

Mediating Traditional Theatre : Technological Strategies for Interpreting Japanese Performing Arts

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メディアを通じたの伝統芸能 ——能狂言、歌舞伎、文楽の翻訳、解説の戦略——

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Mediating or Meddling?

How much explanation is desirable when experiencing a live performance? When the form is as conventionalized, and the language as distant from the contemporary idiom as Japanese traditional theatre, it seems that there has continually been a subsidiary market for auxiliary texts: illustrations, summaries, or modern-language translations. In the 21st century, wireless, internet, and projection technologies have enabled inexpensive advances to these various methods. The research here examines the strategies for mediating tradition in a range of traditional genres in Japan today, to encourage both domestic and international spectators to appreciate the ancient forms.

Mediating or Meddling?

舞台芸術を観る際どれぐらいの説明が適度なのか? 日本伝統芸能のように動きの決まった型が多く、セリフが現代語とかけ離れている場合、昔からずっと今まで補助的イラスト、あらずじ、現代語訳などを利用してはいたはずで。

21世紀からは、ワイレス、IT、撮影技術が伝統な道具から大きく進化してきました。当研究はこれが国内外の客の古典芸能への感性を高めるのに果たした役割、その様相について研究する。

The Problem : Diminishing Popularity and Accessibility

Scholars, journalists, and performers themselves of traditional theatrical arts in Japan warn of the increasing danger of dwindling audiences and calcified repertory (Interview with Takemoto Mikio in Salz, ed. 2016). Except for kabuki, which always seems able to adapt to ride high on the waves of current trends, there seems to be a real possibility of Japanese classical performing arts becoming extinguished at the beginning of the 21st century. Always supported by amateur students, noh and nihonbuyo have lost millions of students to hobbyists enjoying hula dance, ballet and other imported forms. Moreover, due to the effects of the weak economy, young amateur students and audiences are difficult to attract due to their shorter attention spans, and necessity of concentration for a long period in an age where television and game entertainment can be had at a finger's touch. However since the Edo period at least, perhaps the greatest obstacle to direct enjoyment of classical arts has been the increasingly distant Japanese language employed.

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Producers have long provided summaries of plays and helpful vocabulary hints in programs (pamphlets and pre-performance lectures). But technological advances have in the last decade permitted a widening variety of strategies for explication : pre-show lecture-demonstrations, projected titles, simultaneous interpretation, and even direct-transmission Wii-devices.

During this project I visited national theatres (Tokyo, Osaka) and other venues employing different strategies (Yamamoto Noh theatre, Kabuki-za) to attend performances, observe the technical challenges of such interpreting strategies and spectator viewing habits. I interviewed translators, administrators, and technicians on how they arrived, through trial and error, at the present systems, and interviewed performers as to how audience attention and spectator habits had changed through these technologies.

Despite the universal employment of such strategies for mediating traditional theatre at the national theatres, there has been little but journalistic essays concerning these mediating strategies in Japanese or English. I will draw upon recent studies on bilinguality and “side-texts” in theatrical performance (Lindsay, ed. 2006 ; Nornes, 2007 ; Carlson 2009 ; Baines et.al., ed 2011), to analyze the effectiveness of present systems and potential for future improvement.

Pre-History : Mediating Traditional Performances

Noh, kyogen and other medieval *geinô* were ostensibly viewed directly, in an unmediated fashion, from their earliest times. Although written in a complex meld of poetry and prose, the allusions to famous songs, and narrative sources in poetry, war ballads, or novels would have been well-known to cogniscenti, who could enjoy the authors’ recognition and subtle interweaving of themes and allusions. A list of program titles (noh, kyogen) or *banzuke* billboard (kabuki, bunraku) would be employed, but spectators were expected to fully concentrate on the stage, perhaps providing their own expert commentary and critique to neighbors.

The Edo period saw the rise of the publication of helpful summaries, many illustrated, and critical commentaries (Kimbrough, ed., 2011). There are many factors contributing to this new niche of “goods” in stage performance. The “classicization” of language began, as it froze into printed texts even while the spoken language evolved rapidly as Edo became the political center, while still reliant on religious (Kyoto) and economic (Osaka) centers for their authority. When the shogunate demanded all noh titles, costumes, properties, and playscripts be inventoried in the early 17th century, what had been variable family texts, and somewhat improvised kyogen, were organized into “schools” (*ryûgi* 流儀). Protected within the samurai class, noh and to a lesser extent kyogen became popular hobbies among aspirant townspersons. This study required “official” textbooks, approved by designated *iemoto* (家元, headmasters) of established schools.

The nascent publishing industry found a perennial hit in *utai-bon*, libretti for noh plays, which were read and practiced by many townspersons, emulating the official art of the samurai. The social intimacy of singing noh songs together was a popular pastime, one like chess or poetry circles which brought together strangers from many communities for a common pursuit. The publication of *utai-bon*, some with descriptions of costumes and footwork, for avid disciples, helped spread noh throughout the provinces, permitting

many local teachers to make a living through instructing elite and middle-class hobbyists.

Meanwhile printing techniques advanced to permit elaborate, color illustrations that served at least three purposes in mediating traditional performance for the masses: archival, pedagogical, and artistic. Highlights from famous scenes in plays, whether published on their own or within playscripts, were produced in all price ranges, sizes, and quality. Although the sense of perspective, viewing areas, and subsidiary characters were often vague or poorly drawn, the details of the costuming, properties, masks, and movements accord with how these plays are performed today. This leads scholars to believe that these print artists were themselves advanced practitioners or avid fans, obviously deeply connected to the worlds they depicted. The wealth of materials available served better than the ideal of the written text in conveying the actual performance, “kaleidoscopically mediated” (Adam Kern in Kimbrough, 2014, p.163)

Although some of these drawings are crudely drawn caricatures, meant for quick publishing in popular songbooks, others show the care of illustration and publishing (monthly subscriptions sets as with *Tsukioka Kôgyô*) that prove worthy as artistic objects on their own. The framing of performers in the print, their colorful costumes and striking poses, show evidence of a deep understanding of *noh* and *kyôgen*, also nourished by examples from Western portraiture, perspective and coloration.

The *E-iri Kyôgen* books contained fifty scripts from *kyôgen* plays, a long-running seller throughout the Meiji period. Four subsequent sets covered nearly the complete range of the extant repertoire. Although once believed to be actual family texts, it is now thought that these illustrated textbooks were amateur compilations from many sources, or perhaps even audience members copying down recollected dialogue. Each play is illustrated with a single illustration, a remarkably accurate depiction of the climactic moment of a play. Although eventually deemed by scholars as inaccurate pirated texts, these copiously illustrated booklets were continually reprinted throughout Meiji.

Since many of these illustrated manuals were maintained within actors’ homes as well, it is assumed that professionals employed them as well as outside amateurs to preserve, remember, and reconstruct traditions. Later, performers wishing to revive variant versions or plays referred to these images, thus recreating performances based upon illustrations that once documented their ancestors. The loop of stage to page to stage again both enabled the classical tradition to maintain itself, while also permitting actors to experiment, knowing that the tradition would not be lost if concrete repositories of orthodox versions were available.

Kabuki *Hyôbanki* Critiques

One might think that the popular kabuki, with its spectacle, dance-driven plots, and idiomatic, vernacular language would need few filters or supporting materials to be appreciated by its mostly urban spectators. Yet actor prints, serving as both promotion and souvenir, were published in all sorts of formats, quality, and price-ranges. The *hyôbanki*, originally a parody of ratings of prostitutes for erstwhile playboys, featured detailed descriptions and ratings of actors who had been hired for that year’s seasons at the major theatres. These “how to” and “what to look for” manuals, similar to sports preview magazines, became increasingly detailed and popular throughout the seventeen and eighteen centuries.

It was not necessary to actually go to the theatre to be a fan. The rise in literacy in the Meiji period, coupled with kabuki's growing popularity, led to illustrated published scripts, often with imaginative drawings, which were read as enjoyable stories unto themselves, separate from their stage productions that not all could afford or experience directly on a regular basis. Their proliferation, including fanciful illustrations that filled out the imagery only spoken about on stage, contributed to kabuki's growing fan-base, as readers enticed by the stories went to see the real plays enacted live (no doubt also to see blood dripping from the ceiling or a ritual disembowelment, as depicted in the illustrations). Just as there was a wide spectrum of performance venues for aspiring actors—Edo or regional, large and small, adult and child—there were many ways in which avid fans could “own” some part of the kabuki that they adored.

Freedom, Poverty, and Copyright

The impact of the Meiji Restoration on traditional arts cannot be overstated. Fluid and popular forms became systematized; regional variations disappeared with easing of travel restrictions and train travel; censored plays and designated playhouse areas were abolished, opening up closed forms to new publics eager for a night (or day) on the town. In addition to Asakusa operas and Takarazuka musicals, *kamishibai* and *benshi* films, a plethora of new theatre genres emerged in the early 20th century seeking new audiences. The now “old drama” of kabuki, and perennially anachronistic noh-kyogen, employed various strategies to entice and maintain audiences. Published scripts, memoirs (*geidan*) and even secret teachings (*hiden*), were fed by interest from the increasing amateur ranks (who might become professional through a complex licensing system in noh or nihonbuyo), and admitting female performers (for kabuki's dance component, nihonbuyo; for noh, from the 1930s) can all be viewed as mediations and elaborations of the art. Access to the main Way of the art became possible through many subsidiary paths in literature, art, history, and philosophy.

With the Meiji era, noh and kyogen performers found themselves without patronage, venues, and fans. With the dissolution of the shogunate that had supported them as their exclusive art for three hundred years, actors had to forge an independent living. On the other hand, kabuki emerged from restrictions imposed on it by the Confucianist shogunate, expanding its theatres and enlarging its repertory. Moving into new territories and spectatorships, new materials for understanding the basics were necessary for the newly democratic, modernizing masses.

For noh, kyogen, and many other elite arts, the power of the *iemoto* system outlived the shogunate bureaucracy that had instituted it. Without shogunal patronage, professionals turned to elite amateurs, teaching noh singing and dancing as a refined hobby. Noh *utaibon*, published today as it was for a hundred years, includes the copyrighted official text of a particular school. They increasingly included summaries of the plots, including significant *kogaki* (小書き) variations, as well as drawings of the standard costumes and properties. The scripts are libretti but meant for amateur students, showing the sesame-seed marks indicating the chanting rhythm and intonation. Dance and acting movements are indicated with shorthand names for *kata* (patterns), while small caricatures indicate what the stage picture looks like at any point in the lyrics. These libretti are for sale in the lobbies of larger noh theatres today, or in bound

books of hundreds containing just the lyrics, practice texts for the legions of loyal amateur students. Often during performances today one can see older patrons gazing carefully at their laps at their “hymnals” during performances, even marking in red the variants (or mistakes!) that they hear. Unconsciously, many hum or sing the words softly, even during professional performances, evidence of the somatic nature of noh, where 90% of spectators may be current or past disciples of performers. The weight of so many affiliated spectators make major changes in style or delivery difficult. The subsidiary material has become the tail wagging the dog.

Traditional genres and their actors were vital to the cinematic media since its early days. The first extant Japanese film is an 1899 documentation of a performance of the kabuki play *Momijigari*, projected as substitute for the ailing actor Onoe Kikugoro V and later shown following his death, and soon after by that of co-star Ichikawa Danjuro V in 1903. This tribute to individual performers was succeeded by numerous documents of plays in the first decades of the twentieth century. The noh play *Aoi no ue* was recorded in film in a precious film from 1935, with the premonition that this ancient art form could not survive long the vicissitudes of the new world of international military expansion and movie entertainment (it did). Yet it wasn't until after the war, when martial themes of noh and the patriotism that it cultivated were questioned by post-war democracy, that new materials encouraging artistic apprenticeship—including the first female professionals—in these arts truly began to grow.

Foreign Appreciation for Japanese “Classical” Traditions

As part of a campaign to secure the future of Japan's traditional arts as it entered the modernizing currents of global trade, politicians and performers actively sought out foreign tours and tourists, translated texts and wrote introductory manuals, encouraging non-Japanese to regard native classical arts as high-water marks of artistic excellence and proof of a refined civilization.

Translations and Introductions

A wealth of noh scholarship and translations were published in the early 20th century, including in English Ernest Fenollosa/Ezra Pound and Arthur Waley, and Noel Peri (French). However these were “armchair translators”, who had never visited Japan—Pound relied on notes of the late Fenollosa ; Waley included a letter from Oswald Sickert on the performance aspects. It was only in the 1930s that noh as performance began to be introduced.

Kabuki was introduced earlier in numerous articles in theatre specialist magazines, some based on witnessing the extended tours of Sadayakko Kawkami (based on her geisha dances) and smaller kabuki troupes in the 1930s. Zoe Kincaid's monumental *Kabuki* (1925) was, following Japanese scholarly tradition, also performance based. Ichikawa Sadanji II's successful tour to Moscow and St. Petersburg in 1928 received critical acclaim as performance, stimulating influential essays including influential film theorist Sergei Eisenstein.

Curiously, it was the German Frederick Perzynski whose 2 volumes on noh and kyogen masks first provided a categorization and history of these precious crafts, even before any Japanese scholar had at-

tempted to do so. Although my present research examined the mediation employed by Japanese performers and producers to introduce traditional arts, one could easily reverse the lens to examine how the interest by Yeats and Craig, Brecht and Britten moved some Japanese literary and arts scholars to reexamine their own forgotten treasures.

Tours and Tourists

In fact, opinions of foreign dignitaries, whether political or artistic, had always mattered to Japanese cultural entrepreneurs. (Getting a stamp of approval from an international celebrity is still employed in “returned from Russian tour” performances and “preview of American tour production” promotions.) Early visitors to Japan included the Prince of Wales, former President Ulysses S. Grant, opera star Minnie Hauk, and the King of Hawaii. They were taken to *noh* but also to *kabuki*, in specially-devised programs for their entertainment. Although some leeway was given to make them comfortable—fans pushing ice-cooled air for Grant; red-white-and-blue kimonos and flags were sported by dancers—the performances themselves were highly traditional, and the appreciative words of these dignitaries reported upon (their yawns or naps went unrecorded).

Incoming foreigner dignitaries or the hosting of resident foreigners also stimulated efforts to provide summaries and translations of plays prepared for them. By the 1920s, the theatre journal *Nogaku* could refer to the “foreign-format” in describing a visit by Albert Einstein to *noh*, producers having learned to shorten programs to climactic scenes during visits by Indian poet-playwright Rabinath Tagore and Charlie Chaplin. Presumably they were given careful explanations before and during performances by solicitous hosts. Einstein is said to have been particularly interested in the *kyogen* mask for *Buaku*. Noted *noh* scholar Nogami Toyochirô describes his preparation of a program for Bernard Shaw on his visit to Japan, and Shaw’s ability to “grasp the artistic intent” by perhaps not understanding the words. When Benjamin Britten visited *Sumidagawa* that had been arranged for his visit in 1956, he insisted on returning to see it again, at another theatre a few days later, and even asked for a recording to be sent. (Six years later, he showed his understanding of the play by his adaptation of the story to the groundbreaking chamber-opera *Curlew River*). One could say that Japanese interlocutors mediated the exotic *noh* and *kabuki* forms for foreign guests, whose appreciation in turn was employed to attract mass media and popular interest, and perhaps government support.

As Japan began its military expansionism in the early 20th century, it sought to display a measure of its civilization by portraying its traditional forms of theatre as equally worthy of esteem as Western opera or ballet. Tsubouchi Shôyô wrote enthusiastic essays encouraging the development of a Japanese dance form “*nihon buyô*” to rival Western ballet, and penned practical experiments with Western instrumentation and dance mixed with Japanese traditional ballads and *shamisen*.

Proselytizers of Japanese art, dance, and theatre found ready listeners at ladies’ clubs and scholarly societies in London and America from the 1900s. Articles in poetry and literature journals, and later books by Noguchi Yonejirô contributed to a continuing fascination for Hiroshige, *noh*, and other Japanese art forms. Umemoto Rikuhei, head of a small traditional school of *buyo*, published a remarkable volume in

1936, in an attempt to further knowledge for those he had already visited while in London and Paris. It included photographs and floor-patterns for numerous dance-steps, summaries of three plays performed at these lecture-demonstrations, and descriptions (in italics) of his movements by a British observer, who cautioned that sometimes “it cannot be put into words.” Clearly Umemoto was positioning his own school, the art of *nihonbuyo*, and Japanese performance as a whole as something worthy of Western admiration, even if it meant strategic omissions and stresses. Describing his own school’s lineage, he notes Bugaku, the 1000-year old court dance, with no mention of its roots in China. He discusses his father’s ties to the imperial court, but not to the courtesan quarter from which virtually all *buyo* sprang. And his “authentic” dances were credited as being arranged by a British arbiter. Gradually, individuals and groups were learning how best to introduce their art forms to gain Western appreciation, a new income revenue and means for international understanding.

Although performances had been given in colonial Korea in the Meiji period, mainly to admiring Japanese emigrants and dignitaries, the first tour to Western countries was not until 1952 in Venice, and then at the request of the Italian government’s Marco Polo Exposition, rather than the Japanese government. Programs were prepared with translations into Italian, English, and French. Significantly, the event was held on a *noh* stage placed upon an ancient Roman stage, architecturally tying these classical traditions together. (Similarly, later tours by *noh-kyogen* troupes would be held at the Egyptian pyramids, Greek amphitheatres in Athens, and London’s Shakespeare’s Globe, as well as the “new tradition” of New York’s Central Park’s outdoor stage).

The Japanese tourist industry also began introducing various aspects of traditional culture in a series of photo-illustrated books. These included dozens of photographs, color prints, a *washi*-like velum paper cover, and expert authors, including Noguchi and leading *noh* scholar Nogami Toyochirō. *Noh Plays* (2), *The Japanese drama* (6) *kabuki* (7) *Odori Japanese dance* (22), and *kabuki drama* (23) were published from 1934-6. They are brief, well-written histories, and longer introductions to technical aspects of staging, aesthetics, and leading actors as well as practical issues of pricing and theatre-going conventions. They are generously illustrated with leading actors in their famous roles, as well as shots of the spectators and theatre architecture. No doubt a handy guide for post-war tourists to Tokyo, *Kabuki* was republished four times, the latest in 1957, with additional play summaries and new photographs.

Whether through official governmental support or entrepreneurial strategies, Japanese theatre was deemed essential when hosting foreign dignitaries. Programs were prepared for visiting dignitaries, or, as in 1936, for a visit by educators. Plays included popular favorites *Funabenkei* and *Hagoromo*. The Bunka Kyokai (predecessor to The Japan Foundation) sponsored one *Hagoromo/Aoi no ue* program. It included scripts with Romanized letters and Italian, Spanish, and English translation.

The Japan Foundation has used its Kyoto office as a sponsor of an annual *noh* performance, originally free now at nominal price. Leaflets are sent to area universities with large international student populations, and tickets provided for Japan Foundation fellows in the Kansai Region. Programs in English are supplemented by lectures in some years.

National Theatres : Entertainment and Education

Japan is perhaps unique in the world in sponsoring six physically and organizationally separate national theatres, most containing multiple halls. Built over a few decades of economic growth, they share common goals of conservation, continuation, and reconstruction. By sponsoring performances, holding exhibits, publishing lavishly illustrated programs, and archiving video in research libraries, these national theatres attempt to define and preserve established practices accessible to a wide public. Generous subsidies of ticket prices (half that of private theatres), sponsoring training programs (in kabuki, bunraku, noh, and kyogen), producing rare, large-scale, or full-act programs, they attempt simultaneously to expand the repertoire, players, and spectators. Occasionally revived or new plays are produced, involving contemporary theatre playwrights and scholars, renewing the present from the past.

As for the traditional performances that are the heart of these institutions, all means of making these classical performances more accessible to foreign, young, and ignorant spectators is employed: lectures, hands-on workshops, program notes, earphone guides, and title projections. The widening gulf between the specialist knowledge required by aficionado audiences and the ignorance of conventions of first-time viewers, domestic and foreign, has created a veritable industry of mediating technologies and literature. Arm-chair admirers of the traditional arts are given new media with new levels of details, options, and angles with which to explore the forms. Live performance audiences can learn about a play's performance history and special characteristics through copious program notes, follow along in annotated texts, receive pre-performance lectures explaining what to look out for, read subtitles projected on the backs of seats and handheld devices, and listen to earphone guides in Japanese or English. A wealth of online and published summaries of plays, and even translations, are available to the spectator to prepare for the event. In English many of the same template summaries are printed, with permission and acknowledgement, from these same online sources.

Comparing Mediating Methods

A key challenge to mediating performance is to synchronize explanations in multiple languages and formats so that spectators will "be on the same page" when experiencing a performance together. Theatre historian and theorist Erika Fischer-Lichte describes the temporary aesthetic community, not national or local, created by Japanese actors of the Kawakami Sadayacco company in Paris and Berlin at the beginning of the 20th century. This rare communal atmosphere was, "the space of theatre where such a utopia could suddenly materialize" (2001: 30). With open and thrust stages extending into the audience, and asides and ad libs designed to bridge the gap between actor and spectator, traditional arts risk rupturing such intimacy with obtrusive electronic/scholarly mediation.

Summaries of plays, for both Japanese and non-native spectators, and transliterations to Romanized texts with translations have long been part of program materials for noh and to a lesser extent kyogen; kabuki and bunraku rely on necessarily long summaries, difficult to read during the show, but often also too complicated to remember if read in advance.

One effective means of mediating between the live and written forms was given at the International Federation for Theatre Research (IFTR) in Osaka in 2007, a well-attended noh performance presented with scholars in mind. A talk by noh scholar Amano Fumio was interpreted; then detailed written summaries for each scene were given to spectators, with numbers of scenes on placards next to the *waki* pillar. As the numbers were flipped manually, spectators would jump ahead to the next summary. Instead of forcing audiences to cram much information in, forgetting important details and “ruining the ending” with foreknowledge, this system allowed the information to arrive “just on time” and in the appropriate place in the on-stage drama. Afterwards, Amano joined lead actor Ohtsuki Bunzô for a stimulating series of questions from the audience, who seemed highly enthralled with his portrayal. Explanation seemed to stimulate rather than stifle curiosity from this academic crowd. However not all audiences are alike, making for mixed results from any single method.

Another way of translating performances for non-natives is through translation. Bilingual productions offer audiences of two linguistic competencies immediate access to a portion of the production, while at the same time producing amusement at the juxtaposition of languages in a single play. Kyoto’s Noho Theatre Group has performed bilingual kyogen at schools, conferences, and ladies’ clubs for three decades. (Salz and Medlock 2012). The Tokyo Government sponsors a series of workshops and performances to introduce foreigners to its traditional arts, as run-up to the 2020 Olympics. On November 21, 2015 a performance of the noh *Kurozuka* was given, with an English-language *ai-kyogen* interlude, and several dances performed first by Japanese professionals, then by the English-speaking Theatre Nohgaku. Although the melodic speech of Japanese *ai-kyogen* was quite hard to replicate, performer Shigeyama Dôji felt it a worthwhile experiment that deserved further effort.

Earphone Guides

The Earphone Guide service is available in Japanese for most Shochiku long-run productions, and at the National Theatre for kabuki and National Bunraku Theatre for bunraku. English guides are available for National and Kabuki-za performances, and beginning with its 2008 selection as an UNESCO intangible cultural asset. Since many of the same performances are given in Tokyo, Osaka, and Kyoto, the costs for commissioning and recording the expert commentary is relatively rationalized. However local-only shows, like the Kyoto Minamiza, provide only Japanese earphone guide service, and the English programs prepared by The Japan Times.

The Earphone Guides and handheld DS devices work similarly. From a booth in the back of the theatre, an operator moves the projections along according to cues, worked out in a few rehearsals. These are projected as titles on the screen, whether above the stage (bunraku) to the sides (at some public noh theatres), electronically over screens built into the back of seats (National Noh Theatre), or on handheld devices (Kabuki-za). With earphone guides, experts provide a running commentary on the genre, and particular performance practices of the kabuki, while giving voice to some vital dialogue.

It is not an easy task to summarize plot developments or explain obscure customs briefly, then find the most appropriate timing to speak such segments, not to mention finding the right balance of emotional

expression and neutrality for the actual studio recording. The Earphone Guide homepage lists the Japanese interpreters for each act of a play ; presumably some spectators develop special attraction to certain narrators. As a by-product of the English-language translations, many foreign graduate students and researchers have benefitted from working part-time as earphone guide commentators, getting access to rehearsals and receiving tickets for expensive performances.

Projected Titles : Placement and Length Matters

As film historian Mark Abe Nornes points out, although some countries regularly use titles for their multi-lingual audiences (Indonesia, China), Japan has always depended on the shared knowledge of standard Japanese. *Katsudo benshi* commentators, rather than subtitles, was the preferred manner of viewing silent and especially non-Japanese films. When titles began to be used in theatre, it was not for the complex plots of bunraku or long, often unpoetic speeches of kabuki, but for noh and kyogen. These were more distanced in historic formation from the present, but also, whether chanted or spoken from behind a mask, more difficult to comprehend (many spectators in the Meiji period utilized libretti). In noh, a single line might take several minutes to sing or dance to, its meaning paraphrased in a few words. Spectators have ample time to glance down in the lit auditorium to read the text without missing out on important action.

The development of titles in television broadcasts of noh is instructive. Yanagisawa Shinji, a long-time producer for NHK, relates his attempts at making an Introduction to Noh program more accessible by adding modern-language translations as titles. Before wireless microphone technology, standard microphones could not easily distinguish between the loud cries of the drummers and the speech by the shite. The recorded sound was difficult to hear, so titles were added so that viewers could understand the words. Even after advances permitted clear speech, the convention of titles continued as standard practice. Yet when the first broadcasts of this series, aimed at first-timers to noh, employed modern Japanese titles, the response was overwhelmingly negative. “The meaning isn’t the only important thing!” and so on rebroadcast and future programs, the original classical Japanese was maintained (2001, p.13).

In live performances, precisely where the titles are projected makes a great difference. When projected over the proscenium, as at the National Bunraku Theatre, they demand craning one’s neck (when seated in the front rows), distracting from the drama at ground (and below) level. This is an especially complex problem, since bunraku is already a “three-ring circus” of chanter, shamisen, and doll-operators/ doll, titles are yet another channel to attune to. And when projected below the screen, as at the modern playwright’s Mitani Koki’s new bunraku *Much Ado about Love Suicides* at the Kyoto Theatre, they require some twisting and peeking, depending on where one is seated in the raked-seating hall, or more importantly who is sitting directly in front of you (when asked, one of production staff said that titles were placed below so as not to interfere with the stage picture).

When projected to two side screens (as at Biwako Hall’s opera performances) or at the Okinawan theatre production at the Kyoto University of Arts and Culture, or the Japan Society in New York, they are easily readable from anywhere in the audience, but require turning away from the stage action momentarily. When I attempted to spotlight a moment of dramatic kyogen mime to pure sound at a Japan Society

event by avoiding translation of the accompanying onomatopoeia, the producer told me that a blank screen was too distracting—audiences would want to know what they were missing, and why, defeating the purpose of the omission. We projected the original nonsense-syllables in italics.

In the age of personal music-players and internet browsers, it is unsurprising that titles are now projected or transmitted to individual devices. At a “kyogen for beginners” night at the Yamamoto Noh Theatre in Osaka, handheld devices were given to twenty people by reservation. Yet these mostly elderly users fumbled noisily with their devices or held them close to their eyes, interfering with their enjoyment, and distracting other spectators. This small-scale experiment was live : a man in the back of the small theatre was entering the summaries and comments during the show. This avoided the problem of universally distracting the audience with projected titles, but creates other challenges of focus and ease of use.

Perhaps the most expensive and elegant method of mediating performance is at the National Noh Theatre in Tokyo, where titles are transmitted via LED Lite panels on the backs of seats. Modeled on the expensive system utilized by the Metropolitan Opera House in New York, they include shutters to prevent one’s personal screen from annoying a neighbor. These panels can be switched off, or provided with the original/modern Japanese versions, English translations, and sometimes Chinese. Noh performance is slow enough that glancing at the titles mid-song has not proved a distraction, although actors say they sense the mood of intense concentration dissipate as viewers glance down. Consequently, although they are regularly used by the National Noh Theatre series, they are rarely employed at actor-produced shows ; expense is also an issue. Since many noh audience members are amateur students, assiduously following along in their own libretti, the distracting noise of unison page-turning is also avoided, although it still seems that first-timers employ titles and regulars employ libretti.

At the Kabuki-za, earphone guides were discontinued in March, 2015, replaced by hand-held Nintendo-DS size devices. These transmitted English and Japanese titles, with some explanation ; however it was impossible to scrolls forward or backwards ; the titles were offered on pace with the dialogue. Moreover, the various angles and positions which spectators employed to read their devices disturbed those attempting to watch the productions without such filters. No doubt that the lack of dimmed houselights, standard for noh and kabuki, contributed to their ready accessibility and lack of resistance, as they would be more prominent in darkened modern theatre settings. The savings of one-time only translation fees for setting up the text for transmission, rather than commissioning voice-recordings requiring rehearsal visits and studio recordings for each performance, were doubtless part of the strategic change. However, what is lost is the ability to continue watching the stage while an expert informs you of the story and conventions. With the earphone guides, more explanations are given on the genre between acts and plays. Perhaps in the future, both methods could be employed with the same device, allowing spectators more choice in their preferred mediations.

Lecture-demonstrations

Rather than whisper gently in the audience ears, other strategies attempt to involve spectators more intellectually and viscerally with pre-performance activities. Such is the proliferation of audience participation,

introductory workshops, and non-standard noh-kyogen programs, they are now listed as a separate category of “noh events” in the encyclopedic internet site noh.com ([http : //www.the-noh.com/listings](http://www.the-noh.com/listings)). To introduce just a few, noh continues providing hands-on workshops in drums, costuming, and singing as part of the annual “noh is interesting” (*Omoshiro Noh*) series ; the Shigeyama kyogen actors produced a “call-and-response” “Hybrid Kyogen”, with full audience participation in specific places ; tours are given by actors to locations where plays are set. Homepages for genres, schools, families, and individual players provide a wealth of photographs, video clips, authoritative summaries, and personal blogs to aid initiates.

Lectures, demonstrations, and hands-on workshops before traditional performances, perhaps taking a clue from classical opera or concerts such as those given by the Kyoto Symphony Orchestra, have become de rigeur today. However the mood of mystery and ritualistic pregnant expectations of the noh is somewhat pricked by the intrusion of dry, academic explanation. However in recent years, pre-show lectures by eminent academics, conversations among players and scholars, or even silly talks by “*tarento*” (celebrities) are a common opening option to shorter noh-kyogen programs. Mikata Shizuka’s *Teatro No* attempted many experiments at non-noh theatres or non-traditional plays ; his October 3, 2015 production of *Utoh* was preceded by a short lecture by his father, scholar and performer Mikata Ken, explaining the “places to look for” in the subsequent dances and plays. Without knowing the rarity of the variant version of the *Utoh* that was being performed, perhaps spectators’ appreciation would be diminished. As with other commercial performances, online presence has permitted pre-show interviews and pre-views to be presented. A dressing-room interview with the kyogen actors was available online before a Sector-88 produced kyogen program in Osaka.

One might argue that the mysteriousness of the unfolding dances and plays would best be preserved through the tension of ignorant anticipation. However, since the program clearly states the time of the opening lecture, and an ample lobby space is available for those who prefer to refrain from such explanations, the optional lecture seems an effective way to mediate between first-time or even experienced playgoers and the plays ahead, without interfering in any way with the performances. The *Shimin kyogen* (Citizens’ kyogen) Kyoto City has produced for over four decades were introduced by the charismatic and self-proclaimed “perverse” Shigeyama Sennojô for many years. He provided anecdotes for the plays that evening, special vocabulary or cultural context, or sometime accidental performance “happenings.” His verve and wit were enjoyable as warm-up to the kyogen to follow ; after he passed away, his segment was soon replaced by an additional kyogen play, with no introduction. Kyogen’s colloquial language and everyday situational comedy permit a more direct transmission, even six hundred years after its birth.

Traditions Transformed

Although this article has examined largely the expanding activities of mediation of traditional performances, one must not forget that the traditions themselves are changing according to audience tastes and producing systems. The all-day, daylit outdoor programs of the Edo period have given way in noh to two plays and short dance excerpts and a single kyogen. Full-length, multi-scene kabuki plays are now rarely performed except at the National Theatre ; instead “top of the pops” highlights, obeying their own pro-

gramming conventions of straight play and dance play, traditional and newer, are the norm. Noh actors, who once considered kabuki actors “riverbank beggars” of a completely different world, now happily perform excerpts of noh plays as part of multi-genre events in Japan and overseas.

In an effort to attract young spectators, new plays in new settings are attempted, especially by kabuki troupes, including commissioning of leading playwrights (Mishima Yukio, Noda Hideki, Mitani Kôki). As this article was written in the Fall of 2015, mind-bending attempts to mediate traditional performances for foreign and domestic audiences abound. Shochiku and Panasonic teamed to bring Ichikawa Somegoro to an outdoor stage in Las Vegas. Beneath the dancing fountains in the lake of the Bellagio Resort, he performed a thirty-minute version of *Koi Tsukami* (Wrestling with a Carp), with giant projections shown against the back of the stage and shifting mists of the lake. Kabuki’s adaptation of the children’s story about mixed-species love, *Ano arashi no yoru ni* (That night in the storm) was produced, as well as an adaptation of the wildly popular adult manga *One-Piece*. Kyogen actors have produced programs shared with rakugo storytellers, kabuki actors, and commedia dell’arte troupes. By inviting spectators to novel performances sharing the bill with those they may already be familiar with, performers hope to expand their audience base.

It is too early to know whether these innovations will affect the core of the classical performing traditions in Japan. When performance opportunities at these mediating events become more profitable and numerous than orthodox traditions, actors will necessarily be pushed away from their conventional training and performance techniques. However, archival films and photographs, and before that actors’ treatises and prints, assure that somewhere, someone will remember what these traditions were once like. Undoubtedly the pendulum will swing in the opposite direction at some point, and a “retro boom” of “slow theatre” will revive these diminished traditions. The future of tradition, and its entrepreneurial mediators, is thus difficult to predict at this particular moment of post-Fukushima insecurity and pre-Olympic anticipation.

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