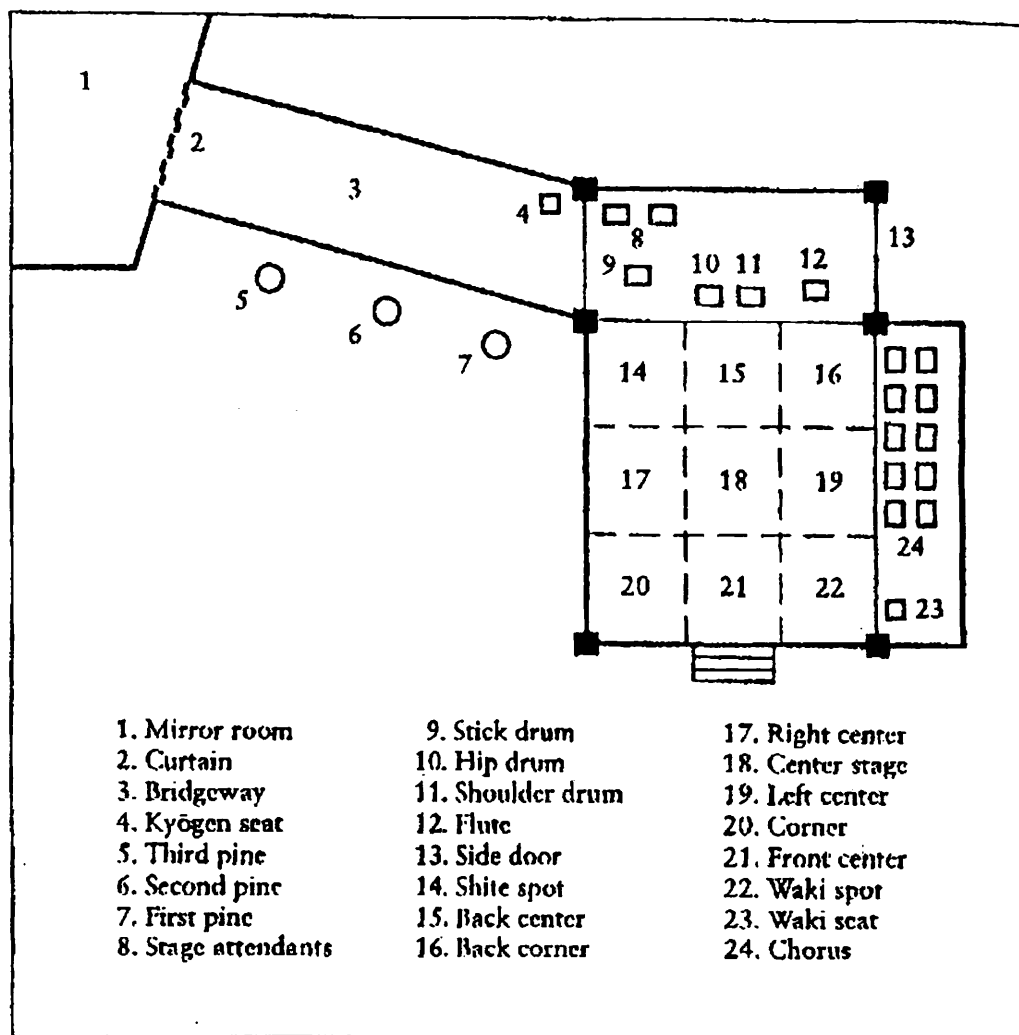


FIGURE 2.1. Diagram of the noh stage. For a photograph of the stage see figure 1.11. (Illustration by Annie Olds.)

spaces as well, such as Western-style theaters and temple or shrine structures, including temporary stages erected for festivals (figures 2.1, 2.2).

Performers are grouped into schools (*ryū*) by specialty. Actors are divided into kyōgen actors (two schools), waki actors (three schools), and shite actors (five schools). The musicians include three schools of flutists, four of shoulder drummers, five of hip drummers, and two of stick drummers. Together these schools claim approximately fifteen hundred members: slightly more than one thousand shite actors, fewer than one hundred kyōgen actors, about sixty waki actors, and around fifty players of each instrument. These numbers include many who are not full professionals, such as young performers still in training, advanced amateurs, and those who are licensed to teach an aspect of noh, such as chanting, but who do not perform in professional programs. There are approximately five hundred active, fully professional performers, but few of them are able to make a living solely by performing. Most also give paid lessons to amateurs and to the children of other performers. Since 1947, women have had the legal right to perform professionally with men, and they are included among the members of the schools. In practice, however, coed casts are infrequently found in some schools and never in others. Women are more likely to

perform in all-female groups or as amateurs. They also serve as licensed teachers of noh song and dance.

Professional performers generally undergo intensive training from childhood through early adulthood, and the discipline and control they develop are widely admired by their Western counterparts. Even today the theatrical professions are largely hereditary, with fathers (or surrogate fathers) teaching youngsters, and the head of the school or subgroup taking over for the final years of apprenticeship. Training is through imitation and memorization. No discrete physical or mental exercises or techniques are practiced—no musical scales, elocution lessons, or physical arts—rather, sections from plays are learned as performance pieces. Most performers study more than one art, and almost all of them practice chanting as well as one or more instruments. Hence a young actor may learn, for example, to sing and dance the last scene of *Kamo* from his father and to play the stick drum and flute parts in his instrumental lessons. Young actors appear onstage in child roles: the noh play *Miidera* has a small but sensitive part for a boy, and the child who appears in the kyōgen *Mushrooms* as the tiniest fungus contributes much to the humor of the play (both plays are translated in this book).

Flute and drums accompany all noh plays and those kyōgen with instrumental music, such as *Thunderbolt*, *Kanaoka*, and *The Cicada* (figure 2.3). The flute (*nōkan*) is a transverse instrument made of strips of bamboo. It is unusual in that overblowing produces intervals of less than a complete octave and the tonal system varies from one flute to another. Rather than harmonize with the human voice, the flute provides melodic embellishments to sung sections and joins the drums in instrumental passages for entrances, exits, and dances. The two hand-held drums, the shoulder drum (*kotsuzumi*) and the hip drum (*ōtsuzumi* or *ōkawa*), are played as a pair; the hip drum is generally more active in the first half of a measure, the shoulder drum in the second half. Interesting exceptions are the *rambyōshi* dance in the noh play *Dōjōji*, in which the dancer performs to a shoulder-drum solo, and a version of

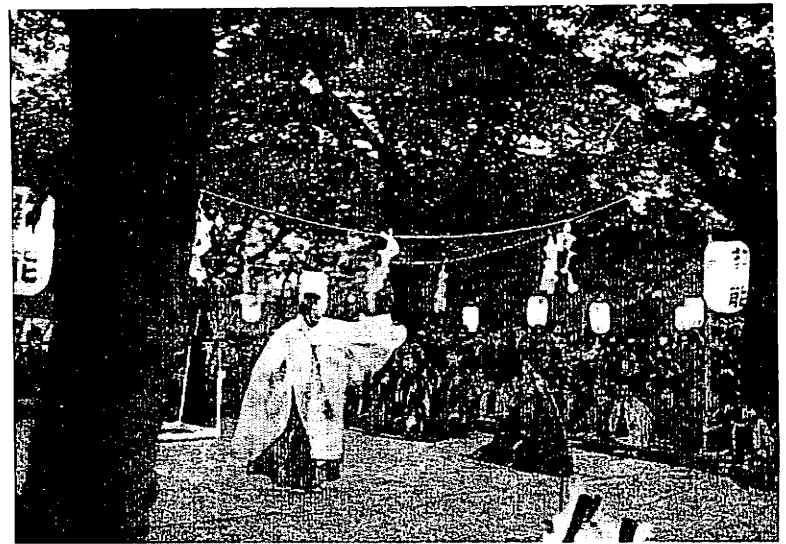


FIGURE 2.2. Takigi (bonfire) noh performed at the site of the gate to Kōfukuji in Nara. The waki (top), a traveling monk, enters down a makeshift bridgeway at the rear of the stage. The shite dances in act 2 of *Yuki* (Snow). The temporary stage is marked off as sacred space by the folded strips of hanging paper. (Photos by Karen Brazell.)

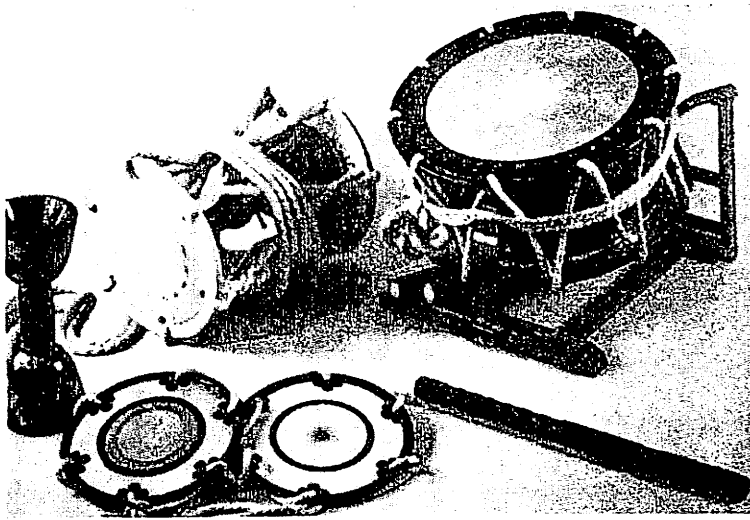


FIGURE 2.3. The instruments used in noh and kyōgen: stick drum (*taiko*) on stand, hip drum (*ōtsuzumi* or *ōkawa*) assembled, shoulder drum (*kotsuzumi*) disassembled, and flute. (Photo by Karen Brazell.)

Okina, in which three dancers perform to the beats of three shoulder drums. The shoulder drum produces four distinct, relatively soft and resonant pitches, and the slightly larger hip drum produces a dry crack that varies only in the intensity with which the drum is struck and the amount of resonance permitted. The stick drum (*taiko*) is played with two lightweight wooden sticks about an inch in diameter. This drum is sounded on the half-beats, establishing a strong pulse that dominates the music. For this reason, the stick drum is used in only about half the plays and then only for the later parts.

The drummers use their voices as well as their instruments to contribute to the aural impact of the performance. Their calls (*kakegoe*) of *yo*, *ho*, *yoi*, and *iya* generally sound eerie to the untrained Western ear, but the quality of these sounds (loud, quiet, urgent, lulling, gentle, or vigorous) helps establish the mood of a particular piece, and their precise placement in the drum patterns is an important means of controlling the rhythm. The musicians are also part of the visual picture. They sit in full view of the audience, their posture, movements, and garments strictly regulated by convention. In noh the musicians enter first, walking along the up-stage edge of the bridgeway, and leave only after the actors have exited. In kyōgen they enter the stage only when they have a part to perform.

Another group of onstage performers is the chorus. For noh plays, the chorus usually consists of eight to ten shite actors, who enter and exit through the little door at backstage left (*kirido*). They come onstage after the instrumentalists have entered and exit last. When a chorus is used in kyōgen plays, it is composed of four or five kyōgen actors, who kneel at the back of the stage. Neither chorus represents characters of its own; rather, it impersonally voices the text, shifting easily from speaking in the equivalent of an effaced third-person narrator to chanting the words of the main character in the first person. The leader of the chorus, who sits in the middle of the back row in noh, is an important force in integrating the aural elements of the performance.

Because the stage is decorated only with the painted pine on the back wall, the bamboo on the stage-left wall, and an occasional simple prop, costumes and masks provide most of the color and visual beauty. They also indicate the age, gender, social status, and nature of the characters. Central to the costuming of a noh figure is the mask, a piece of beautifully carved sculpture with almost a life of its own (figure 2.4). In noh plays, adult shite actors are masked except when they play ordinary, living male characters, such as the secondary characters (*tsure*) in *Shunkan* or the grass cutters in *Atsumori*. Waki actors, who never wear masks, only play living male characters and, like other unmasked noh performers, keep their features immobile.



FIGURE 2.4. Noh masks: ko-omote for young women, as for the tsure in *Kamo* (top left: photo by Monica Bethe); Yamamba mask (top right: photo by Monica Bethe); Shunkan mask (bottom left: courtesy of Michelle Li); *hannya* mask for jealous women, as in *Dōjōji* (bottom right: photo by Karen Brazell).

Kyōgen actors, on the other hand, perform most of their roles without masks, using stylized expressions to create stage personae. The few masks used in kyōgen, such as the *buaku* mask for *Thunderbolt* and the bearded *noborihige* for the subsidiary deity in the aikyōgen of *Kamo*, have exaggerated features. The expressions on noh masks range from the serene young woman's mask (*ko-omote*) used in act 1 of *Kamo*, which takes on a cheerful or sad expression as it is carefully raised and lowered, to

the fierce deity mask (*ōtobide*) of the thunder god in act 2, which has an exaggerated expression that comes to life most vividly when the head is moved quickly from left to right. A few noh plays, such as *Shunkan* and *Yamamba*, use masks designed for specific characters; most others use generic masks.

The art of costuming, like most arts in noh and kyōgen, consists of varying a relatively small number of forms. The basic garment for characters of both sexes is similar to the modern kimono: a narrow-sleeved,¹ full-length gown made of plain, striped, or plaid material (*noshime*) for male characters and a similar garment appliquéd with gold or silver foil (*surihaku*) or with foil and embroidery (*nuihaku*) for females.² Kyōgen female characters wear an embroidered nuihaku by itself, and a few noh characters, such as the female demon in *Dōjōji*, may appear in only these two undergarments: a foiled kimono with its bottom half covered by a folded-down embroidered kimono. Most noh characters also wear an outer garment. The colorful brocade robe (*karaori*), intricately woven with weft floats on a twill ground, is used mostly for women's roles and may be worn in various ways. Both male and female characters may wear a three-quarter-length, light silk or gauze cloak with broad sleeves, such as the versatile travel cloak (*mizugoromo*), the hunting cloak (*kariginu*), and the dancing cloak (*chōken*).

For a fuller stage figure, both male and female characters don divided skirts with stiffened backs and pleated fronts, made of either a plain-colored material (*ōkuchi*) or a satin weave with bold gold or silver weft patterning (*hangiri*). These are usually worn by the shite or a waki playing a high-ranking priest. Other performers wear variations of the soft, pleated trousers called hakama, still part of traditional Japanese dress. Standard, ankle-length hakama are worn by musicians for regular performances (instrumentalists and chorus members always wear similar costumes), and long hakama (*nagabakama*) and matching stiff vests are worn for the most formal occasions. Hakama are generally reserved for male characters and normally are not used for shite roles in noh, although the female demon in *Dōjōji* may wear a long hakama over a scaled kimono. Kyōgen players wear short or long hakama, often with bold geometric designs, or a special type of breeches with leggings (*kukuri-hakama*).

Other costume pieces include wigs, headpieces, hoods, caps, headbands, belts, aprons, and stoles, all used in highly stylized and conventional ways. Masks are worn with wigs, ranging from the tightly tied-back wig (*kazura*) for a woman to the mop of cascading red, white, or black "hair" (*kashira*) for an active deity. Court caps or crowns often top the wig: the woman in *Izutsu* dons her lover's court cap; the thunder god in *Kamo* wears a black crown, the mother deity, an elaborate headpiece. Costume pieces are not always used realistically. Female characters in kyōgen, for example, are not masked; rather, their heads are wrapped in strips of white cloth that hang down on each side of the head, framing the male face (*binan*). In noh the brocade headbands

1. Narrow sleeves are made of one width of material, approximately the width necessary to cover an arm from shoulder to wrist, and are sewn up halfway along the outer edge to leave a rather narrow armhole. Wide sleeves are made of one and a half or two widths of material and are not sewn together at the outer edge, only attached at the bottom.

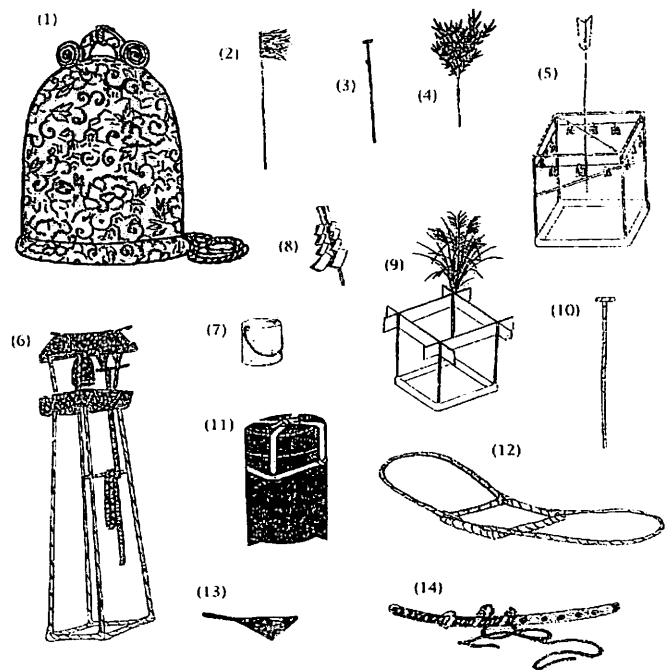
2. To find illustrations of these costume pieces, consult the glossary at the back of this book. Items are listed by their Japanese names.

(*kazura obi*) for women are worn under the mask, presumably to avoid detracting from its beauty; warriors wear their white headbands in a more realistic fashion over the mask (compare figures 2.10 and 2.18).

Noh costuming includes symbolic elements. A female character who appears with the right sleeve of her robe slipped off, revealing the underkimono, is probably deranged, although working or fighting characters—such as the boat woman in the play *Eguchi* and the warrior Atsumori (see figures 2.6 and 2.10)—may also appear in this way. A brocade robe containing red indicates that the wearer is young, and the color of the neckband on a woman's inner kimono reflects her social status. Designs may suggest the nature of the character being portrayed: thus, the undergarment of a passionate woman who turns into a serpent often has a diamond, fish-scale design; the costume for a thunder god may include clouds and zigzag lightning patterns; Yamamba's costume often has clouds to represent illusion and circles to suggest the wheel of fate.

Props are of two kinds: large stage props, which, with one or two exceptions (for example, the bell in *Dōjōji*), are constructed anew for each performance, and small, hand-held props, which are stored between uses (figure 2.5). All performers carry fans: the instrumentalists and chorus members place theirs on the stage or hold them in fixed positions while performing. Actors generally carry fans with spread tips (*chūkei*) whose designs, in addition to being aesthetically pleasing, also indicate the nature of the characters. A defeated warrior, for example, carries a fan with a red sun over waves. These fans are used to express an enormous array of actions, from the blowing of the wind to the serving of sake. When hand props are no longer needed, the actor drops them, and they are immediately retrieved by a stage attendant; there is no need to invent a "butler" to remove them realistically. The hand props used in the plays in this anthology illustrate the wide variety that are available: Buddhist rosaries, pails, bundles of grass, paintbrushes, a branch, demon stick, sword, sickle, walking stick, conch shell, mallet, and a needle.

Stage props—carried onstage by one or more attendants before the act in which they are needed—usually are simple frameworks, merely suggesting the object they



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| 1. Dojoji Bell | 8. Purification wand |
| 2. Reed | 9. Well with pampas grass |
| 3. Demon stick | 10. Walking staff |
| 4. Branch of bamboo | 11. Stool |
| 5. Altar with arrow | 12. Boat |
| 6. Bell tower | 13. Spread-tip fan |
| 7. Bucket | 14. Sword |

FIGURE 2.5. Noh props. (Illustration by Mien Wong, based on Fukami 1933.)

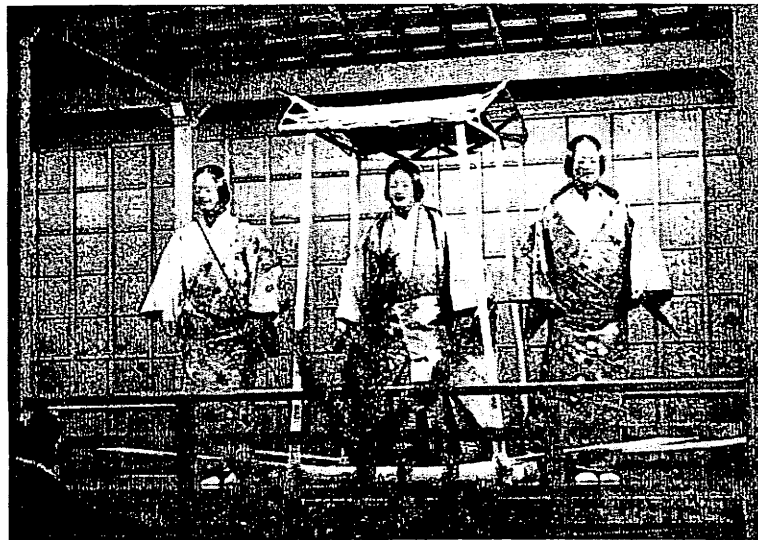
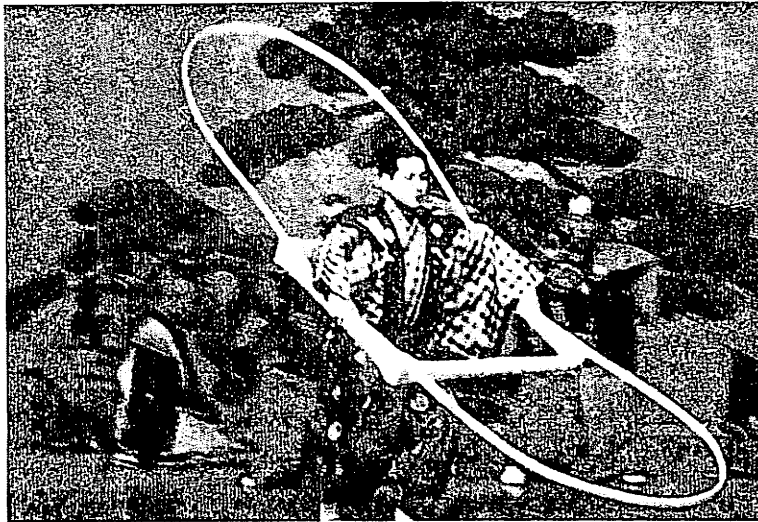


FIGURE 2.6. Two types of boat props used in noh. At the top the aiikyōgen carries in the simplest boat frame for the play *Funa Benkei*; this prop is also used in *Shunkan*. (Photo by Karen Brazell.) The more elaborate boat frame at the bottom is used in the play *Eguchi*. One woman, at the left, has the right sleeve of her outer robe slipped off to indicate that she is working (poling the boat). The woman at the right wears her kimono (*karaori*) in the straight style (*kinagashi*), and the shite in the middle wears broad divided skirts beneath her brocade kimono worn tucked up (*tsubouchi* style). (Photo by Tanaka Masao.)

represent (figure 2.6). The altar with the arrow attached in *Kamo* and the similarly constructed well frame with pampas grass in *Izutsu* are two examples (compare figures 1.17 and 2.12). Other props, such as the boat in *Shunkan* and the bell in *Miidera*, are manipulated by the actors. Some large props are also used to conceal an actor, as the bell does in *Dōjōji*. Because kyōgen actors create settings through explicit mime, they rarely use stage props, and none occur in the plays in this anthology. A large, round lacquered container with a lid (*shōgi* or *kazura oke*) falls somewhere between the categories of hand prop and stage prop and serves several practical functions: it is used as a seat for the actor in the mirror room or in the center of the stage, and especially in kyōgen, it serves as a useful container for sake or for the “delicious poison” in the play of that name. The lid may be used as a large cup.

Song and dance, the two arts (*ni-kyoku*) of noh, are used to bring the material elements and the text to life, to create the living tapestry that is the performance. The texts of plays are chanted or sung (it is difficult to decide which English word best describes voice production here) in three basic styles: intoned speech (*kotoba*) and two modes of singing—melodic song (*yowagin* or *wagin*) and dynamic song (*tsuyogin* or *gōgin*). The most prosaic parts of noh and the majority of kyōgen lines

are intoned with a full voice in stylized patterns, rendered somewhat differently by shite, waki, and kyōgen actors. The chorus never uses intoned speech. The melodic mode is used for soft passages expressing elegance, sensitivity, and suffering. It has a musical scale composed of three base pitches a perfect fourth apart and sounds vaguely like Gregorian chanting. Dynamic song is used to express excitement, courage, or solemnity. It has no definite scale; rather, certain sounds swell in heavy vibrato, with the “melody” consisting of adding force to the breath to raise the pitch and suddenly withdrawing the force to lower it. The drums may accompany either mode. Sometimes the song matches the rhythms of the drums (*hyōshi au*, congruent rhythm), and

at other times it does not (*hyōshi awazu*, noncongruent rhythm). The flute embellishes the melody line but never harmonizes with the vocal line, and the chorus sings only in unison. Some *noh* plays, like the woman play *Izutsu* or the demon play *Yamamba*, use a single mode, but most use both in various combinations. *Shunkan* alternates between the two modes, depending on the subject, whereas in *Miidera* the *waki* uses dynamic song, and the distraught mother, melodic song.

Although some *kyōgen* plays are performed entirely in *kyōgen*-style intoned speech, more than 60 percent include sung portions. In addition to styles based on *noh* chanting, *kyōgen* has adapted various other song types from medieval and Edo-period popular music, such as the bounce-back-again doll (*okiagari koboshi*) song in *Two Daimyō* and the snail song in *The Snail*. Some sung passages in *kyōgen* are accompanied by instruments, the same drums and flute used in *noh*. The rhythmic patterns, however, are unique to *kyōgen*. The *shite*'s entrance scene in *Kanaoka* is a good example of *kyōgen* adaptations of *noh* music.

Zeami defined three basic modes of dance (*santai*): the aged (*rōtai*), the feminine (*nyotai*), and the martial (*guntai*), terms that are still used to describe *noh* dance today. In *Kamo*, the celestial mother dances in the feminine mode and the thunder god in the martial mode, and the style used to present the old, demonic woman called *Yamamba* combines all three. These modes are not strictly typed by gender. The feminine mode suggests a sensitivity to beauty and emotion that is part of the masculine as well as the feminine ideal, and the martial mode suggests a supernatural, demonic quality as well as aggressive masculinity. *Atsumori* is danced in the feminine mode to melodic chanting in the lyrical *kuse* scene, which describes the suffering of the Heike clan, and in the martial mode to dynamic chanting in the final scene, depicting *Atsumori*'s death.

An entire play is choreographed and performed in dancelike movements, although certain sections typically have more movement than others. Many of these sections are learned and performed as independent dance pieces (*shimai*). Examples from the plays in this anthology include the bell scene in *Miidera* (*kane no dan*); the segments labeled *kuse* in *Yamamba* and *Atsumori*, describing the nature of *Yamamba* and the Heike's sojourn at Suma; and the last sections (*kiri*) of *Atsumori* and *Kamo*, which depict a battle and a storm, respectively. All these are dances to song.³ *Kyōgen* actors may also use a distinctive form called little dance (*komai*), which the characters typically perform for one another, as is beautifully exemplified in the *aikyōgen* dance in *Miidera*.

Other dances, including both long dances (*mai*) and action pieces (*hataraki*), are performed to instrumental music without song. The many named variations of *mai* share the same basic choreography but are danced in different styles, to different tempi and instrumentations. The quiet dance (*jo no mai*) in *Izutsu* lasts about fifteen minutes, whereas the fast dance (*kyū no mai*) in *Dōjōji*, with almost the same choreography and instrumentation, takes only four or five minutes. In all cases, the dancer performs to repetitive flute phrases joined by two or three drums, depending on the context. Action pieces have a shorter, less complex musical structure and

3. In a complete *noh* play, instruments accompany the song, but in a *shimai* performance, only vocal music is used.

usually express an action or emotion. For example, a *kakeri* dance expresses anguish in both the noh play *Miidera* and the kyōgen *Kanaoka*. The *hataraki* in *Kamo* portrays the power of a thunderstorm; the stroll (*tachimawari*) in *Yamamba* depicts the weight of a burden; and the *notto* in *Dōjōji* represents part of an exorcism.

Noh performance is best explained as a system of highly conventionalized, interlocking parts. The rules developed over the centuries may be reinterpreted somewhat, but they are seldom blatantly broken. Each production of a play is basically the same, and the accepted variations (*kogaki*) are themselves standardized and even named. Because there is no director to impose a “new” interpretation, the actors control the production. The creativity of noh performers is more comparable to that of musicians than to Western-style actors. What is performed is established by tradition; creativity is expressed through the “how” of the performance, the life the performers breathe into the forms they have received from their teachers. The performance results not from weeks of rehearsals, but from long years of intensive training, during which each performer masters his own role and becomes acquainted with the roles of all the other players. For most performances a single preparatory gathering (*mōshiawase*) is sufficient. At that time the actor taking the *shite* role discusses his interpretation of the play and asks the group to rehearse complicated passages.

In addition, a noh performance is a once-in-a-lifetime event. Unlike kabuki, the puppet theater, and most Western theatrical productions, a particular group of performers assembles to produce a given play only once. A single performance without a full dress rehearsal means that no player can predict exactly how the others will perform. The tension created by this sense of uncertainty is an important source of creativity. On foreign tours this once-in-a-lifetime aspect of noh aesthetics must sometimes be disregarded for practical reasons, much to the dismay of the performers, who point out that the variety of foreign performance conditions may create an analogous type of creative tension.

Noh and kyōgen are repertory theaters, a label with somewhat different connotations in Japan than in the West. The repertoire consists of a set number of plays that vary slightly from school to school, although each genre has a core of commonly performed works. Currently there are just over 250 kyōgen plays and just under 250 different noh plays in the repertoires of the various schools. The number does not remain static for long, because old plays that have survived only as written texts may be revived and reenter the repertoires, and unpopular plays may be dropped. There also is considerable interest among some performers, scholars, and others, including non-Japanese, in creating “new” or “modern” noh and kyōgen plays. These may be performed on noh stages and may use professional performers, but they are not considered part of the traditional repertoire.

Both noh and kyōgen plays are grouped in categories based largely on the nature of the main character. Since the late seventeenth century, noh plays have been divided into five groups, with one play from each group included in a full program. The conventional order of performance is (1) deity plays; (2) ghost-of-warrior plays; (3) woman plays; (4) miscellaneous plays, including living-person and crazed-person plays; and (5) demon plays. The following translations of noh also are arranged in this way, although the deity play *Kamo* appeared in part 1. The categories of kyōgen plays are not as clearly delineated and are not as closely related to

performance order. The general categories include daimyō plays, servant plays featuring Tarō Kaja, demon and mountain priest plays, women and bridegroom plays, priest and blind people plays, and a miscellaneous category that includes some direct parodies of noh.

The play scripts translated in this anthology are written in various combinations of prose and poetry and in different levels of language from different historical periods. Kyōgen texts are mainly prose and are relatively colloquial, although the language is that of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, not that of contemporary Japan. The scripts also include, however, many repetitive and formulaic lines, poems and songs, formal prayers, elaborate puns, and onomatopoeic expressions. The overall tone is more intimate and informal than that of noh, yet kyōgen language is highly patterned and no longer colloquial. The translations attempt (in various ways) to capture aspects of this tone.

Noh texts are quite different. In most plays a single “character” (sometimes it is more an emotion than a character) is predominant, and all the players work together to create that being or feeling. Consequently, although the waki and kyōgen roles in noh sometimes have names (often they are simply labeled traveling priests or villagers), they rarely have fully individualized voices. The lines they speak are often formulaic, and the content of their speeches is generally predictable: the waki describes a journey, and the kyōgen explains the “story.” In fact, many texts, especially chantbooks, leave out most of the kyōgen parts and the more formulaic lines of the waki. Some of the waki’s lines and most of the shite’s and chorus’s lines are poetic: they are metered (sometimes loosely, other times more strictly) and often do not make grammatical sense. Instead, images and allusions are strung together with repetitions, puns, and other types of wordplay. Noh playwrights, especially Zeami, were familiar with the poetic practices of their time and took full advantage of them. Because literary Japanese does not necessarily identify the speaker or subject or distinguish between male and female, present and past, thoughts and speech, singular and plural, or first, second, and third person, the translator into English is forced to make distinctions and supply details not provided in the original. Clearly then, two translations of a single play might be quite different and yet both be “accurate.”

The translations in this anthology attempt to reflect the poetic structure of noh rather than to live up to Western expectations of character differentiation or to be more semantically clear than the originals. Generally they attribute lines to the roles (for example, the shite and waki) rather than to the characters that these actors sometimes represent, and they take full advantage of enjambment, both to keep the stream of images flowing and to force the type of rereading that Japanese wordplay creates. In addition, a considerable amount of performance information is included to aid readers interested in theater to visualize what is happening onstage. Finally, these translations are meant to be read slowly; a noh play in print may cover only a half-dozen pages, but in performance it fills one to two hours.