

***Sankei Shimbun*·“Star Performers”**
Teruhisa Oshima, 39, Kita School Noh Actor

1. “Hopeless little brother”: turning point at 18 Feb. 1, 2015

The Oshima family [Fukuyama City, Hiroshima Prefecture] line of Kita School Noh *shite* (lead performers) goes back to the late 19th Century. I’m the fifth generation. I started taking lessons from my grandfather [Hisami Oshima, Kita School Noh actor] before I can remember, so I don’t recall my first lesson or my first appearance on stage [at the age of 3]. The fact is I was put on our Noh stage [Kita School Oshima Noh Theater] before I knew it.



Thinking back, my grandfather was a passionate man. There was no discussion during lessons, and he was full of energy, which he expended feverishly, even on an unmotivated boy. While being swatted with a fan or bamboo stick, I parroted the *utai* (chant) and imitated the *shimai* (dance) until those skills became automatic. It was hard when my mother called me in for lessons while I was playing with my friends in the neighborhood after school and when I had to sit very still on the stage. I felt I wasn’t cut out for Noh. And my sister [Kinue Oshima, the only female actor in the Kita School], who is one year older, was outstanding. So everyone had this image of “the talented big sister and the hopeless little brother.” Although I didn’t dislike Noh, at the time I felt somehow resigned to the future that had been decided for me.

My attitude changed after I graduated from high school and went to Tokyo to study under Tetsuo Shiozu [*shite* in the Kita School]. At the age of 18 I was getting instruction from someone else for the first time, and I was afraid that if I didn’t keep up I’d be left behind. Until then my family had covered for me, but I realized that I was going to have to take responsibility for myself. After that I started seriously applying myself to Noh.

Photos by Seiji Nomura

2. “Other dimension” discovered through mask Feb. 8, 2015

Wearing a mask for the first time is an important milestone for Noh actors. It marks the progression from a *kokata* (child actor) to a full-fledged Noh actor. I was 15 or 16 at the time, but that’s when I first learned of the “other dimension” of Noh. Although you’re standing in the middle of the stage in front of the audience, by wearing a mask you’re forced to confront yourself. You feel like you’re in a very closely confined world, and your feelings steadily turn inward. That made it easier for me to put Zeami’s *riken* (viewing oneself objectively) to use. Learning of this feeling by wearing a mask for the first time was a major discovery.



As I mentioned last time, I moved to Tokyo to go to college, but by leaving home I realized what a favorable environment for a Noh actor I’d been raised in. Our home in the city of Fukuyama in Hiroshima Prefecture has had a rehearsal hall since the time I was born, and there was an actual stage on the second floor [Kita School Oshima Noh Theater]. The current theater is the third. The first one was built by my great-grandfather [Hisatarō Oshima, Kita School Noh actor], but it was destroyed by fire during the war. In 1948 my grandfather [Hisami] rebuilt it. Then in 1972 he built the current theater. It’s a ferroconcrete building with a stage made entirely of cypress. My grandfather liked to say, “You need a castle to perform Noh.” With the support of a variety of people, he built his “castle,” providing a way for us to enter the world of Noh naturally. In retrospect, that is the power of tradition, and I developed a sense that people’s expectations would come to rest with me.

3. Unforgettable success of English-language Noh play Feb. 15, 2015



Beijing performance of English Noh play *Pagoda*
Teruhisa Oshima (left) and Jubilith Moore as a
traveler

Photo by Kazuhiro Inoue

As a Noh actor, in addition to the classical repertory I've also appeared in new works. Of those, *Pagoda*, an English-language Noh play that was first staged in three countries in Europe, was unforgettable. While on her way to sightsee in Miyajima, Jannette Cheong, a British playwright, came to see a performance at our theater [Kita School Oshima Noh Theater in Fukuyama City, Hiroshima Prefecture] and was very impressed. She said the performance was wonderful and that she had a script that she had been mulling over for years that she'd like to put on as a Noh play. We were struck by her enthusiasm, and, with the help of Richard Emmert, an American who studies Noh, we added choreography to her English-language script and turned it into a Noh play.

The story takes place in China in the 1960s during the Cultural Revolution and is based on Jannette's family. Her Chinese grandmother reluctantly put her son on a ship for England during a period of turmoil. This boy later became Jannette's father, but he never saw his mother again. In the play, the mother and son meet again in the afterlife. As the *shite* (lead actor) and *shitetsure* (the companion of the *shite*), my sister and I played the roles of Jannette's grandmother and father. The play was entirely in English, and it was difficult to pronounce sounds that don't exist in Japanese in a way that sounded like *utai*. My sister, who had a lot of lines, had a rough time. But the reaction to this universal story of a family was very positive in England and France. The success of the performances in Europe led to performances in Japan and China in 2011.

4. Lifetime of repeated trial and error

Feb. 22, 2015



At our Kita School Oshima Noh Theater we are also working to popularize Noh. My sisters and others give lessons at elementary, junior high and high schools in Okayama and Hiroshima prefectures. The students practice for one year and then put on a performance dressed in kimono. We have kimono, obi and *hakama* in all sizes – enough for about 100 people – at home. Every time I go home my mother is making *hakama*. Traditional Japanese culture has finally been incorporated into education in Japan, so our entire family is working to pass Noh on to the next generation. We also give numerous talks and workshops on Noh. Until now we relied on the support of our students, but the survival of Noh, which in a sense suffers from “Galapagos syndrome,” is threatened. How to promote Noh without sacrificing the elements that are important to it is a big challenge.

In Noh, performers in their 40s and 50s are mere fledglings. In the past, I thought more experienced performers were striving for an ideal art. But I've come to understand that the better the performer, the more they've faltered. Even living national treasures have to contend with their physical decline and work to stay fit. I realized that this repeated trial and error is an extremely important element of Noh. There are no right answers in the world of Noh, so I will continue to apply myself throughout my life.

Photo by Seiji Nomura

translated by Nancy H. Ross