

Emma Tei

Mr. Greco

English 3H

28 April 2020

Cultural Preservation and Noh

The first time Hikaru visited the Noh theatre in his early ages, the bright colors of the kimono sleeves swinging and filling his eyes as the masked performer's stomps synchronized with the rhythms and the tempos of the Japanese instruments completely captivated him.

Hikaru Morishita, my uncle and a professional Noh performer and teacher, also was influenced by the beauty of the ancient Japanese theatrical art when he was a child. Hikaru Morishita was born in Nagoya, Japan on February 13, 1977. His relatives had a variety of connections with people involved in Japanese arts, and he often visited Noh plays in his childhood. His great uncle, Housui Yamamoto, was a famous Japanese oil paint artist who co-established the Tokyo University of Arts, and Hikaru Morishita was first inspired by this figure to become an artist. However, after high school, he decided to serve his apprenticeship to practice Noh performance under the Housho-Style Noh performer that he and his relatives were familiar with. Later on, he became a Noh Shite (main) Performer and has performed in many famous Noh plays including Ukai, Takasago, Makura jidō, Ataka, arashiyama, shun'nichiryū, etc. Noh apprenticeship does not have an age limit, but my uncle started his training and studying at a very young age. Soon, he became known for his skilled performance and passionate demeanor as a Noh teacher in contrast to his young age. Passionate about his profession, he explains, "Noh is not only a culture by itself, but formed in harmony with other Japanese cultures

and customs that existed long before technology nor advancements made today existed”(1). He continued to explain how significant Noh is for preserving Japanese culture because Noh in a way creates a world that existed long time ago for the audience in the current days to see. He shared how Noh plays inspired him to become a performer. He mentioned, “While Noh is a theatrical art, it is also a music, a ceremony, a religious ritual, a gathering. The fact that the culture that people preserved 600 years ago is still intact is appealing to me”(1).

As numerous developments and improvements in the current days make living more fast paced, the amount of time people spend to face traditional arts is decreasing. This modern society has affected people in a way that limits their imagination and sensitivity to certain values. It has become a challenge to spread familiarity and preservation of Noh in Japan. The challenges that Japanese cultural preservation faces today not only applies to Noh, but traditional arts in general. What only adds to this challenge is the rising number of mistreatments caused by the increased foreign recognition.

Originally, Noh was practiced by a performing arts group under the Kasuga-Taisha Temple in Nara, Japan (a Shinto-buddha shrine) about 500 to 600 years ago. Originally, Noh was introduced to Japan by China about 1300 years ago. As the Japanese got more familiar with this influence, people started to call these plays Sarugaku in the beginning. Then, as time passed by, Sarugaku developed into a formal comedical theatrical art called Kyogen, which still exists today. Later, an artist named Zeami begins to add elements such as the distinctive rhythms and rhymes along with the tragic story scripts, forming a new theatrical art called Noh. Noh was originally performed for religious events specifically in front of emperors, lords, and war generals, but as time passed, Noh became available for the common citizens. However, every other aspect and elements of Noh is preserved the way it was by Noh lovers and Noh performers, including my uncle today.

Common responses from the audience the Hikaru Morishita said he receives, includes “What does this even mean?” or “I am not sure how to respond” or simply “What is this?”. However, Morishita describes that these responses are normal, and should not let people feel embarrassed nor hesitant to watch Noh. He mentioned that “Watching Noh as a play, I think, is very difficult. The words are hard to catch and interpret, and if you don't have the prerequisite knowledge, you may not even know who the characters are. To enjoy and understand Noh as a play, it may require a little bit of studying beforehand. Noh is known to be the world’s oldest theatrical art, so it is a challenge to watch it as a play. At first, I would recommend watching Noh similarly to watching something like an abstract or contemporary dance.”(1). On the surface, Noh is very unique and like the interviewee said, hard to understand. Noh involves rhythms and intonations that are not found in any other Japanese theatrical arts, and it also references stories, figures, and languages that are far different from modern cultures. However, it is important to first understand that there really is no right way to view Noh or any other cultures and traditions, as long as you are willing to face and take in its uniqueness. As I researched about the preservation of cultures, I discovered that many people think that the lack of knowledge when interacting with those cultures leads to mistreatment. However, naivety is different from mistreatment of cultures, and ideally, people should not hesitate to expose themselves to new cultures, which in this case may be Noh.

Furthermore, Hikaru Morishita shared his personal experience as a Noh performer. He stated, “When I dance and sing Noh, I feel that I am being separated from myself. It is similar to the mental state when doing a Buddhist meditation such as Zazen”(1). Although Noh was and still is performed as a religious ritual that involves a more spiritual world rather than the common world, Noh also evokes certain humanly emotions that depict reality and life during a tragedy, for instance, grief, deceit, and love. When the interviewee talked about how he feels separated from himself, this represents the key factor of Noh, where the tones and costumes, as well as the masks that the main characters always wear helps the performer become something that are not human, whether it is a demon or a ghost. In Japanese, this is described as “ Menn wo kakeru”(1) or ‘hang a face’ to bring down a spiritual power.

Not only as a Shite(main performer) but as a Hayashi-date(instrumentalist), Hikaru Morishita pointed out the unique balance between Noh lines and the music. He described that “There are only four types of traditional Japanese instruments used in Noh, which are; Japanese flute called the Noukan, a small Japanese drum that makes the soft sounds, a large Japanese drum which makes high, sharp pitched sounds, and a drum that is used as it rests on the floor”(1). As he described of his experience as a Hayashi-date, I began to notice that the noises and tempos that the Hayashi-date creates are far different from a typical ‘music’ but a tool used to sometimes contrast the emotions and dances of Noh, and other times strengthen certain emotions and characters. Hideo Kanze, a famous Noh performer once said, “ Noh is the accel and brake”(3). This comparison not only represents how the unique sounds and intonations, as well as the complexity of the emotions in Noh is created, but also reflects the origin of Noh, which Zvika Serper mentions in his journal *Japanese Noh and Kyōgen Plays: Staging Dichotomy*, ”This harmony of contrasts, which I consider as one of the most important concepts of the traditional Japanese theater, originated in Chinese philosophy, which teaches that change is the main factor in cosmic existence. This notion of change taking place between two poles led to the concept that seeks to fuse contradictory elements into a unified harmony”(6).

I wanted to share this interview with the audience as the interviewee expressed his concerns about how Noh will be consumed by a broader category of people in the future, especially when this formal and ritual theatrical art is usually not openly available for all. It can be said that many Japanese people has never actually seen Noh plays before, and as recent events such as the Setouchi Triennale Art Festivals and Tokyo Olympic(that was supposed to be held

this year), brought an increased attention towards Japanese cultures and arts from foreign countries, I hope that this will serve as an introduction to what Noh is and what it can be.

Hikaru Morishita later mentioned that his favorite play among all that he's ever performed was Takasago, which evokes the greatness of long life through the shared lives of the two main characters. He shares that he still "continues to discover something new every time" he plays the role.

Author's note: This interview gave me the opportunity to relearn and rediscover some of the Japanese cultures that I grew up with but was separated from as I moved to the U.S. It was interesting to hear some of the concerns that Japanese culture faces directly from the mouth of a person specializing in Noh, and I wish to convey that anyone can enjoy traditional art if they have the opportunity to do so.

Reflection:

I think that because Noh is a very specific topic, there are some parts in my documentary where I should explain further in detail so my point will be more clear, and I also definitely need to add more details and personal information about the interviewee. There are some grammatical errors and sentences that should be simplified so the overall paragraphs are more clear, but the amount of information in the documentary I think is enough.

MLA list:

- 1) Morishita, Hikaru. Personal interview. 31, March 2020.
- 2) Munakata, Kuniyoshi, and Jeffrey Kahan. "Noh Shakespeare: An Interview with Kuniyoshi Munakata." *Shakespeare Bulletin*, vol. 14, no. 1, 1996, pp. 26–28. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/26352980. Accessed 24 Apr. 2020.
- 3) Hideo, Kanze. "Noh: Business and Art. An Interview with Kanze Hideo." *The Drama Review: TDR*, vol. 15, no. 2, 1971, pp. 185–192. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/1144637. Accessed 24 Apr. 2020.
- 4) Goff, Janet E. "The National Noh Theater." *Monumenta Nipponica*, vol. 39, no. 4, 1984, pp. 445–452. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/2384576. Accessed 24 Apr. 2020.
- 5) TAMBA, AKIRA. "The Music of the Noh." *The World of Music*, vol. 17, no. 3, 1975, pp. 3–12. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/43620001. Accessed 24 Apr. 2020.
- 6) Serper, Zvika. "Japanese Noh and Kyōgen Plays: Staging Dichotomy." *Comparative Drama*, vol. 39, no. 3/4, 2005, pp. 307–360. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/41154287. Accessed 24 Apr. 2020.
- 7) Rath, Eric C. "Legends, Secrets, and Authority: Hachijō Kadosho and Early Modern Noh." *Monumenta Nipponica*, vol. 54, no. 2, 1999, pp. 169–194. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/2668341. Accessed 24 Apr. 2020.

8)Denney, Joyce. “Luxury and Propriety: Edo-Period Noh Costumes and Samurai Women's Garments in the Detroit Institute of Arts.” *Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Arts*, vol. 88, no. 1/4, 2014, pp. 114–127. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/43493632. Accessed 24 Apr. 2020.

9)Pilgrim, Richard B. “The Japanese Noh Drama in Ritual Perspective.” *The Eastern Buddhist*, vol. 22, no. 1, 1989, pp. 54–70. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/44361846. Accessed 24 Apr. 2020.

10)Fukuhara, Kazuto. “若者能.” 第15回若者能, 2007, wakamononoh.jp/03/desire.html.

西野 春雄. 能を支える人びと：西野春雄, CaliberCast, 2020, www.the-noh.com/jp/people/sasaeru/002_haruonishino.html.

11)ワゴコロ編集者 ". “能に流派はあるの？能の流派をわかりやすく解説！.” ワゴコロ, 株式会社ヒトノテ, 2017, wa-gokoro.jp/traditional-performing/Noh-Kyogen/497/.

12)Suzuki, Toshio. *Kaze Ni Fukarete*. Chūō Kōron Shinsha, 2013.

