

Some Comments on the *Noh: The Potomac Cherry*

舞台評 能『ポトマック桜』

By Mari Boyd

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Professor Ueda's noh, in general, is characterized by splendor and a generosity of spirit, making it easy for the audience to be carried away by the sheer vibrancy of the sensory orchestration of drums and flute, chant, sumptuous costumes, and decked stage. Thus it was refreshing to note the prominent civic themes in his newest work, *Noh: The Potomac Cherry*.

This noh has a number of objectives. First is to celebrate the centennial of the City of Tokyo's presentation of 3000 cherry saplings to Washington D.C. ; then to mark the sesquicentennial of the American civil war; and finally to offer a requiem for those who died in the 3.11 Great East Japan disaster in 2011.

The blossoming cherry branches placed around the base of the noh stage and on the upstage area onstage set the play in Washington D.C. and accented the good-will occasion by creating a festive mood to the performance. The cherry motif brought the characters together in that the 1950 U.S visit by Ozaki Yukio, the governor of Tokyo in 1912, and his daughter to see the transplanted trees called forth the spirit of Abraham Lincoln who resided in the Lincoln Memorial.

The more serious themes for the two politicians were those of "government for and by the people" and of war and peace. The first seemed to be a reference to the political situation in Japan where politicians seemed to spend such excessive time and energy bickering among themselves and vying for power that the people, particularly those in the Fukushima disaster area who needed urgent assistance, were left neglected. The second theme was stated with great clarity. Meaning, when delivered in Noh chant, is not easy for contemporary Japanese audiences to comprehend. However in the second scene, "Do not war, do not kill" was repeated twice in modern Japanese without any elongation of the sounds so that what was said was unmistakable. I thought that such a strategy was highly effective in its insistence on making one pay attention to a known thought yet receive it afresh.

In closing I would like to note that the intercultural aspects added visual novelty to the *mise en scene*. The costumes for Abraham Lincoln were particularly eye-catching. His close-fitting frockcoat-like top with white waistcoat and silver buttons exposed the actor's posture and arm positioning to a surprising degree and in the second scene, his robes and Okina mask made Old Abe seem more Asian, almost Gandhi-like—a suitable association for this thematic play.

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