

# *Noh and Yeats: A Theoretical Analysis*

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**B**EFORE THE END of the Second World War, all the secret theories concerning the acting and writing of Japanese Noh plays were usually shown only to one actor in each of the five main schools in each generation, although limited copies of works explaining these aesthetic ideas were sometimes kept at the houses of highly privileged people such as the *daimyo* (or feudal lord) or—from the end of the Edo period (1603-1886)—with extremely rich merchants. Not only were the concepts behind the Noh hard to find in Japan but translations of these basic ideas have been published only since W. B. Yeats's time. In 1964, Hinoki-Shoten first published *Kadensho*, a translation of one of the 16 books of theories of Noh drama by the actor and playwright Ze-Ami (1364-1443). Thomas J. Reimer and Masakazu Yamazaki then published a free-style translation in 1984, while I produced another edited translation in 1985. Yeats, therefore, when he started to write *Four Plays for Dancers* actually had never had the opportunity to study the jealously guarded secrets (which were protected in the same way as those of medieval guilds in Europe) that explained the essence of this theatrical tradition. His information was limited to what he had gleaned from Ernest Fenollosa's translations of Noh plays and from meeting a few Japanese amateur singers of Noh plays and a Japanese dancer, Michio Itoh. Thus, given only that, Yeats had no direct knowledge of the underlying philosophy of the Noh drama. In this article, I examine how close his plays are to these medieval masterpieces.

Yeats was searching for a poetic form of theatre because he believed that poetry was the most powerful and common means

of Irish expression. He was a poet, and by far was better known as a poet than as a dramatist or literary critic. Naturally, when he started writing plays, he chose verse. His early plays made some contribution to the establishment of Ireland's national identity, by bringing his audience closer to their cultural roots, and some of his cultural plays, such as *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902) and *Deirdre* (1907) are excellent instances of poetic and aesthetic achievement. The political message in *Cathleen ni Houlihan* was so clear and direct that its patriotic message inspired many Irish nationalists. Yeats, in later life, wondered whether he had indirectly, through the effect of this play, sent young men to their deaths in their revolt against British rule. *Deirdre*, however, is the play that gives some indication that he was heading towards writing *Four Plays for Dancers*. Ze-Ami states, in his *Sando*, that writing a Noh play requires three stages: first, finding the right main character for the play, who is well known for his or her sophistication and elegance; second, constructing a plot in order of *jo*, *ha*, *kyu* ("introduction," "development," "conclusion"); and, third, writing the play, selecting poetic language suitable for the main character and the development of the play. *Deirdre* is an Irish legendary tragic heroine, and her legend is well known to the Irish. She was like Wakamurasaki, the beautiful young heroine in one of the episodes of *Genji Monogatari* (*The Tale of Genji*, written by Murasaki-Shikibu in the early eleventh century). *Deirdre* was beautiful even in her childhood and was raised in seclusion by King Conchubar so that she would become his queen when she grew up. Before the King could marry her, she met a young man called Naoise, and they eloped to Scotland. Several years later, this caused her tragic death: she returned to Ireland with her lover at the request of King Conchubar, who said that he had forgiven them. He sent Fergus, the king who had abdicated, as a safe conduct. Naoise and his brothers were killed treacherously at the King's order as he still wanted *Deirdre* as his queen. *Deirdre* committed suicide. Her beauty and early death offered writers in the later periods an evocative and powerful literary motif. Yeats's choice of *Deirdre* as the title role of the play met Ze-Ami's recommendation for writing a Noh play; and his attempt to revive Irish legend and mythology in order to

strengthen cultural belief coincided with Ze-Ami's choice of an ideal hero or heroine.

*Deirdre* is the first play in which Yeats used musicians both as characters and commentators. Their function, in fact, was more like the chorus used in Greek tragedies than those of Japanese Noh plays. The introduction of the chorus into a play, however, is a step towards the Noh. Noh plays are musical dramas with the majority of the parts being sung, or rather chanted, with or without the accompaniment of a Japanese flute and two or three drums. In Noh plays, the chorus, called *jiutai* (normally eight singers), is located in the alcove on the left-hand side of the stage, and members do not move about on the stage; they do not speak their parts.

*Deirdre*, though a poetic play, retains contemporary conventions of realistic drama in its plotlines and stage directions. Yeats was still trying to create a certain degree of verisimilitude in his drama, attempting to make it more convincing by using realistic stage sets and a comprehensible plot. In an essay of 1904, "First Principles," he argues that everything must be eliminated that draws an audience's attention away from the few moments of intense expression, whether the expression is through the voice or through the hands. At this stage, however, Yeats had not formulated his theory of "rich simplicity," although he was certainly heading towards it.

In 1913 Yeats first saw the manuscripts of Fenollosa's translation of Noh plays, which Fenollosa's widow had handed over to Ezra Pound for publication. Yeats spent considerable time with Pound, going over Fenollosa's translations at Stone Cottage during that winter. When he came to know these translations, he realized that they were the kind of plays he had been seeking through the years: "In fact, with the help of those plays, 'translated by Ernest Fenollosa and finished by Ezra Pound' I have invented a form of drama, distinguished, indirect and symbolic, and having no need of mob or press to pay its way . . . an aristocratic form" (*Certain Noble* 221).

The first play Yeats wrote under a strong influence of Noh was *At the Hawk's Well* (1916). It was first performed in the drawing room of Lady Cunard's house in London before a small

audience of people who were interested in poetry. Michio Itoh (1893-1961) was in Europe to learn European dancing, and he was then taking lessons from the sister of Isadora Duncan (after Isadora refused to teach him). Though Itoh was not trained in the Noh theatre, Yeats found him ideal for the part of the Guardian of the Well. This play and its performance were a remarkable merger of Western poetry and Japanese traditional theatre conventions.

Simplicity is the common feature of all the sophisticated Japanese arts that have developed under the influence of Buddhism, particularly Zen. Yeats was seeking some way in which he could increase the dramatic effect of his plays without using conventional realism, and he found a solution in simplification:

And yet this simplification is not mere economy. For nearly three centuries invention has been making the human voice and the movement of the body seem always less expensive . . . I have simplified scenery, having *The Hour Glass*, for instance, played now before green curtains, now among those admirable ivory-coloured screens invented by Gordon Craig. With every simplification the voice has recovered something of its importance . . . The stage opening, the powerful light and shade, the number of feet between myself and the player destroyed intimacy. (222)

Yeats's effort to simplify his staging of *At the Hawk's Well* is seen in his choice of a private drawing room instead of a theatre for its production. This made all contemporary staging methods impossible. Stage props and stage lighting were eliminated. All actors and musicians were exposed to a select audience. There, the "intimacy," as Yeats called it, was maintained throughout the performance. Michio Itoh's tense dancing produced a tremendous effect in a small space; and it was a complete success. This production was performed again a few days later, in a bigger drawing room at Lady Islington's house, and among the fashionable and distinguished guests was Queen Alexandra.

Yeats followed the Noh tradition by introducing the use of masks in this play. The Old Man and the Young Man wear masks, and the face of the Guardian of the Well is to be made up to resemble a mask. Yeats, however, was not altogether following the Noh tradition. In the Noh theatre there is no makeup, and *waki*, or the supporting cast member, who is usually a priest or an

aristocrat, does not wear a mask. *Waki* originally represented, and provided a link with, the audience of Ze-Ami's time. The lead, or *shite*, usually wears a mask, especially as it helps an actor to portray a woman and a supernatural being. Yeats, however, was interested more in distorted masks than in the symbolic masks often characterizing the Noh drama. These symbolic masks in the Noh were often the result of a long process of simplification and sophistication as Noh became an increasingly refined and spiritual theatre. It was the direct influence of Zen aesthetics on the aristocratic patrons of Ze-Ami's time that resulted in subtly balanced masks such as *ko-omoto*, *zo*, and *ohmi-omna*. These masks rejected realism and transcended individualization. In theory, Yeats seemed to share the same principles, stating in his *Autobiography* that "[t]he masks of tragedy contain neither character nor personal energy. They are allied to decoration and the abstract figures of Egyptian temples" (470-71). Dulac's masks for Yeats's *At the Hawk's Well* were made more exaggerated in expression than abstract Egyptian sculptures. As the quotation above shows, however, Yeats, certainly was trying to create universal archetypes while paradoxically simplifying and rejecting realism in employing masks for the production of his plays.

The use of musicians in *At the Hawk's Well*, as in *Deirdre*, is similar to the chorus in Greek tragedies and unlike the chorus in Noh. This obviously was Yeats's choice; he knew through Fenollosa's translations how the chorus was used in a Noh play. The stage for Yeats's play was opened by the first musician folding and unfolding black cloth, while in a Noh play the curtain at the end of the bridge is raised by stage hands, symbolically announcing the opening of the play, and the *waki* then appears to set the stage. The chorus in Noh comes on to the stage from a back trap door, and sits at the left-hand side alcove, and remains there throughout the performance. Yeats gave his musicians the roles accorded both chorus and *waki* in the Noh theatre. He could have given the Old Man the role of *waki*.

Yeats's plot for *At the Hawk's Well* consequently is very different from *Yoro*, which is believed to be its model:

Jo, scene 1: The first singer, usually "waki" sings a few sequence called *sashi*, *shidai* and *hitoutai* (nowadays they are called "shidai," "nanori" and "michiyuki").

- Ha, scene 2: The appearance of the "shite," who sings the "rongi," "issei" and "hitoutai."
- scene 3: The dialogue of "shite" with "waki" leading to the song which they sing together.
- scene 4: A sequence of singing of either "kusemai" or "tad-aiiai" which will include dancing.
- Kyu, scene 5: This includes the final dance and the last action and is accompanied by the rhythmical chanting of the chorus called either "hayabyoshi" or "kiribyoshi." (They are called "chunori" and "oonori.")  
(Sekine 105)

In the introductory part, *jo*, in *Yoro*, a courtier sent by Emperor Yuryaku, playing the role of *waki*, announces his intention of finding the truth of the rumour about some magic spring water that could give human beings immortality. In the development part, *ha*, he goes deep into the northern mountains and meets a young man and his old father. The courtier hears the story of the miraculous water and is taken to the place where the *kikusui-sake* appears. Certain parts of their dialogue take the form of singing. In the concluding part, *kyu*, the mountain god Yoryu-Kannonbosatsu appears, stresses the importance of the Buddhist religion, and praises the reign of the emperor, a living god. In *At the Hawk's Well*, the introduction is given by the musicians. They set up the scene for the play proper to begin. In the part of *ha*, An Old Man and A Young Man develop the story, revealing their intention of drinking the water from the well to gain immortality. The plot of this Noh play develops in the form of storytelling, while in Yeats's play it develops in the realistic confrontation between the two characters. In the part of *kyu*, the Guardian of the Well appears to frighten the Old Man and to allure the Young Man away from the well, in order that neither can have the miraculous water. This theory of *jo*, *ha*, and *kyu* was developed in Chinese poetry, and Ze-Ami applied it to Noh playwriting. This is not, however, a unique but a rather universal theory. Yeats did not have any contact with this theory, but his plot for *At the Hawk's Well* fits into the pattern of *jo*, *ha*, and *kyu*, the European equivalent of introduction, development, and conclusion.

Yeats's next play for dancers is *The Only Jealousy of Emer*. This is believed to be based on the Noh play *Aoinoue*. They share the

theme of the jealousy of a woman. Yeats chose his characters from a well-known Irish legend. Ze-Ami recommended in his *Sando* that most of the audience should know the characters. However, the plots of the two plays differ in the nature of the jealousy examined and its consequences.

Lady Rokujo, once a lover of prince Genji, wants to kill Aoinoue, her rival for his love, after suffering public humiliation at a festival. Lady Rokujo's vengeful spirit starts tormenting Aoinoue, making her ill. The introductory part, *jo*, starts with a servant of *udaljin* (the prime minister) being ordered to bring a priestess to find out the cause of the illness of his daughter, Aoinoue, since no orthodox treatments have had any success. The developmental part, *ha*, begins when Teruhinomae, a priestess, plays a stringed instrument called *azusa* and prays that any spirit possessing Aoinoue will come forward. The vengeful spirit of Lady Rokujo arrives and confides to the mediating priestess her intention to kill Aoinoue to achieve her revenge. Lady Rokujo's vengeful spirit is too powerful for the priestess to overcome it. The monk and the spirit (in the form of a devil) demonstrate a battle of spiritual powers, good and evil. After the fierce confrontation, Lady Rokujo loses her power and gives in. The monk thus demonstrates the unbeatable power of his Buddhist god.

Emer, on the other hand, is the wife of a legendary hero, Cuchulain. She knows that Cuchulain has a mistress called Eithne. Emer, however, is not desperately jealous, as she knows that in the end Cuchulain will come back to her in his old age, and thus she wins against his younger lover. Emer has accepted the situation, as can be seen in her words "We're but two women struggling with the sea." She is portrayed as a courageous beauty, while the other woman is passive. The introduction to the play, *jo*, is similar to that of *At the Hawk's Well*, as musicians announce that Cuchulain is on his deathbed, attended by his queen Emer. The developmental part, *ha*, begins when Emer and Eithne try to revive him. Instead of adopting the vengeful spirit of *Aoinoue*, Yeats brings in Bricriu of the Sidhe, who had a capacity for intrigue and for setting gods and people against each other, to confront the two women. Bricriu offers a bargain: Cuchulain's life for Emer's hope of getting Cuchulain back in his old age.

Another fairy, the Woman of the Sidhe, appears after Eithne has been frightened away. She tries to allure Cuchulain away to the fairy world. This causes uncontrollable jealousy in Emer, and she gives up her hope of living with Cuchulain in his old age by renouncing his love. The conclusive part, *kyu*, shows Cuchulain reviving not in Emer's arms but in Eithne's, and Emer is left to witness her husband calling out to his mistress. The play ends with the musicians unfolding and folding the cloth.

Yeats did not follow the Noh tradition in writing this play. His interest was not in advocating religious power but in reviving the mysterious fairy world. By having Emer confront the Woman of the Sidhe, Yeats made his play more dramatic. Emer, a proud woman, feels jealousy for the first time in the confrontation with the Woman of the Sidhe. The dances in both the Noh and Yeats plays are vital. In the Noh theatre, dance is usually given to *shite*, the lead, but Yeats chose to give the dancing part to the Woman of the Sidhe. In a Noh dance, the lead is meant to express the culmination of the *shite*'s feelings and emotions, but in Yeats's play it was used only to raise Emer's jealousy. Yeats's use of masks is also different from that of the Noh theatre. He made all his characters wear masks (with the exception of the musicians, whose faces are made up to resemble masks), while in the Noh theatre the *waki* and the chorus appear without masks. The Ghost of Cuchulain changes his mask to a heroic one after his revival. The convention of changing masks on stage does exist in Noh, but it only occurs when the lead changes his character during a performance. This is not the case with Cuchulain, who does so at the very end of the play, to show that he has revived. In writing this play, Yeats focused on the misery of Emer after her only consolation was dashed, taking his example from *Aoinoue*, in which Lady Rokujo is left in her misery, after losing her battle of revenge. Yet these two plays differ; Yeats never absorbed the religious belief of Buddhism and the stricter Noh conventions.

*The Dreaming of the Bones* (1919) is the third of the *Four Plays for Dancers*; it is the best play and also closest to the forms of the Noh play. Yeats based this play on a specific Noh play, *Nishikigi*. This old Japanese play provided him with a model for the virtually impossible, showing him how to connect past and present in the short span of time on stage:



The concept of the play is derived from the world-wide belief that the dead dream back, for a certain time, through the more personal thoughts and deeds of life. The wicked, according to Cornelius Agrippa, dream themselves to be consumed by flames and persecuted by demons; and there is precisely the same thought in a Japanese "Noh" play where a spirit, advised by a Buddhist priest she has met upon the road, seeks to escape from flames by ceasing to believe in the dream. (Yeats, *Four Plays* 129)

The couple in *Nishikigi*, however, does not escape from suffering by ceasing to believe in their dream. They are saved by a Buddhist monk who prays for them. Yeats was consistent in ignoring the essential religious elements in Noh plays, which are as religious as medieval miracle and cycle plays. It was the love obsession and suffering in purgatory into which Yeats was drawn. He chose Dermot and Dervorgilla as his main characters. Both are seen as legendary lovers and traitors in Ireland, and there could not have been more suitable characters to cause such an intensity of drama.

In the introductory part of *Nishikigi*, the *waki*, as a monk, sets the scene. He does not wear a mask. On reaching the main square stage from the bridge, he proclaims his intention of going to Michinoku (a northern part of the Japanese mainland), sings a sequence of a travelling song, and then announces that he has arrived at Michinoku. In the developmental part, this monk meets a (seeming) village couple, learns the local way of courting, and also hears from them a sad story of unfulfilled love in which both protagonists died. The monk is then shown to the mound where the man was buried. When the couple finishes the story, they vanish into this burial ground. The monk stays on the site and prays for them during the night. In the monk's dream, the couple reappear and they thank him for rescuing them from their timeless suffering. To show their gratitude, they show the monk how the man courted the woman and how she rejected him. In the concluding part, the couple (still in the context of the monk's dream) show their joy at being united, symbolically, by sharing sake from the same sake cup. The man finally dances to show his joy. The dawn breaks and the monk awakes to find that they have vanished, and he himself is left in front of their grave. (This type of play is called "Mugen-Noh," a dream play, as the major part takes place in the dream of *waki*.)

*The Dreaming of the Bones* opens with the first musician setting up the stage. While unfolding the cloth, the first musician sings an opening song, starting with the line, "Why does my heart beat so . . ." Then the first musician announces that a young man, seemingly an Aran fisherman, is coming. Yeats again uses a musician to open the play but again without yielding to the Noh tradition. The developmental part, *ha*, has two sections; first, a Stranger guides the Young Man to the ruined Abbey of Corcomroe. This Young Man had fled from the Post Office in Dublin, a famous revolutionary site in the 1916 Irish Rising against British rule, and is being chased by the British Forces. The Young Man is then passed on to the Young Girl, who accompanies the Stranger; she tells him of the sufferings of Dermot and Dervorgilla. She recounts that after their deaths, for 700 years, though their eyes meet, their lips never meet because of penance for their sin. The Young Girl asks the Young Man for forgiveness for the crime they committed 700 years before, which caused the successful Norman invasion of Ireland. In the concluding part, *kyu*, the Young Man refuses to forgive them for their crime, because as a direct result he nearly got killed along with many other patriotic Irishmen. The Ghosts of Dermot and Dervorgilla disappear after performing a passionate and desperate dance. The Young Man is left alone on the hill when the dawn starts to break. The musicians then close the play by refolding the cloth.

The function of the Young Man in this play is very similar to that of the *waki* in a Noh play. The Young Man represents the contemporary period. The time of the play is set just after the Easter Rising in 1916 (the play was first published in 1919). Consequently, there is a huge time gap of 700 years between the Young Man and Dermot and Dervorgilla. Like the *waki* in a Noh play, the Young Man represents the audience and he does not wear a mask. He is also given the power to save the suffering couple, though it is not a religious power. As the Young Woman says, "If somebody of their race at last would say 'I have forgiven them' the couple will be saved." Yet the Young Man, though nearly persuaded to utter his forgiveness, refuses her plea. Considering the contemporary political situation (the Irish Rising was quashed by British Forces and anti-British nationalism was at

its height), Yeats could not possibly have allowed the Young Man to forgive them. This, however, was not only because of the political situation in which he wrote the play but because of Yeats's own belief, which was much closer to twentieth-century nihilism than to medieval Japanese mysticism. As in his two earlier plays for dancers, he avoided concluding the action within the context of the drama.

Ze-Ami states that *hana* is the life of Noh. In a Noh performance, actors do their best to create *hana* on the stage through their acting:

"Hana" literally means flower, but any attempt to define what is meant by "hana" in the Noh theatre leads to a labyrinth of expressions since the elements of this aesthetic concept are so versatile, and Ze-Ami suggests that Noh includes them all. His concept of "hana" derives from the appreciation of actual flowers, mainly from the beauty of cherry blossom but that does not necessarily means that he excludes all other flowers from it. He also says that actors aged from twelve to thirteen, actors aged from twenty-four or twenty-five, or those around fifty are all equally capable of producing this "hana" . . . But the quality of acting, the kind of perfection an actor is capable of producing on stage, will vary according to his age and skills.

(Sekine 143)

The way to present *hana* in Noh is subtlety itself. Though the Noh theatre seeks to create a visual impact upon the audience, crudity is to be avoided. Symbolic gestures in acting are meant to be more elegant and far-reaching in their expression. The stage set of *Nishikigi* is very simple, consisting of a small mound (a cloth-covered six-foot bamboo structure); and stage props comprise just an ornate branch—a symbol of courtship—and a narrow cloth—one of unattainable love. The stage set of *The Dreaming of the Bones* is also simple, with a curtain that has a symbolic pattern of a mountain and the sky. A lantern is the only prop. Though the stage sets and props are simple, both texts are rich. Both *Nishikigi* and *The Dreaming of the Bones* have a scene of intense courtship, where *hana* can be produced on stage. The conclusions of both plays differ and correspondingly so do their concluding dances. In *Nishikigi*, a man dances to express his joy at finally being united in the next world with the woman he courted for one thousand nights before he died of despair, while in the *The*

*Dreaming of the Bones*, Dermot and Dervorgilla dance in frustration, gazing at each other intensely. Ze-Ami states in *Fushi-Kaden* that a touch of sorrow could add extra beauty to *hana*. Dermot's and Dervorgilla's dance should gain some extra effect as they are naturally sad after their plea has been rejected, but Yeats's intentional or unintentional political message is so strong that it mars the aesthetic effects of the play.

Yeats's last play for dancers is *Calvary*. The theme is the crucifying of Jesus Christ. Yeats, though he chooses as his main character the son of the Christian God, does not make this play in any way similar to a medieval cycle play. Although in Noh there are a group of plays dealing with gods and supernatural beings, none of them became the basis of *Calvary*. Noh plays, in general, are very religious. Yeats's use of Lazarus's seeking to escape from Christ's love, of Judas's trying to fight Christ's power, and of the Roman soldiers' dancing to throw dice to decide who gets Christ's cloak after the crucifixion are not meant to represent a Christian point of view. Noh plays, in general, are deeply spiritual; Yeats's four plays are not. Yeats selectively uses some forms and elements of the Noh drama, all the while persistently seeking his own goals.

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