

Lights, Camera, *Noh* Action!

A Quiet Look

by

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To say that Noh drama is different from what a Western audience might expect is an extreme understatement. The acting, music, and dance are woven together with poetry, mime, and other elements to form a unique genre. This paper will probe a particular essential in Noh that might appear to some as the absence of action.

The form of Noh was developed in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries by Kan'ami Kiyotsugu and his son Zeami Motokiyo and it is their attempt to create a “world of sublime beauty” with the concept of *yugen* as its foundation which can be described as an ethereal undercurrent that represents an abstruse concept, just on the edge of perception. Noh dramas are short in comparison to Western forms such as opera although Noh has many of the same characteristics such as music, lighting, costumes, and stage design – all combined to provide a setting for the performers to tell a story. In a classic opera, the plot of the story is the driving force behind the action whereas in Noh drama the plot would have been familiar with Japanese audiences and almost inconsequential to the action. “Although Noh plays often read well on the page, the total effect is lost without the nonverbal elements.” In the apparent lulls of action to Western eyes, quietness pervades the presentation that is charged with the “underlying spiritual strength of the actor” that captures the audience and compels them to inner contemplation. “The audience ... is invited to see beyond the everyday of reality ...[and] into the aesthetic realm of *yugen*” (Sayre 614).

In *Semimaru* by Zeami, the title character is being punished for not performing his duties well. He is exiled to the top of a lonely mountain, has his head shaved, and his fine robes replaced with simple coverings for head and body. In the reading of the play, there are stage directions which indicate bowing, kneeling, receiving an item or even a shift in posture to indicate a change of emotion. Since the character is masked during the performance, emotion

must be conveyed through other means. It is easy to imagine the slow, deliberate movements of the characters as they proceed through the story when finally Semimaru falls to his knees and weeps at his abandonment.

The producers of modern drama may believe their audiences lack the capacity for introspection and must be dazzled with never-ending action to maintain interest. The Noh drama offers their viewers an opportunity to be ensnared by the strength of the performers energy – even when motionless – and to escape from the mundane into the sublime. Sayre quotes an essay of Zeami's wherein he states, "sometimes spectators ... say the moments of 'no action' are the most enjoyable." (Sayre 614)

Works Cited (Bibliography)

Sayre, Henry M. *The Humanities. Culture, Continuity and Change*. Book 3. Saddle Rock, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2012. Print.