

Traditional Theatre During “with Covid-19”: Japanese Noh and Kyogen Coping Strategies

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“With Covid-19” の伝統芸能 ——日本の能と狂言の対処法——

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The arts world was shocked by Covid-19. Noh-kyogen performers were forced by necessity into exploring how to maintain their training, performance, and teaching activities through shifting restrictions, reluctant students, anxious spectators, and yet with increasing government understanding and support. This research focuses on noh-kyogen during Covid-19 crisis, 2020-2022, examining five stakeholders for this venerable art: performers, amateur disciples, spectators, producers, and researchers.

芸術界は Covid-19 に衝撃を受けました。能狂言の演奏家は、必然的に、シフト、制限、消極的な deshi, 不安な観客, そして政府の理解と支援の増加を通じて、トレーニング、パフォーマンス、および教育活動を維持する方法を模索することを余儀なくされました。本研究は、2020 年から 2022 年にかけての Covid19 危機における能狂言に焦点を当て、この由緒ある芸術の 5 つの利害関係者（パフォーマー、アマチュア弟子、観客、プロデューサー、研究者）を調査しました。

Japan has a wide spectrum of theatrical performance. Practiced by ardent amateur hobbyists and performing recitals, and attending their teachers' performances like noh-kyogen and kabuki ensure that these classical forms have been passed down through many generations. Commercial theatres with deep repertoires like Takarazuka Girls' Opera Troupe and Shikigekidan musicals have famously rigorous training for their young recruits, who may “graduate” to other commercial stages. The “shōgekijō small theatres are comprised of recent university graduates and successors to the '60s-'80s avant-garde movements. Theatres range from well-appointed National Theatres with subtitle panels on the backs of chairs for foreign spectators, to fifty-person bench-seating music clubs offering dance and theatre showcases on off nights from their musical one-night stands.¹⁾

Covid-19's sudden outbreak in Japan resulted in much confusion, self-reflection, and creative strategies among arts professionals. The arts world was shocked into considering how to maintain their training, performance, and teaching activities through shifting, confusing restrictions, reluctant students, anxious spectators, and yet with increasing government

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understanding and support.

This research focuses on noh-kyogen, Japan's classical performance arts, examining five major stakeholders for this venerable art: performers, amateur disciples, spectators, producers, and researchers.²⁾ It examines both the changing conditions for onstage performances and for the teaching of amateur disciples, the two principle means of livelihood for the approximately 1000 profession performers. Through observation, interviews, an online series of "pandeminars", and referencing a growing number of articles and special issues of specialist journals, I will attempt to paint a picture of nohgaku's contemporary challenges, various coping strategies employed, and successful "best practices" that have been carried over into the post-Corona present.

Research was gathered through two Ryukoku Sociocultural Research Institute (SCRI)-sponsored "pandeminars" (pandemic era seminars), spring of 2022 and 2023. They were co-hosted by J-PEST, an online meeting of international performance studies scholars begun in May, 2020 to comfort each other in dire circumstances and to exchange information on Japanese theatre tours, training, and performance changes during the Covid pandemic.³⁾ Interviews were conducted with noh actors Uda Tatsushige (Kongo), Matsui Akira and Oshima Kinue (Kita), performer-producers-scholars Diego Pellecchia and John Oglevee, and kyogen actors Shigeyama Akira and Sennojō, as well as manager-producers of noh-kyogen families. Correspondence and interviews with overseas teachers and trainers of J-theatre, Julie Iezzi (University of Hawaii, kabuki) and Larry Kominz (Portland State University, kyogen, kabuki), and Jane Traynor, student in both Hawaii and Japan, and Ondre Hybl, Czech kyogen group Divaldyi organizer, contributed to an international perspective on the effects of Covid on noh-kyogen as taught overseas.

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On March 10, 2022 an online "pandeminar" forum discussed the issues of continuity of noh-kyogen through COVID. Its primary focus was to share new strategies that performers and producers were engaging in to maintain fans and disciple passion, train and grow as performers, and continue their international activities. Participants included overseas mediators who had long brought noh, kyogen, and kabuki to America (Julie Iezzi, University Hawaii; Larry Kominz, Portland State University), Kita school noh performer Kinue Oshima, who has taught overseas (France, U.S.) and offers online training in both chant and dance, assisted by TheatreNohgaku's Oglevee. After noh scholar and Kongo School professional Pellecchia and Salz outlined the ways noh-kyogen had adapted to domestic and foreign venues, and we asked our guests about their Covid activities.

What follows is a summary of the Pandeminar discussion, as well as papers by Pellecchia and myself since then, along with interviews with a Shigeyama family Soja Club producer, performers, and trials of online educational videos and applications.

Performers and performances

In March, 2020 the Covid-19 outbreak began with a plethora of cancelled or “postponed” announcements for many live musical and theatrical performances. The emergency measures of off and on openings and closings of theatres continued until September 2022—far longer than most other countries. Moreover, unlike many other developed countries, the responsibility for determining safe practices during the uncertain times of “3Cs” (closed spaces, crowded, close contact) was not by national orders or enforceable guidelines, but in the unenforceable form of “suggestions” by national and prefectural authorities, and even individual hall operators. Persuasion through scientific evidence, authoritative official statements, and social pressure were tools used to navigate the shifting circumstances of early Covid.

According to researchers, in the six months since the outbreak, the vast majority of noh and kyogen professional and amateur performances, most planned years in advance, were postponed or cancelled. Moreover, many of these “postponed” performances—their producers expecting the emergency to be over within months, not years—were later cancelled, ticket monies returned, or accepted as “donations” to the increasingly desperate limbo of performers. As in other countries, lack of tourists was particularly felt, especially in heritage site-studded Kyoto.

Yet performances were not their only means of livelihood. For unlike professional actors of most modern theatre companies, who were entirely dependent on local government stipends for “cultural workers” through Covid, noh and kyogen actors sought to maintain their main financial source, devoted disciples. Noh shite (leading role actors and chorus), and to a lesser degree kyogen performers, make their basic income through teaching regular lessons and annual recitals at home and regional culture centers. A typical noh master might have regular lessons at home studios and rental facilities in regional cities with students numbering a total of 40 or more as their basic livelihood. Fees can be substantial for middle-class and wealthy students, with dance and singing lessons of ¥10,000-25,000 tuition per month for two to three lessons, purchase of *utaibon* texts and school fans, annual recitals with additional fees for hall and costume rental, the hiring of professional assistants and chorus members, permissions and licenses to sing for special pieces, and summer and winter gifts. Students are expected to purchase tickets, perhaps several, for their teachers’ professional performances. Disciples treat their long-term teachers with respect bordering on adulation, developing close pedagogical and personal ties that may extend over generations. During Covid, many continued out of habit and responsibility for the tradition, but as the hiatus stretched many took the opportunity to “retire.” Musicians, waki players, and kyogen performers, with fewer if any students, felt the lockdown severely with deep repercussions.

Yet during the Covid lockdown and subsequent restrictive measures, performers, unable to be paid for either teaching or public performances, found other ways to maintain their links

with disciples. YouTube and Zoom “salons” offered insight into their “family business”, with displays of masks, hints about costuming, and introduction of family members. With the “chat” function of online media, students had unprecedented access to their teachers, asking questions, offering cheering messages and, through GooglePay, giving donations towards their teachers’ livelihood. Sometimes specialty goods were offered on their Soja Club website, such as with the Shigeyama family’s annual “Covid-themed tee-shirts” by leading Nihonga painter Yamamoto Taro. The young master of the Hosho School of Noh in Kanazawa began fee-based online videos as a way of generating and maintaining interest from the public during the long epidemic time-out. These forums offered performers an opportunity to “meet” their audiences regularly and directly (if virtually), promoting their few public performances but most importantly by showing off their personalities, for example fun family bantering of the Shigeyamas, to encourage their disciples’ continued devotion and eventual return to the practice stage and theatre.

Meanwhile, many senior actors of troupes were reluctant to accept public funding. They are aware that, as recently as the end of the 19th century, their forefathers depended on shogunate patronage for the entire livelihood. Consequently, when the Meiji Restoration shifted political and economic power to the new elite, many noh-kyogen families were forced to sell masks and costumes. Some even left their ancestral art, in order to survive. Although the Corona pandemic was much more sudden yet less dire, these family leaders were reluctant to request welfare lest they depend on it. Yet eventually noh actors were nonetheless forced to seek support from local and national levels as the pandemic continued. Yet according to Pellecchia, many actors used these funds for archived performances with no or limited spectators, and online videos and materials to provide greater access to the art. I was treated to a surprising scene in the private noh studio of a Kongo actor near my home in Nishijin. Twelve young professional performers in full, formal kimono and costume, introduced then performed a full noh play—to the delight of twelve spectators and three large video cameras. The production contributed to the young actors’ career growth and the family archives. Another performance of the spectacular *Tsuchigumo* (Earth Spider) was performed at the Kongo School for few spectators but four, remotely controlled video-cameras, some blocking audience viewing. This was later broadcast nationally.

Spectators were limited to ½ or 1/3 capacity when in September 2020 highly-regulated noh and kyogen public performances returned, first on a grand scale at the National Noh Theatre in Tokyo. But the severe restrictions made the already austere art appear as ceremonial and elite as in the shogun’s time, no doubt scaring away new, young audiences. Tickets, all reserved seating, were purchased with the caveat that shows might be cancelled or postponed. Fever scans were taken at the door, while spectators tore their own tickets. Leaflets for upcoming performances were removed from their usual stands. No food or goods were offered in the lobby. Once inside the theatres, seats were assigned, with “don’t sit here” placards placed

between seats (groups of two or three were permitted to sit together). The front rows were left open, presumably to maintain even more distance than the ritual “pebble garden” that fronts noh stages. Spectators were encouraged to wear masks at all times, to refrain from eating or drinking, or even to chat amongst themselves in the hall or the lobby. To keep the show within two hours, breaks were omitted and with them a relaxed information exchange and tension relief.

Onstage, chorus members numbers were reduced from 8 or 10 to 5 or 6, in the Kongo school wearing specially made black mouth-covering handkerchiefs. The *kirido*, side-door near musicians and chorus members at upstage left, remained slightly open for air circulation. The custom and ritual formality of having all performers onstage throughout an entire hour or 90-minute play was relaxed: *waki* and other accompanying players might leave the stage when no longer needed.

Programs in normal times might include two or even three hour-long noh plays with short dances and a kyogen in between. During the pandemic, Shorter programs were offered, with a single play preceded by a lecture or short dances without a kyogen, keeping the performance time under the government encouraged guidelines for live events of a two-hour limit. Formerly samurai, noh performers were expected normally to play stoically through any minor illnesses, but during Covid, performing with even a low fever was forbidden. And should family members get Covid, they also needed to quarantine themselves for as long as ten days.

For professional actors, Covid was a challenging period: reduced opportunities to perform in adumbrated performances for restricted-seat, non-responsive spectators with the constant tension of the threat of last-minute cancellations and Covid clusters.

Young professionals

Teaching of all performing arts in Japan are done by the “*kuchiutsushi*” imitation method of teacher modeling the correct physical and vocal forms for students to follow as exactly as possible. While video and audio recording devices had been used in recent years to quicken the pace of initial learning, the physical presence of master and disciple in a one-to-one relationship of teaching, and need to “steal the secrets” of the tacit aspects of the arts is central to the “lifetime” “ways” of arts (*geidō*) such as flowers, tea ceremony, and classical dance.

Young actors, expected to perform in a series of increasingly challenging roles on their path to mastery, were handicapped by their lack of performance opportunities. This slowed their career trajectory with repercussions continuing today. A silver lining might have been the availability of teachers for intensive lessons, but according to kyogen actor Sennojo, “without the motivation of an upcoming performance, I couldn’t really practice hard.” Like the world-class athletes who were confounded by the postponement by a full year of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, training trajectory for noh-kyogen is a “just-in-time” endeavor that can peak too early or not at all with continuing uncertainties. The fragility of the actors’ position as

dependent on live performance and face-to-face interactions with students was deeply felt.

There was a generational shift in the noh world. Normally activities are decided and produced by the heads of schools, and branch families with long, proud generational histories. But the younger performers, sensing the crisis most keenly, being able to pivot to online SNS and Zoom resources, and lacking the “fallback” of devoted students and fans, were most active. Regular online forums like “Let’s meet on YouTube” (Shigeyama family), Tatsushige Uda’s at-home salon, and the Hosho school’s young master’s and Yamamoto noh theatre activities were noteworthy attempts to forge bonds with fans and disciples during times when they could not perform. “For archives” performances in cramped actors’ studios were offered, with full orchestra and chorus, with only a few fans attending while three video cameras recorded. New plays were put up online, with subtitles, some praying for peaceful and healthy times. New educational materials in the form of websites illustrated with photograph, prints, and video clips were created, most notably by Tokyo’s National Theatre. “Online Theatre” with “Stages Beyond Borders”.

The Japan Foundation created a series of high-quality documentaries introducing traditional forms, including noh and kyogen, with subtitles in six or more languages. And the contemporary multimedia artist Hiroshi Sugimoto created unusually atmospheric performance videos of noh climactic dance sequences inside various temples and halls. With over 50,000 views from a global audience, these videos served to continue to introduce Japanese traditional and contemporary performing arts in the long period when no visitors were permitted to come, whether to watch or study.

Hobbyist amateurs

Noh actress Oshima Kinue offered her view that online lessons permitted those living in remote areas or with physical ailments that made travel difficult greater opportunities to study. But even if she set up her camera and sound properly to capture her dance movements, few students had similar studio-sized spaces to practice in real time with her. Nor could she correct movements when seen so far from the small phone monitor. Chanting was taught through the usual model/imitation method, but the sound quality of the mic, unable to teach more than one student at a time due to “zoom lag,” created further challenges for students not able to observe her breathing, and mouth tongue articulations, while looking at their texts. And, of course, the special atmosphere of devoted amateurs, social gathering, and ability to watch and learn from others’ lessons was missing. Many older masters were unable to make the transition to online teaching, and so lost a large portion of their income. Waki, kyogen, and musicians, with fewer students and “zoom lag” hindering sound, were also unable to take advantage of online opportunities.

Performances and Spectators

The majority of audiences for noh today are elderly, including many retirees, and they were quick to recognize the dangers of face-to-face lessons, much less the travel to and from, and cluster potential of live performances. As noted above, when live performances returned, front rows were emptied, seats spaced apart, and doors left open for circulation to provide some semblance of safety. Still, many disciples who had previously purchased subscription tickets for teachers’ performances absented themselves, and even younger spectators living with older family members refrained from putting their loved ones at risks. Long-term students dropped out of *keiko* “temporarily”; many have not returned.

Noh programs are determined years in advance, including main cast and chorus members, kyogen ai interludes and musicians. Yet new productions and programs from the classic repertoire often featured plays in the god category, blessings for peace and harmony, and fifth, demon category, where a savage beast attacks, thwarted by brave warriors and priests, are quelled, killed, and banished. Ohtsuki Bunzo, a creative leader and living national treasure, early on put online a new noh, a prayer for peace, and later directed a large-cast adaptation of the hit animation *Demon Slayer*, still touring. Recently, the Yamamoto family performed an adaptation of Faust at the Romanian Sibiu Festival, perhaps referencing the disasters caused by arrogant scientists tempted by glory and wealth.

Producers: managers, mediators, media adaptations

For noh and kyogen actors who are ambitious to forge a family or personal brand, wives or paid managers will help with their online presence and national producing activities. For the Shigeyamas of Kyoto, the lobby display of goods, stamping of membership cards with points that could be exchanged for specialty items, and photo-calendar sales earn additional monies, but moreover allow fans a chance to meet their favorite performers.

During Covid, these activities were either forbidden by hosting theatres, or families themselves through “self-restriction.” This lack of contact between kyogen actors and their fans was felt keenly by Soja Club staff, who felt that momentary signed calendar or photo-opportunity was a precious point of communication between actors and audience. Meanwhile, actors acutely felt the stone-cold silence of masked spectators, the front rows left empty and seats spaced apart,⁴⁾ implicitly warned not to laugh out loud or even chat with friends inside the theatre. Without the usual ability to “read” an audience, these professional comedians felt frustrated and depressed.

As early as March 2020, the Shigeyama family began hosting online salons from their homes, “Let’s meet on YouTube!” (YouTube で会いましょう)。Once or twice a month, actors led by the most technically inclined younger generation, Shigeyama Ippei and Shigeru, streamed a two-hour salon from the family home in Demachi. It was meant to comfort fans watching from home, provide news from the “front” of performance venues, and offer two fully costumed

performances. Eventually, these transformed into thematic gatherings, “How did festival performances of Setsubun bean-throwing at demon begin” and “properties used in kyogen.” And actors shared more personal stories, discussing “favorite foods” or “memorable travels.” The live audience of 150-300 provided a running commentary in the lively Chat, and those with GooglePay accounts could donate. Goods were sold, upcoming programs announced, and tickets sales promoted. The Nihonga painter Yamamoto Taro was a frequent guest, and offered postcards of his sketches of that night’s stream, and Covid-themed T-shirts for sale on the Shigeyama family shop. Archived sessions of the two-hour plus streams are viewed as many as 10,000 times on the Soja Club Channel archives, with play titles helpfully noted.⁵⁾

The Yamamoto family in Osaka took a different tack. A small, 150-seat theatre in the downtown area, they are known for hosting foreign tourists with “variety” nights of different arts, with English rakugo or subtitles projected on side wall. Young members collaborated with videomaker for Apps including “Ohayashi sensei” (おはやし先生) and “MaiMaiRevolution” (舞舞 Revolution!) that playfully but seriously taught the basics of instrumental music in noh and the basics of noh from a disciple’s perspective.⁶⁾

Although amateur students continued to be the backbone of support for noh-kyogen performers, diversification into new SNS outreach, and revenue streams spurred by Covid may have a lasting impact. Ironically, this classical Japanese art may first have found online success with non-Japanese students.

Overseas tours and teaching

While not a large part of their income stream or annual schedule, overseas tours and workshops by noh and kyogen actors are a refreshing break from the daily pressures of teaching, practice, and performance in Japan, as well as opportunity to recognize the place of traditional Japanese arts within world performance. Many actors find inspiration from being appreciated by young, experimental dance and theatre artists, and some have forged long-term connections with commedia dell’arte troupes, Ariane Mnouchkine’s Theatre du Soleil, and Theatre of Yugen in San Francisco. Some also participate in regular workshops at the University of Edinburgh, University of Hawaii and others.

The March 10th pandeminar featured three representative mediators between the Japanese traditional performers and American undergraduate students and artists. Julie Iezzi at University, following a seventy-year tradition begun with Earle Ernst and James R. Brandon, regularly brings kyogen, kabuki, and less frequently noh performers for a year-long coursework leading to performances in English on the University of Hawaii main stage.

Faced with the onset of the pandemic while planning the final stages of her kabuki production, Iezzi realized that with borders closed and no end in site to restrictions on campus, she should pivot to a simpler Kyogen year. Kabuki was postponed to 2024, while frequent guest Sennojo Shigeyama beamed in from Kyoto at odd hours, as students from New York to

Bombay were attending class, told they could not enter the campus by the tourist-oriented islands of the State of Hawaii.

The first semester was devoted to learning about kyogen basics and writing new plays; the second, to rehearsing five chosen from the prior semesters’ offerings. “Remotely Kyogen: Japanese Comedy Under the Stars” was produced in April 2021 as an online event, later transferred to a Theatre and Dance program website available to be accessed by the public, along with educational materials, actors’ interviews, etc.

The production featured traditional plays *The Persimmon Thief* (Kakiyamabushi, here adapted as *The Mango Thief*), a parody about spaceship adventures, an Italian tourist’s souvenir-hunting adventures, and *Mushroomz 2.0*, based on the kyogen *Kusabira*, about an unhelpful IT technical support person instead of a Yamabushi mountain ascetic.

As performers were not allowed on campus for the entire rehearsal period, and not in the same room during shooting, greenscreen technology was used to fuse separate cells into the semblance of an ensemble production. For Iezzi and Sennojo, the time spent constructing sets and doing publicity, ticketing, airport drives, and so on for a normal production was spent on rehearsals from multiple time zones, with a maximum of four at a time per lesson on screen so that teachers could assess their movements properly.

Sennojo found the lack of three-dimensionality the biggest challenge, as with the frontal Zoom screen, students couldn’t see his side or back, nor he theirs. And as with Noh, vocal quality varied according to the student actors’ mics. Iezzi said she quickly gained great technical skills in greenscreen technology and video editing—but never wanted to repeat the experience. The Kabuki production is on schedule for an April Hawaii production and May tour to Gifu in 2024.

Larry Kominz at Portland State University has directed theatre and Japanese language students in kyogen and kabuki productions for forty years. With Covid protocols shifting with different Oregon-state regulations, he found it challenging to navigate his Spring, 2021 production, hopefully entitled *Kyogen Laughter: Light at the end of the tunnel*. He chose small-cast plays that did not require students to touch each other, had them wear masks at all times, and test themselves before going on stage, then ultimately held a live-streamed performance without spectators. To provide the laughter and audience encouragement simulating a normal, raucous hometown show, he had the student actors sit in the audience, cheering each other on. The video was then archived for later viewing. Parents of performers spread out around the U.S. and beyond were especially grateful for the opportunity to watch these performances without having to brave the still real threat from Covid.

As with most live performances throughout the world, Covid-19 regulations and self-restrictions led to an abundance of online, archived performances. The dedication of teachers such as Iezzi (and Sennojo) and Kominz (and his costumer wife Toshimi, who could not return to shop for kimono in Japan) allowed students without easy access to rehearsals or face-to-face

classes to acquire the techniques and spirit of kyogen in a semblance of traditional practice and performance. During the pandemic, Iezzi informed us that some University of Hawaii students who had even appeared in the same online plays together had only met each other for the first time at the cast party!

Yet despite these pioneering attempts at leaping the hurdles imposed by this mysterious and dangerous pandemic, it remains to be seen whether the underlying purpose of teaching noh and kyogen overseas achieved its goals of psychophysical technique transmission.

Researchers

Through the shifting sands of Covid measures, the varied strategies of noh and kyogen troupes helped maintain their balance, if not full health. In contrast, the established, funded, ongoing research projects managed to pivot quickly to the immediate crisis, recognizing the vital, historic significance of simultaneous reporting of frontline actors on the arts scene.

For researchers too, Covid was a great blow. As scholars of a living and vital traditional art, noh-kyogen researchers tend to have close ties with particular teachers and schools. Yet Corona restrictions curtailed or made impossible attending live performances, visiting noh research centers and libraries, interviewing performers, holding research meetings, hosting overseas colleagues, viewing collections of masks and costumes in overseas museums, and attending overseas conferences. Pivoting quickly, the Tsubouchi Memorial Theatre Museum at Waseda University, and two major noh research centers assumed the task of documenting, archiving, and making public contemporary responses to Covid.

The Waseda University Theatre Museum understood early on the value of “frontline reporting” of primary sources in the pandemic. An exhibition in fall 2020 followed by a valuable publication, *Lost in the Pandemic: Theatre Adrift and Expression’s New Horizons*, including posters, stage designs, and interviews with a wide spectrum of theatre practitioners and producers involved in traditional and contemporary theatre. The ephemerality of live performance could be clearly seen in intricately designed posters and leaflets for shows that would never be offered.

Musashino University normally offers a free kyogen performance and a lecture series whose theme changes annually. The lecture series during Covid-19 was held online, hearing from actors and musicians about their activities during the lockdown. These were then transcribed in the annual Journal, and kept in archives for a year. The Kyogen performances were held without audiences, then archived with an introduction added by director Miura Hiroko, and with invaluable subtitles in both Japanese and English, and some in Chinese.

Hosei University’s museum opened an exhibition in 2022 that spread among three buildings on campus, examining “Noh and Kyogen in Crisis.” It tied the Covid-19th disruption of the noh world with that of the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923 and World War II fire-bombing of Tokyo. A map of the Tokyo area noh theatres, accompanied by a video, showed

how many were damaged or destroyed, and some rebuilt in other locations. Photographs and online snapshots showed how various noh and kyogen schools and families were dealing with the Covid-19 outbreak. The catalogue, with interviews with senior performers, was published in the Center’s annual research journal as “Crisis and Noh.”

The Nihon engeki gakkai (Japanese Society for Theatre Research), Gakugeki gakkai (Musical theatre research group), and Nohgaku gakkai (Noh theatre research association) each published special issues on Covid-19s effects on Japanese arts. In English, the International Theatre Institute in Tokyo, part of a worldwide network of ITI Centers, published their invaluable annual Yearbook. In the first section, Noh scholar Oda Sachiko continues her assessment of the significant happenings in the Noh-kyogen world.

Although far from the performance critiquing, prize-assessing, lecture sponsoring, and text-mining activities they normally engage with, researchers in noh and kyogen found their skills and contacts allowed them access to the private wounds and quotidian detail occurring in real time with continuing significance as contemporary ethnography.

Future questions

In the post-Corona moment, there has been a surge of performances, especially by young performers eager to return to their career trajectory. Young players especially seem passionate and performing at the highest quality as they tackle rare, challenging roles or find new ways to interpret the standard repertoire. The last direct government support of “cultural workers” has transitioned to a newfound recognition that performing arts are vital to the communities, as well as individual mental health. Of particular note is the “Nohgaku Caravan”, ongoing Bunka-cho funded project that brings noh-kyogen to regional venues, and revives and produces large-scale new noh. Yet the problem of shrinking audience bases remains, especially older persons still concerned with Covid and influenza outbreaks.

Actors’ reluctance to sucking on the teat of government, considering the ruinous consequences with the fall of the shogunate, has stimulated a wealth of entrepreneurial activities, the fruits of which cannot yet be adequately explored here: pay per view or on demand lessons and lectures, continuing online lessons from performers’ homes, Apps, collaborations with CG digital images (*VR Ghost and the Shell*), regular home salons by actors to offer a backstage tour or upcoming play preparations, or family *shugyou* training.

It remains to be seen whether the long hiatus from the public stage has affected the career trajectory of younger performers. Despite its long history and seemingly conservative character, noh performers led by tech-savvy youth adapted swiftly to the changing circumstances. This has upset normal hierarchies of leadership and popularity. Even as senior actors have taken a backseat role due to their fragility, some younger performers may realize the precarity of their chosen artistic careers and look to fallback career options or even quit the noh world. Others have a renewed passion for performance, and the discipline that goes with it, having undergone the dark times of the Covid crisis, but recognizing the preciousness of noh and kyogen

performance as a one-time only event that needs the dynamic, live participation of performers and spectators.

Notes

- 1) Iwaki Kyoko estimated over 170 theatre and dance performances on November 12, 2012 in Tokyo alone, not including amateur performances of manzai/rakugo comedy. (Salz 2016, ed. Pp: 354-357)
- 2) This paper extends a lecture for the Association for Anthropology of Japan (AJJ) at Kyoto University in Dec 2022: “Comic relief and reform ‘with Covid’: Catharsis, healing, and change through Japanese kyogen”
- 3) Japanese-Pandemic Electronic Salon for Theatre (Jortner, et.al., ed., 2022; Boyd and Salz, ed., 2023)
- 4) At the beginning of reopening of noh theatres, there were generally two empty seats left between spectators, reduced to one in later stages, although couples and friends were allowed to sit together.
- 5) <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLNqREfthjMe4VNu4jRJ0NL7wF3wcSwAXL>
- 6) <https://jp.ldplayer.net/games/com-teamokina-maimairevolution-on-pc.html>, <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.teamokina.ohayashisensei&hl=vn>

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Playbill, YouTube videos of all plays

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