

Contemporary Tradition – Japanese Performance Genre Today

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National University of Singapore

Introduction

Traditional Japanese Performance Genre Today – an introductory note

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Traditional Japanese performance genre is one critical part of Japanese culture – publicity material of Japan is often presented with the colorful makeup of kabuki actors or the boisterous music of buyo dance, at times complete with vaguely familiar spoken lines that sound like the Japanese language one learns in Japanese language classes. In Japan, news media such as the NHK (the Japan Broadcasting Corporation) and major newspapers have regular programs and reports on news of the four major theatre genres: noh, kabuki, bunraku and kyogen. Outside of Japan, students and researchers interested in Japan learn about these theatrical forms in classrooms and libraries, or through multimedia. In educational institutions and theatre companies, we also see courses and repertoire related to a wide range of traditional Japanese performance genres.

The defining features of these traditional performance genres include the visual (attire, makeup, movement), the audio (music, instruments, language used) and sometimes the textual (play texts, musical scores, treatises) – all present an image of something unique and distinct from our present time. The most common implication of such an image is that, traditional performance is a representative of a historical past that encapsulates the cultural essence of the period from which it has originated, complete and undisturbed. When traditional performance is perceived in such a way, it would seem that to perpetuate and disseminate what this original cultural essence would be the inevitable approach when engaging with it. To do otherwise would be sacrilegious, as it would be a gesture to challenge an established belief.

But is traditional Japanese performance really simply a time-transcending cultural relic of the past? What does it represent other than cultural identity? Why is this important in our time? What else can traditional performance offer its global audience today? How do teachers and students, both within and

outside of Japan, integrate their own cultural, social, political or economical context with traditional performance? What kind of scholarly and practical work has been created, and how do these works relate to traditional performance?

As a student, then teacher and researcher of noh and subsequently other forms of traditional performance, these are questions that have been asked and discussed regularly. The conference “Contemporary Tradition – Japanese Performance Genre Today” is an attempt to address these issues by gathering together both scholars and practitioners to share their works and engage in dialogs. Amongst the conference participants, many are also scholar performers who have both researched on the performance genre and performed it. We aimed to illustrate the great diversity and potential of traditional Japanese performance in this conference.

The three-day conference (Oct 13 – 15, 2016) was organized with the Department of Japanese Studies, with support from the Japan Foundation, the Japan Creative Centre, and the Arts House. It was also held in celebration of the 50 years of diplomatic ties between Japan and Singapore, as well as the 35th anniversary of the Department of Japanese Studies.

There were four sessions in the first two days that were held on NUS campus. At the first three sessions, nine scholars and practitioners presented papers on their research and theatrical work on noh, kabuki, kyogen, gagaku, koto and Heikyoku. Day three of the conference was a lecture-performance conducted by Theatre Nohgaku. During the session, members of Theatre Nohgaku explained key components of noh and performed the English noh play *Blue Moon Over Memphis* as an illustration. The full-housed lecture took place at the Arts House, a multi-disciplinary arts venue in downtown Singapore.

More details of each session can be found on its individual page. Thank you for stopping by. I look forward to your comments and suggestions.

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