Just Say Noh. But Also Say Kyogen: Crash Course Theater #11

Crash Course: Theater
https://youtube.com/watch?v=J1IyUPMXwS0
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Hey there, I'm Mike Rugnetta. This is *Crash Course Theater*, and today we're exeunt-ing medieval Europe and headed to late medieval Japan, introducing one of the world's most distinct and lasting theatrical styles, Noh.

What's that, Yorrick? [pause] No, it's called Noh. [pause] Yes, Noh. [pause] No, "Noh" is the name... It's spelled N-O-H. [pause] The H is silent. Handle it, m'dude!

Anyway, we'll be tracing Noh's origins, showing how it flourished in the 14th century, and then we'll explore its staging. We'll look at kyogen, the farcical scenes between Noh plays which act as a nice reminder that the world isn't all vengeful ghosts and lamenting women. We'll also look at *Atsumori*, Zeami Motokiyo's emo flute-playing samurai Noh drama, so put on your favorite spirit mask and let's go.

[*Crash Course Theater* intro]

We don't exactly know when or how theater arrived in Japan, but the mythical version goes like so. One time, the sun goddess Amaterasu was teased so badly by her brothers that she hid in the Heavenly Rock Cave and the world went dark. Not great. So, the gods tried to get her to emerge, but nothing worked until Ame-no-Uzume, the goddess of dawn, mirth, and revelry, came up with a brilliant plan: she would sing and dance while taking off her clothes.

So she does this, and the gods go crazy. So crazy that the sun goddess pokes her head out and is like, "What's all this fuss about?" Light returns to the world, and maybe also stripping gets invented. Stripping, theater, and light—a natural trio, really.

In terms of non-mythical origins, sacred dance was part of Shintoism, the traditional religion of Japan. Particularly important was *kagura*, or "god music", a dance performed by priestesses.

But in the 6th century CE, Buddhism arrived, and with it Japan adopted additional forms of dance and ritual. We know about some of these from a 712 CE text called *Records of Ancient Things*. It sort of does what it says on the tin.

In 782, some killjoy nobles nix palace entertainers, who were then taken in by Buddhist and Shinto temples, at which point worship got a lot more exciting. Maybe you're noticing some similarities with the rise of liturgical drama in the West?

Noh has two more immediate predecessors. Dungaku, or "field music", possibly originated in Korea. It was associated with spring rice sowing and fall rice harvest festivals and included comedy, juggling, and dance. Sarugaku, or "monkey music", possibly originating in China, featured animal acts and nudity.

More significant for Noh, Sarugaku also included dance theater, in which the chorus would speak the lines for the main character when the dance became too vigorous. In the 12th century, Buddhist temples adopted Sarugaku Noh, a cleaned-up version of the Sarugaku, as a teaching tool. Even without animal acts, we're still a pretty long way from Noh proper, though.

The real defining moment came with Kiyotsugu Kan'ami, an acclaimed Sarugaku Noh performer. When he shows up, Japan is structured as a shogunate, meaning that while there's an emperor, most of the ruling is done by the Shogun, the highest-ranking general.

The Shogun in the last 14th century is Ashikaga Yoshimitsu, and he is big-time into culture. He becomes a patron to Kan'ami, and then a patron and lover of Kan'ami's son, Zeami Motokiyo.

Father Kan'ami manages to combine Sarugaku Noh with stories borrowed from classical Japanese sources, like *The Tale of Genji*, and then ties the whole thing up with a Buddhist bow. Son Zeami then takes that form, perfects it, and writes some theory about it, because, I mean, come on, somebody's got to be doing theory at your theater, right?

Zeami also writes about 100 of the plays considered Noh canon. And guess what? We still have 21 of them. Yes! Sources!

Noh plays are short, only ten or so pages long, but they take anywhere from thirty minutes to two hours to perform. Which may seem like a nice, reasonable evening at the theater, but when there are five types of Noh play, and court entertainment includes one of each type, performances could last a butt-numbing eight hours.

Each play consists of two scenes, and most involve a ghost, a demon, or a tormented human who can't rest. The language is a mix of verse and prose, most of it sung or chanted. Every Noh play ends with a dance.

The five types of Noh play are the *kami mono*, which involve the sacred story of a Shinto shrine; *shura mono* plays are about warriors like Atsumori (we're going to meet him soon); *katsura mono* plays, or "wig plays", are about wigs... j/k they're about ladies, who were played by wig-wearing men because, surprise surprise, dudes only.

The fourth type of Noh play is basically a grab bag, though it often included *gendai mono* plays, which told naturalistic stories, or the *kyojo mono*, aka "madwoman plays", which are sad wig plays about a woman who loses a child or a lover and then goes insane. The final type, the *kichiku mono*, or "demon plays", feature supernatural beings and have the coolest masks. I mean, look at this! And also this.

Noh dramas are philosophical and somewhat static. They're heavily influenced by Shinto ideas about our connection to nature, and Buddhist ideas concerning the transitory nature of life and the destructiveness of desire. There's not a lot of action, and the goal is to convey a mood rather than to tell a story.

Each play has at least three characters, and some have four or five. The three essential types of characters are, first, the *shite*, or main character (this is the only character to wear a mask); second, the *tsure*, the *shite*'s companion; and, third, the *waki*, or witness or antagonist. Sometimes, the *shite* is disguised in the first scene and reveals himself in the second scene. Sometimes, as in *Atsumori*, the *shite* plays two different characters.

Subsequent to Noh plays, and sometimes between the scenes of one play, comedy scenes called "kyogen" were staged. These were probably a nice change of pace, because Noh plays aren't, um, funny.

There are two kinds of kyogen: parodies of Noh, which are like satyr plays, and scenes of everyday life based around stock characters, which resemble Roman comedies. But in both cases, there is one big difference: kyogen are never vulgar. They are short, usually music-less, and, though the language is more casual than in Noh, they are still very carefully performed.

The Noh stage is pretty rad. The main part, the *hon-butai*, is roofed like a shrine and held up by four pillars. Jars are embedded under the stage to help with acoustics, and a pine tree is painted on the back wall. [to the cameraman] Not enough time for a pine tree?

Stage right stands a bridge called the *hashigakari*, also roofed. This is dotted with three pines, representing heaven, Earth, and man.

This is where the main characters enter and exit.

The Noh theater doesn't have scenery, but actors wear beautiful costumes of embroidered silk and carry hand props. The fan is the most important object, as it can symbolize rain, wind, the sun, the moon, and a lot of other things.

A three- or four-person orchestra called the *hayashi* sits at the back of the stage, dressed in samurai costumes. Traditionally, the orchestra, a flute and two or three drums, follows actors' rhythms and movements.

In addition to the main cast, a six- to ten-person chorus sings, narrates, and takes over the lines of the *shite* when he's busy dancing.

Like the Sanskrit theater, Noh acting is highly gestural and codified. Noh actors train from the age of seven. There are no directors and nothing that we would recognize as rehearsal. Rigorous training means the actors' performances must be perfect every time.

Only the *shite* are masked in most plays, and that mask has one of five types: aged, male, female, god, or monster.

Zeami, who wrote more than twenty booklets explaining the philosophy and style of Noh, said this about acting: "Just as the transparent crystal produces fire and water, or a colorless cherry tree bears blossoms and fruit, a superb artist creates a moving work of art out of a landscape within his soul."

According to Zeami, actors did this using three techniques. *Monomane* meant identifying with and embodying the character. *Yugen* meant lending that embodiment elegance while emphasizing the impermanence of life. And *hana*, or "flower", meant endowing the performance with spontaneity, so that even within Noh's highly systematic style a play would feel a little different every time.

Noh were primarily court entertainments performed for aristocratic audiences. But unlike other cultures, the Japanese mostly revered actors. During the height of Noh, many performers were even able to join the noble caste, the samurai.

Speaking of samurai, let's turn to our tragic tale, Zeami's *Atsumori*, a story adapted from the popular *Tales of the Heike.*

A Noh Thought Bubble? "Noh" problem.

The play begins as the *waki*, or "witness", dressed as a priest, enters via the bridge, saying, "Awake to awareness. The world's but a dream, one may cast it aside. Is this what is real?" Just in case the Buddhist influence wasn't totally clear.

The witness says his name used to be Kumagae, but now it's Rensho. He became a monk because he feels guilt over killing a young warrior, Atsumori. Rensho explains he'll take a trip and pray for his soul. He crosses the stage, and his journey is complete.

Arriving at his destination, he sees the *shite*, a flute-playing grass cutter. Rensho marvels that a low-class person can play so well. The grass cutter encourages him to be more woke, and they talk about flutes. It turns out the grass cutter is a relative of Atsumori, so he and the priest pray together.

And now a kyogen interlude, wherein the *waki* asks a peasant to tell the story of Atsumori's death. It turns out Atsumori was ready to escape a battle when he realized he left his precious flute. Returning for it, he missed the last boat out. He met enemy warrior Kumagae, who admired Atsumori's bravery and elegance but killed him anyway. And then the *waki* is like, "That's me! I'm Kumagae."

In the second scene, the *waki* prays before bed. The *shite*, masked as Atsumori's ghost, enters and dances. The chorus describes Atsumori's death, and there's a moment where it seems like he'll take revenge on Rensho. But instead, he kneels and asks Rensho to pray for his soul in the hopes they'll both be reborn on a single lotus petal, which is the Zen version of a happy ending.

Thank you, Thought Bubble.

So, the moral of the story is that attachment is bad, even if it's to flutes. And also, don't underestimate grass cutters.

We can see by its philosophical orientation, slow pacing, and melancholy tone that Noh has a different feel than other types of theater we've encountered so far. But there's an even more important difference.

Unlike so much of the ancient theater we've been learning about, Noh is a living art form. It is still performed today by troupes who have inherited traditions passed down since Zeami's time. While it struggled in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, now it's considered an essential part of Japanese culture.

Well, it's time for me to take the *hari* door. Next time, we'll be heading to Italy, where theater briefly gets Neoclassical and then gets rude. Until then, curtain.

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