

Lecture: On *Noh Hamlet*

In European tour, December 2012

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Prologue before the performance

Today, Professor Munakata Ueda is going to perform *Hamlet* in the Japanese traditional Noh style as a kind of solo performance. He is today without Noh costumes nor a mask. And he sings today the Chorus part also.

In order to appreciate a Noh performance, you are expected to be “imaginative”.

In the beginning, a kimono is placed near the front of the stage. You must imagine that “Ah, that represents Ophelia who is already dead.”

And in front of Ophelia’s grave Hamlet meditates, then you will hear a meditative song. That is Hamlet’s inner voice. It is usually sung by the chorus.

And at the end of the play, the chorus sings: “Good night, sweet Prince. Flights of angels sing thee to thy rest”.

You will notice how this line is expressed by the handling of a fan.

Now, a short version of “Noh: Hamlet”, as a one-man show.

Ueda Munakata’s Lecture.after the performance

My first attempt at performing *Hamlet* in Japanese Noh style was at Harvard University in 1973-75.

Until then, nobody had tried to perform Shakespeare’s plays in Noh style.

In Noh singing, each syllable of every word must be stressed and prolonged.

Most Japanese words end with a vowel, while English words mostly end with consonants that cannot be prolonged.

And there are many unstressed syllables in English.

However, I wanted to sing Noh melodies in Shakespeare’s English, because I loved both of them.

I was encouraged in the United States and I returned to Japan in 1975.

When I had almost finished the work, *The Shizuoka Shinbun* interviewed me and I met several enthusiastic people who were interested in both Noh and Sh., and I founded “The Noh Sh. Group” in Shizuoka in 1981.

Incidentally, as you may know, Shizuoka and Cannes are sister cities.

Every year in the beginning of October, a “French Festival” has been held at the beach of Miho in Shizuoka.

There stands a memorial of a French ballerina Helene Giuglaris who performed a Noh play, *Hagoromo*, an angel play, in Paris in the late 1940s soon after World War II.

After her death, Marcel Giuglaris, her husband, visited Shizuoka as a French newspaper correspondent and told Shizuoka people about her, and a monument was built to her.

Well, training to sing Noh style in English was not easy until we premiered *Noh Hamlet* in Shizuoka in 1982.

We were fortunate to have the help of Japan's leading Noh musicians, among them was Shonosuke OKURA, an *Otsuzumi* or large hand-drum player. We were young. I was in my forties.

I took the *shite* or main role Hamlet as well as directing the play.

For the two performances in Tokyo the following year, about 1,000 people came, though the house capacity was 350.

It was televised by NHK in the evening news all over Japan. Some weeklies reported with photographs.

For most Japanese it was unbelievable to hear Noh melodies sung in English and see Noh combined with Sh.

For the last 100 years or so, it was taken for granted in Japan, that Sh. would be acted by *Kabuki* actors and other traditional or modern type of performers, but never by Noh actors.

Now, one of the highlights of *Noh Hamlet* is the scene in which, after Ophelia's death, Hamlet meditates in front of her grave in a posture of *Zazen* or *Zen* sitting position.

After a long meditation, he knows he may not have really loved Ophelia, though he had thought he loved her.

For, until then, "To be or not to be" of himself, and "to be or not to be" of Claudius, his uncle, now King, had been the most important question, not his love of Ophelia.

Hamlet has a long meditation. During the meditation, the ghost of Ophelia appears.

Seeing Hamlet reflecting upon himself, she approaches him and pardons him and disappears.

Suddenly he has an enlightening inner experience "satori" and sings: "To be or not to be: is no longer *the* question."

He realizes "To be or not to be: is not *the* question." But, "To live in the present moment is the most important", and he must live for Ophelia also, who may have died because of him.

So, finally he sings "To live in the present future is the only way of living." "The readiness is all."

This is the end of the first scene.

The second scene is from Act V of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

During the fencing match between Laertes, Ophelia's brother, Hamlet is thrust with a poisoned sword and falls.

The second scene is a short dance of Hamlet as a kind of Epilogue.

It begins with: "Exchange forgiveness". "Exchange forgiveness".

This is Laertes' line in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. This line is repeated by the chorus. This is a theme of this Noh play.

After World War II, the idea of "forgiveness" has been very prevalent in Japan.

The last line of the Epilogue is from Horatio's prayer for Hamlet. "Flights of angels sing thee to thy rest."

When *Noh Hamlet* was first performed in Tokyo in 1983, it took over four hours, as there were five scenes.

Then I rewrote it into a two-scene version and showed it at the National Noh Theatre in Tokyo in 1985. Again I took the *shite* Hamlet.

The Japan Times reviewed: "These are very moving, these last beautiful moments, partly because Hamlet and Zen prove uncommonly complementary, and partly because Shakespeare and the Noh have so illuminated each other." (Donald Richie)

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, there is no meditation scene.

Hamlet leaves Ophelia's grave and never returns, but I expect he never forgets her.

I think this work of imagination is one of the reasons why Paul Claudel, a French poet & French Ambassador to Japan, loved Noh, and he himself wrote Noh plays in French in a kind of symbolism.

The Irish poet and playwright, W.B. Yeats said that realism is for foolish people.

It is clear that Sh. was concerned not only with this world, but also with the world after death.

Noh is Japan's oldest theatre art founded in the 14th century, and even now it is very popular.

Noh is concerned with the life after death, though they say in Zen: "Live in the present moment."

At the end of my latest work *Noh King Lear*, the spirit of Cordelia, Queen of France, appears and she leads her father Lear to Heaven.

Noh King Lear was so popular in Japan and was repeated four seasons in Tokyo until last year..

I wish I could bring the play *Noh King Lear* to France as well as to Britain. I am sure you love it.