Spring 2017

Ballet Review

From the Spring 2017 issue of *Ballet Review*

Karen Greenspan on noh at Lincoln Center

Ballet Review 45.1
Spring 2017

Editor and Designer:
Marvin Hoshino

Managing Editor:
Roberta Hellman

Senior Editor:
Don Daniels

Associate Editors:
Joel Lobenthal
Larry Kaplan
Alice Helpern

Webmaster:
David S. Weiss

Copy Editor:
Naomi Mindlin

Photographers:
Tom Brazil
Costas

Associates:
Peter Anastos
Robert Greskovic
George Jackson
Elizabeth Kendall
Paul Parish
Nancy Reynolds
James Sutton
David Vaughan
Edward Willinger
Sarah C. Woodcock

Cover photograph by Julien Benhamou, Paris Opera Ballet: Léonore Baulac and Mathias Heymann in Rudolf Nureyev's *Romeo and Juliet*.

Of Mortals and Spirits

Karen Greenspan

An old man places a mask on his face and transforms into a deity. A Buddhist priest faces off with a possessing demon in a battle for a dying woman's soul. A fisherman finds a feather robe that a celestial maiden claims is her transport to heaven. Four magical lions, dispelling ignorance, anger, and hatred, dance on a bridge. This is a glimpse into the domain of the spirits that visited the Lincoln Center Festival during the week of performances given by the Kanze Noh Theatre of Tokyo. The five classics and two kyogen (comedic form) plays afforded audiences a journey into the 700-year-old ritualized blend of music, poetry, drama, and dance that is called "noh."

Every aspect of this performance genre adheres to strictly prescribed conventions – the structure of the stage, the composition and stage placement of the orchestra and chorus, the types of acting roles, the entrances and exits, the use of masks and costume, the spare vocabulary of dance movement and floor patterns, the selection of props, the pacing. Everything. These traditions have been practiced and transmitted from master to disciple in family lineages for centuries and are still maintained through five main schools: Kanze, Komparu, Kongo, Hosho, and Kita.

The star performer of Kanze Noh Theatre is Kanze Kiyokazu, the twenty-sixth Grand Master of the Kanze School and designated as "Important Intangible Cultural Property" by the Japanese government. His son and chosen successor, Kanze Saburota, performed alongside him in some of the performances. They are the hereditary descendants of the Kanze School, which claims the closest descent in bloodline from the forefathers of noh, Kanze Kanami (1333-1384) and his son Kanze Zeami (1363-1443).

Although the noh schools aspire to preserve their performance traditions unchanged, the noh genre is the very synthesis of change, having evolved and coalesced over centuries from many forms of Japanese danced ritual and local as well as foreign-influenced entertainment. According to the *Kojiki* (*Record of Ancient Matters* compiled in 712 C.E.), the world was danced into being by a goddess who performed a divine dance that coaxed the life-giving sun goddess, Amaterasu Omikami, out of the Heavenly Cave in which she was hiding. This original divine dance is the prototype of all Japanese Shinto rituals and performing arts. Through dance, the Japanese summon and entertain the gods. Through dance, the deities manifest themselves on earth, bestow blessings on the people, and share their divine energy. And dance is the foundation underlying noh.

Throughout Japan, Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples stand side by side addressing the spiritual needs of the people: Shinto rituals and festivals for the cycles of life and agriculture; Buddhism, for death and salvation. During the fourteenth century, in Nara, the imperial capital at that time, the sacred sites and cyclical rituals were sustained under the patronage and protection of the ruling military dictator, the shogun. Influenced by new dance styles filtering in from China and Korea and the Shinto rituals in which they participated, Kanami and his troupe of *sarugaku* (popular entertainment including Chinese acrobatics and pantomime) entertainers synthesized a new form of danced theater for their regular performances at the ceremonial scene at Nara.

The Muromachi shogun Ashikaga Yoshimitsu singled out Kanami's son Zeami at an early age as an exceptional performer. This recognition and relationship gave Zeami access to the finest education, exposure, influence, and support, which helped him to refine his artistic skill. Zeami went on to formalize and codify the noh system and the underlying philosophy and theory of performance that have been handed down intact to the current generation. The noh repertory continued to be

enlarged to a canon of approximately 240 plays, becoming the established aesthetic of the court even as the various shogunates arose and fell.

It is at the intersection of Shinto ritual; Zen Buddhism's beliefs, practices, and myths; and the regimented discipline of the samurai code of conduct that noh came into being. The Lincoln Center Festival programs offered sterling examples of this and allowed for a transportive experience to a faraway world.

A special noh stage was constructed for the occasion over the stage at Lincoln Center's Rose Theater. In accordance with specific noh design conventions, the stage was made of Japanese cypress, which is also used in the construction of Shinto shrines. One immediately noticed the *hashigakari* – a long bridgeway, used for the actors' entrances and exits, from the sacred mirror room (where the actors put on and remove their masks) to the main stage; the main stage that extends into the audience; and the pine tree – a symbol of longevity and felicitation, the eternal noh backdrop – painted on the back wall of the main stage.

Kanze Noh Theatre opened its week of performances with *Okina*, which is actually not a noh play, but rather a Shinto rite, performed by three dancers, to bestow peace and prosperity across the land. It frequently opens a noh program. This Shinto rite is still performed at the annual Kasuga Shrine (Shinto) and Kofuku Temple (Buddhist) dedication in Nara to invite and entertain the gods. Shinto places great importance on purification (restoring the body and mind to the innate pure and divine state), and therefore, Grand Master Kiyokazu explained at the lecture-demonstration presented by Japan Society prior to the festival performances, the performers would take part in special purification rituals in their hotel that night.

For *Okina* there is also a mirror room ritual during which the performers sip sake, eat grains of uncooked rice, and toss salt on themselves. (This is also performed by sumo wrestlers in the ring prior to a match.) Just before the performers entered, a stage assistant momentarily came out, struck pieces of flint together generating a few sparks to purify the stage, and then receded behind the curtain.

In complete silence, with the mask bearer carrying his black box, Okina (a venerable old man), Senzai (his companion), and Sanbaso (Okina's earthy counterpart) processioned onto the stage in the classic noh sliding-foot walk. Wearing the white, divided-toe socks called "tabi," the performers glided along the bridgeway – torsos pitched slightly forward like Giacometti walking figures. The controlled, slow-tempoed, and long-repeated execution of this walking step – in which the actors slide the whole foot forward, dorsiflex while maintaining heel contact with the floor, then lower the foot and toes while the back foot begins sliding forward – immediately established a ceremonial pace and contemplative mind-set, focusing our attention on the extreme economy of movement. The instrumentalists, chorus, and stage assistants entered along the bridgeway following the actors. They took their places, seated onstage, and the flutist began playing.

The actors in *Okina* wear formal ritual attire as opposed to the usual costumes. Okina was played by the Kanze Grand Master himself, wearing the black, strapped-on hat of a Shinto priest. Senzai, Okina's escort, was played by the Kanze Master's son Saburota.

With the full, grand accompaniment of the chorus, Okina sings his song, a prayer that (according to the program notes) contains "mysterious lines whose meaning has been lost." Senzai moves to center stage to perform his danced prayer, chanting loudly to the energetic beat of the drums. He repeatedly whips his sleeves around, points his fan to set a new direction, and follows it with his footsteps.

While all eyes are trained on Senzai, stomping his feet and flourishing a powerful arm overhead, Okina kneels off to the side and puts on his mask. With this action, Okina becomes the deity that is believed to inhabit the mask. The fact that the performers don their masks onstage in full view of the audience is a distinctive feature of *Okina*.

Okina. (Photo: Stephanie Berger, Lincoln Center Festival)

Senzai returns to his previous place, kneels, and remains perfectly still in a half-bowing posture for the entire performance of Okina's ancient dance-prayer. Wearing the white, old-man, Okina mask; his arms outstretched sideward holding an open fan in one hand; Okina sings a prayer. The song merges into a slow, stately movement formula danced in three directions. He elegantly circles one arm and then the other, bows forward, and uprights himself as he opens his arms wide – exuding benediction. At times one detects the slightest tremor of his fan as the Kanze Master extends it forward, holding it open and horizontal, like an offering. This is an intentional movement called "tremble the fan." It is a pointed example of noh's emphasis on using spiritual energy to fill a simple, understated gesture, as opposed to relying on abundant and flourishy movement.

Okina concludes his dance with a dramatic sweep of one sleeve above his head while he draws his open fan across his face. He repeats a theme of three stomps that seem to seal the blessing and walks back to the black box where he kneels and removes his mask – all to intense drum accompaniment. Afterward, Okina stands and turns toward the audience maskless – again a mere mortal. He lifts one arm, then the other, and sinks to the floor in a bow, touching his forehead to the floor. As Okina stands up and turns to exit, Senzai comes to life and shadows him as they slowly walk the diagonal upstage to the bridgeway and exit to the drummers' ceremonial beat.

The drum tempo picks up for Sanbaso's contrastingly energetic movements characterized by a rhythmic stomping sequence. Sanbaso is traditionally a kyogen actor's role, and he delivers a rustic, earthy blessing. The musical

Sumida-Gawa. (Photo: Stephanie Berger, LCF)

accompaniment contributes to the driving vitality of his dance, which employs the high-pitched flute together with the drums – punctuated by the drummers' calls (syllables shouted by the drummers, to cue timing, drive the rhythm, and coordinate with all of the performers – before hitting the drum).

The dance builds to a dramatic jump in which Sanbaso hikes both knees up in the air. He then walks upstage and kneels while a stagehand fastens a black, old-man mask on the actor and hands him a golden bell tree (cluster of large jingle bells with a handle). The bell tree is one of the typical Shinto props used for ritual dances. Sanbaso launches into a song and dance in which he repeatedly shakes the bell tree toward the ground while stomping in a mimed sequence of planting. The dance and drumming speed up until Sanbaso kneels down and removes his mask. He exits the stage followed by the mask bearer and the other performers.

The Lincoln Center audience seemed both curious about and mystified by this completely plotless ritual piece. Perhaps that is because in the West, we are not accustomed to dancing our prayers, nor do most of us associate planting and dependence on positive natural conditions with putting food on the table.

With *Hagoromo*, we were introduced to a traditional "woman play" with recognizable dramatic elements like conflict and transformation. A "woman play" is one of the five categories of noh. These are determined by the role of the main actor (the *shite*). In a "woman play," since all noh actors are male, female roles are defined by costume, mask, posture (stance), and movement.

Based on a folk tale, the drama opens with a simple fisherman who comes upon a beautiful feather robe draped over a pine tree. No sooner does he decide to bring the found treasure home, than Hagoromo, a celestial maiden, calls to him and claims that it belongs to her. Hagoromo enters the stage wearing a stunning kimono – minus the robe. Her white mask is that of a young woman. Most exquisite is the celestial crown she wears, studded with dangling golden charms. She maintains that she must have the robe back in order to return to heaven. They argue back and forth in a sung dueling duet. The charms dangling from Hagoromo's headdress perform a dance of their own, trembling as she sings – giving a sense of her desperation.

The fisherman negotiates that he will return the robe in exchange for seeing her perform a celestial dance. It is Hagoromo's dance that is the centerpiece of the play. Once attired in the exquisite cream-colored opaque silk robe, hand-painted with pastel-colored wisteria fronds, Hagoromo faces the audience and walks downstage. She performs a blessing dance in which she manipulates her open fan in gestures of offering, bestowing heavenly treasures upon mankind. Then she glides to the bridgeway and dances her exit to heaven.

Hagoromo's movement was so minimal that it looked like the dance of a floating robe. And that is exactly what it was supposed to be – as the lyrics of the final song describe, "the celestial maiden whose feather robe flutters in the coastal wind . . . soars above the peaks of Mount Ashitaka and Fuji, ultimately vanishing into the hazy spring sky."

Sumida-Gawa gave a taste of another category of noh play – a tragic "madwoman drama." While offstage, the flute and drums played a haunting overture and set an ominous tone. Kanze Kiyokazu played the bereft mother, on the verge of madness, who arrives at a ferry dock wanting to cross the Sumida River in search of her lost child. She wears a distinctive, black, round, woven sedge hat, and carries a bamboo branch that symbolizes insanity – both used to dramatic effect when she throws each to the floor at separate occasions.

While the mother and the other traveler are seated in the boat crossing the river, the boatman sings a tragic tale of how a year ago slave traders kidnapped a young boy from the capital and brought him this great distance. Here, the child fell ill and died in a state of abandonment. The woman slowly moves her hand toward her masked face in a patent gesture of grief as she realizes that the boatman has revealed the fate of her own lost son. While sitting on her knees in the imaginary ferryboat, she pivots, almost imperceptibly, to inquire if any family had come for his dead body. When the boatman replies "No," she throws her hat down and brings both hands toward her face in a reprise of the crying gesture.

The boatman offers to take her to the grave, represented by a gray mound in the center of the stage. The mother kneels and sings her lament. She believes she hears her son chanting, and indeed, we hear a high-pitched voice scratching out a song. The burial mound shakes until finally a white-robed, white-wigged child ghost emerges from behind it.

A pity-evoking sequence ensues in which the mother repeatedly runs across the stage to embrace her son, only to fold her arms around nothing as the ghost slips away from her grasp. In the final wrenching moments, she falls loudly onto one knee, embraces the willow tree that marks his grave, and slides to the floor hugging it as the flute music closes the grief-filled scene. The gestures are few, but oh, so potent.

Busshi (*The Fake Sculptor*) provided comic relief with its simple kyogen brand of humor. A country bumpkin heads off to the big city to purchase a Buddha statue for the newly built village temple. In a cartoonish representation of his journey, the peasant walks a large circle around the stage shouting out for a statue maker. A con man in the city immediately seizes on the peasant's gullibility and convinces him that he can fill the order. They agree upon a pick-up time the next day. The con man frequently confides in the audience so that the

humor and tension builds as we are in on the con. The piece reaches its climax when the peasant comes to collect the statue and the con man races back and forth between portraying the statue (wearing a mask) and portraying the sculptor (unmasked). The peasant is repeatedly unsatisfied with the sculpture's hand gesture, which the con man keeps trying to correct. The con man's role switching quickens to an impossible pace – until finally, he is caught in his ruse. Chock-full of Buddhism, mime, simplicity, and slapstick, the performance was a gem.

With *Shakkyo* (*The Stone Bridge*), Kanze Noh delivered an energetic, otherworldly dance piece. The original noh play tells the story of a monk who is traveling on a pilgrimage through China and comes upon a stone bridge that spans a deep gorge. A young boy appears and tells him that on the other side of the bridge is the Buddhist Pure Land of Manjushri (Deity of Wisdom); and if he is patient, he might behold a miracle. The unusual wonder takes the form of a magical, acrobatic dance of lions – messengers from Manjushri.

The abridged version performed by Kanze Noh eliminated most of the play and offered an enhanced dance piece with four lions – one wearing the signature crazy white wig and three in similar-looking red wigs. (There are other variants of the piece that cast only one or two lions.) Their kimonos looked grand and bore designs in silver, gold, red, and black on a shimmering white satin background. The lion masks had a ferocious, demonic visage. However, their golden complexion, signifying righteousness, distinguished them from the usual malevolent demon masks.

While the pilgrim waits patiently at one side of the bridge (represented by a downstage platform that spanned the width of the stage) the white lion (the actual messenger of Manjushri) enters the stage and climbs up on the bridge. The three red lions follow along the entrance bridgeway – two lions positioned on the bridgeway and two on the downstage platform – performing unusual head twitches in a martial-looking dance that fills the stage with electric energy. In a wide plié stance with arms extended to the sides, they flick their wigged heads left, right, back, and forward in a movement theme that they repeat like a magical mantra.

The action continues to build, climaxing with an athletic twirl jump landing loudly on their knees. Then, ending in typical no-nonsense noh fashion, the lions exit along the bridgeway, followed by the monk, and finally the stagehands and musicians.

With sequences of quick gliding steps in a circle formation, martial stomps, plyometric jumps onto the bridge platform, and a dramatic action freeze save for the eerie head twitches, the piece was a dynamic contrast to the other noh pieces presented.

Aoi no Ue (*The Lady Aoi*) is a tale of good versus evil in purely Japanese terms. Based on an episode from the eleventh-century classic *Tale of Genji*, the drama unfolds as Prince Genji's young pregnant wife Lady Aoi lays dying, afflicted by the spirit of one of her husband's spurned lovers. A Shinto priestess summons the possessing spirit – Lady Rokujo, who is consumed with jealous rage because of Aoi's favored position with Genji. In spite of what the title suggests, the play revolves around Rokujo – not Aoi – and Kanze Kiyokazu played the formidable lead role.

Lady Rokujo enters and kneels beside Lady Aoi, represented with distilled simplicity by a red kimono laid flat on the front of the stage. Rokujo's sorrowful song and gestures evoke sympathy at first. But her jealousy grows vengeful as she points her half-open trembling fan at her helpless foe. Her emotions build as she walks away, then turns toward Aoi and dances with her trembling red fan, stamps her fury, throws her fan at her victim, and leaves the stage.

As the stakes have been raised, a *yamabushi* (mountain priest), clad in the robes and distinctive, little, black hat of a Shugendo (ascetic mystical sect) practitioner, is brought in to exorcise the menacing spirit. Lady Rokujo's spirit walks onstage, a white cloth covering her face. She removes the veil to reveal her

Shakkyo. (Photo: Kanze Noh, LCF)

transformation into a malevolent demon dramatized to full effect by the *Hannya*, or ogre, mask she wears. In a spiritual standoff, the two battle for the dying lady's soul – each wielding their weapon of choice. The she-demon attacks with her wooden mallet; the priest fervently rubs his wooden rosary beads while chanting mantra. Interestingly, even the back-and-forth floor pattern dramatizing this man-versus-spirit clash is a prescribed convention used for "exorcism scenes." The sound of the flute and drums, along with the clatter of the beads rubbed in prayer, amplify the conflict until the priest's incantation finally overcomes the crazed spirit and saves Lady Aoi from death and Lady Rokujo from her anger.

Every aspect of noh drama is an ideal expression of the distinctive Japanese culture in which it was incubated. And it was offered to us with big-hearted spirit by the artists of Kanze Noh Theatre, who maintain it as it was conceived some 700 years ago with samurai discipline and render it with nuanced humanity.

Give *Ballet Review* as a Gift

and we'll send the BR signature card – with a beautiful drawing by Edward Gorey – to the recipient in your name. Please be sure to include your own complete address when ordering.

To send several gift subscriptions please list the names on a separate sheet of paper.

For credit card orders, use our fax number: 347-713-7737.

Individual Subscriptions

☐ Yes. Please begin my personal subscription to *Ballet Review* for one year for $29.

☐ I would like to subscribe to *Ballet Review* for two years for only $51 – a 12% savings.

☐ Check, payable to *Ballet Review.*

☐ Visa ☐ MasterCard

Credit Card Number

Exp. Date Signature

☐ Foreign Postage. Please add $14 per year (Two years: $28), payment in dollars drawn on a U. S. bank.

☐ Overseas Airmail. Please add $23 per year. (Two years: $46.)

☐ I would like to send a personal **gift subscription** for ☐1 year or ☐2 years to:

Gift Recipient's Name

Address

Institutional Subscriptions

☐ Please enter a 1-year subscription at the institutional rate of $52.

☐ Please enter a 2-year subscription at the institutional rate of $87.

☐ Enclosed is our check.

☐ Please invoice us.

☐ Foreign Postage. Add $14 per year, or $23 per year for airmail; remit in dollars drawn on a U. S. bank.

Ballet Review Subscriptions
100 Hudson Street – #6B
New York, NY 10013, USA
or subscribe by fax or online at balletreview.com

My Name

(Organization)

Street Address

City State Zip Code

(Country)

(Telephone) (Fax Number)

Subscribe online at www.balletreview.com