

Getting to 'Noh'

Discovering the art of 'Noh' with the Oshima family

This article is about my recent visit to Japan, my experience of 'Noh' at the Oshima theatre in Fukuyama and in Hiroshima, and the beginning of my 'Noh' adventure that continues to this day.

If you ask a 'Westerner' if they have ever been to see a Noh play. The majority would probably say they have not. If you then ask if they have ever heard of Noh theatre, many 'theatre-going' people would dig deep into their subconscious mind and say that they have some knowledge of Noh. Few would actually have seen a Noh play performed live, and for the majority, 'Noh' is an enigma.

I am a 'Noh novice'. Before November 2007 my first and only experience of Noh theatre, took place more than 30 years ago in London (England). My memory of that Noh play is rather distant and vague. I do remember something of the unforgettable 'art of Noh', as expressed through the haunting sounds of voice and minimalist music, the graceful precise and slow, foot movements, and I remember that the costumes and masks were highly distinctive.

In November 2007 I made an extensive visit to Japan with a friend. This was to be my first 'purely' personal trip to Japan.

My previous visits had all been for professional reasons - facilitating Japan-UK educational collaboration, and working closely with the British Council in Tokyo. For more than 10 years I had travelled to Japan but on each occasion I had managed to visit only a small part, and had stayed for very short periods. During that time our two countries, learnt a great deal about each other's educational systems and a number of valuable links were forged involving national bodies and universities. But my own understanding of the Japanese 'aesthetic', of which I had held a longstanding fascination, remained largely unrealised.

That is not to say that the ten years of my visits to Japan were lacking in cultural experience. On the contrary, I have been extremely fortunate that considerable efforts had been made by some of my friends to introduce me to Japanese culture – taking me to a first night performance at the National Kabuki theatre, for example, or to some of the lesser-known temples of Kyoto between meetings. I have also had the tremendous pleasure of being introduced to exquisite Japanese cuisine in Kyoto and elsewhere on a number of occasions, usually to celebrate the successful conclusion of a project. But perhaps some of the most unusual experiences were the serendipity ones; the happenstance of seeing the 'Gion' or 'Bean-throwing' festivals because they coincided with visits. These were important to my introduction to Japanese culture. And they served to whet my appetite for a different kind of experience of Japan, and a chance to soak in the

Japanese 'aesthetic' a little more. My visit to Japan in November 2007 was to fulfill this wish in more ways than I could have imagined.

My friend and I spent three weeks travelling from Tokyo, walking part of the Nakosendo Way, visiting artisans and temples in Kyoto, experiencing the art of Noh in Fukuyama and Hiroshima, visiting the unforgettable shrines and temples of Miyajima and Mount Koya, enjoying the hot springs of Ryujin, the parks, museums and cuisine of Kanazawa, and seeing the fabulous scenery and exquisite lacquerware of Wajima and the Noto Peninsula. Finally, returning to Tokyo to see friends and experiencing one of the world's busiest capitals. My very good Japanese friend, Professor Kimura had helped me plan this amazing trip, together with his travel agent friend, Mr Shibata, who made all the arrangements. The result was a wonderful travel itinerary that went like 'clockwork'! But what neither Mr Shibata, nor my friend, nor I could have foreseen were the adventures that were to unfold through the people we met. There were many, but one of the most fascinating came as a result of our visit to Fukuyama.

We had 'requested' to see a Noh play, but had not realised how difficult this request was to fulfill, both because of the infrequency of Noh performances in Japan these days, and because of our busy travel schedule. Mr Shibata thought it was important for us to see a performance of quality and so he searched the country and found that the Oshima family were staging a performance of Noh at their family theatre in Fukuyama and booked us front row seats.

It was amazing. Everything I had remembered about the 'art of Noh' came to life and we were swept up in the whole 'theatre' experience. What were vague memories were now very real: the incredible costumes, masks, movement and sounds (vocal and musical) coming together in this minimalist art form. We could not understand the detail of the story (this was to follow with the help of friends) but the uniqueness of the experience could not fail to impress us. The absolute concentration, precision, slowness and discipline of the performers I had only previously seen in the top masters of Tai Qi who work to a discipline of the 'slower the better'. But the performance aspect of Noh means that there is a level of communication that is buried deep in the art form and which, at times, is transferred in an almost meditative state from the stage to the audience. At this level of mastery I suspect that the 'holistic' benefit may be experienced by the performers, everything they endure must transcend their bodies in ways that may be the audience cannot really fully appreciate unless they have taken part in a Noh play. This was truly a lesson in performance art, as well as in the art of performance.

There was only one other 'Westerner' in the audience so our presence was 'noted'. During the interval, Mr Bungo Kagimoto, a television producer from Hiroshima, who was making a documentary programme about 'Noh', approached me. He asked if he might interview us at the end of the performance about our

impressions of the play. What followed was the beginning of my 'Noh' adventure that continues to this day.

As we talked a second gentleman, Mr Masanobu Oshima, came up to us and after hearing that I was from London and that I was rediscovering my introduction to Noh Theatre, invited Mr Kagimoto and us to dine with his family and the other performers at a nearby restaurant. It was a wonderful evening. The Oshima family so generously gave of their hospitality to complete strangers – strangers who could offer nothing more than their interest in the family's art. But what an art! And what a family! Across generations and gender - from the youngest to the oldest - all were involved and all extremely talented. But they were also very kind, hospitable, full of energy and interest in the art of 'Noh'. I wondered how many of Japan's National Living Treasures (not that I appreciated Mr Oshima's status at the time) would invite total strangers to dine with them. We found the whole family to be approachable and warm-hearted. During the course of the evening we mentioned that our next stop was Hiroshima. Mr Kagimoto then told us that the Oshima family would be giving a 'Noh' performance at a High School in Hiroshima in the early afternoon the next day and invited us to join him there. Having spent many years supporting education how could I refuse!

The next day we arrived at Hiroshima and set off immediately to visit the wonderful shrine at Miyajima. We then travelled back to Hiroshima and met up with Mr Kagimoto at our hotel (having not even had time to check-in!) We were taken to a Hiroshima High School and together with the whole school were able to benefit (through the kind support of the Head of English who interpreted for us) from an amazing lesson in 'Noh' given by the children of the Oshima family, followed by an excerpt from a Noh play - 'Tomoe' with an inspirational performance by Kinue Oshima. For most of the school children this would have been their first experience of 'Noh' theatre - a culture that dates back to the mid 14th century. We learnt many things, but one of the most intriguing was the demonstration by the Oshima family how the static Noh mask can be used to convey different emotions by just tilting it. I would be insincere if I said that 'Noh' did not have a slightly soporific effect on the body – sending one (and some of the performers) into a mild state of meditation. I had heard some Japanese people describe 'Noh' as boring, but that is not my experience. The more I learnt about 'Noh' the more I began to appreciate this wonderful art form and the tremendous discipline and expressive ability needed to perform 'Noh'.

I was so impressed with what I had learnt in Fukuyama and Hiroshima that I decided to follow up my newfound interest. Teruhisa Oshima, the only son of Masanobu and Yasuko Ohsima, lives in Tokyo and finding that we had more days to spend in Tokyo than previously planned, I decided make contact with him and his wife, Suzuko. I asked if he was performing in Tokyo while we were there, but unfortunately he was not. I said that I was interested to meet him again and to find out more about 'Noh'. He very kindly agreed to meet us and brought a good friend who spoke excellent English and was herself a Noh musician. She

plays the flute. To my surprise Teruhisa brought a mask with him that he described as a 'new' mask because it was only 40 years old! He showed me how a performer creates different expressions by the way he tilts the mask, and then invited me to try it on. It was only when he placed the mask over my face that I realised how little one can see and therefore how difficult it must be to perform with a mask. Add to this, the excruciating posture needed to be maintained for long periods during a performance, and it became clear just how dedicated one has to be to perform 'Noh', and why one has to start so young (all the Oshima children started to practice Noh from a very young age, Kinue Oshima, for example, now aged 33, started when she was just two years old).

I am ever more intrigued by the art of Noh. I have learnt that there are five traditional schools of 'Noh', four descended from the early 'Noh' schools dating back to 1333, and one progressive school, Kita, dating from the early 17th century to which the Oshima family belong. In addition, there are other interesting 'Noh' developments, such as English 'Noh', which includes performances of both traditional 'Noh' stories and new material. Once I realised that the art of 'Noh' has developed beyond the 240 or so traditional plays I thought I would invite the Oshima family, and my new musician friend, to review a recent piece of my work to see if they thought it had the potential to be adapted into a 'Noh' style play. To my delight, Mrs Oshima expressed some interest in this challenge and I am now exploring whether this can be realised.

My work is called 'PAGODA', and if some time in the future you see it listed on the Oshima or some other schedule of Noh performances, may I take this opportunity to encourage you to go and see it. Not because it is my work, the development of which I regard as an amazing new challenge to my creative writing journey, but because I think it would be wonderful for you to be as inspired as I know I have been by the talent, beauty, and immaculate performance art of the Oshima family and other Noh professionals and amateurs in performing Noh.

Since my return to London my Japanese friends have introduced me to some English Noh pieces. While I was listening to these, I was impressed that, remarkably, not only had the performers captured the 'art of Noh', but also, as I could understand the libretto, I felt even more engaged with the dramatic qualities of the art form. But what a challenge this must be - I imagine it takes some considerable courage and vision to look beyond the wonderful repertoire of the traditional stories that exist to date, to search for new opportunities to perform, explore and develop the art of 'Noh'.

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