



Conventions of the Noh Play

A. The Five Types of Noh Plays:

1. The god play (Kami)—congratulatory piece praising the gods in a quiet, dignified tone.
2. The warrior play (Shura)—a slain warrior comes back as a ghost and relives his suffering
3. The woman play (Katsura)—an elegant, stylish woman is the protagonist
4. The mad woman (or madness) play/realistic play
5. The supernatural (or demon) play (Kiri)—a battle between a demon or other supernatural figure and a hero in which the demon is usually subdued.

B. The Order of Performance

1. Okina-Sanbaso—a ritual piece
2. The god play (Noh)
3. A Kyogen play
4. The warrior play (Noh)
5. A Kyogen play
6. The woman play (Noh)
7. A Kyogen play
8. The mad play (Noh)
9. A Kyogen play
10. The demon play

C. The Characters of a Noh Play

1. **Shite** (pronounced sh'tay)—the main character, the “doer” of the play
Maejite—(pronounced may-j'tay) the shite appears in the first part of the play as an ordinary person
Nochijite—(pronounced no-chee-j'tay) the shite disappears and then returns in the second part of the play in his true form as the ghost of famous person of long ago.
2. **Tsure**—(pronounced tsoo-ray) the companion of the shite
3. **Waki**—a secondary or “sideline” character, often a traveling priest, whose questioning of the main character is important in developing the story line
4. **Waki-tsure**—the companion of the waki
5. **Ai or Ai-kyogen**-- an interlude actor, often a local person, who gives further background to the waki, and thus to the audience, in order to understand the situation of the shite

Other Performers

1. **Jiutai**—a chorus, usually consisting of eight people, that sits at the side of the stage and functions to narrate the background and the story itself. It also sometimes describes the character's thoughts and emotions or even sings lines for the characters.

2. **Hayashi**-- instrumentalists who sit at the back of the stage. They consist of a flute (nohkan), an hourglass-shaped drum held at the shoulder (kotsuzumi), a slightly larger hourglass-shaped drum placed on the lap (okawa or otsuzumi), and a barrel-shaped drum placed on a small floor stand and played with two sticks (taiko). The rhythms and melody of these instruments follow highly prescribed systems.

D. The Structure of a Noh Play

1. **Jo**—the introduction. The chorus enters and seats itself on stage. The formal action begins with the entrance of the waki.
2. **Ha**—the development. The shite enters and introduces himself with a monologue. The waki begins a series of questions through which the shite begins to reveal some mysterious facet of his past or identity. At the end of this section, the shite usually exits the stage.
3. **Kyu**—the climax. The shite reappears and has been transformed into some truer manifestation of his nature. Through dance, the shite reenacts some truth about his past or reveals his transformed understanding.

E. Style of a Noh Play

1. Not a performance of realistic theatre; its movement is highly stylized and prescribed.
2. Relies heavily on exaggerated gestures, some of which have specific meaning, while others serve as an abstract aesthetic expression to convey the emotions of the main character.
3. In general, deliberateness, brevity, suppression and abstraction are important features of Noh movement.
4. All characters portraying women and old men wear masks as well as supernatural beings such as ghosts, deities, demons, and divine beasts. Only middle-aged male characters do not appear masked. In general, masks either have a neutral expression or portray a very strong emotion. Even in roles in which an actor does not wear a mask, the sense of a masked face is evident; the actor does not use his face for realistic expression but rather for mask-like expression.
5. Costumes in Noh are elaborately made and follow prescribed conventions as to their use. All characters, whether rich or poor, young or old, male or female, are all beautifully costumed, and the costume helps reveal the type of character being portrayed. The costuming process is complex. Rather than the actor putting on his own costume, two or three costumers are needed to sculpt the costume on the actor.