

Theatre Reviews

***Noh King Lear*. Dir. Kuniyoshi Munakata Ueda. Kanze School. Kioi Hall (Small Hall), Tokyo, 29 April 2009.**

Reviewed by Ryuta Minami

Anthony Tatlow writes that “A Japanese or Chinese Shakespeare no longer seems a contradiction in terms, but rather can open our eyes to readings we would never have associated with those texts, yet which seem entirely justified and hence enlarge our understanding” (34). No Shakespearean performance will fit this remark so well as Noh Shakespeare. Kuniyoshi Ueda, Emeritus Professor of English, is a pioneer of Noh Shakespeare, who has so far produced *Noh Othello* (1992), *Noh Hamlet* (2004) and *Noh King Lear* (2007 and 2008) with professional Noh Masters of Kanze School. In these Noh Shakespearean performance, Kuniyoshi Ueda ably demonstrated how Shakespeare’s plays can be re-interpreted and reshaped according to the aesthetics of the Noh theatre, and thus offered to many theatregoers “additional opportunities for thinking about Shakespeare’s plays” (Orkin 3).

The recent revival of *Noh King Lear* in April 2009 was welcomed by many theatregoers, not only because Ueda recreated *King Lear* in an impeccable Noh manners, but because the performances in the previous years were such a great success with the virtuoso performance of Cordelia by Reiko Adachi (1925-), the eldest female Noh performer. (Here it will also be noteworthy that a new Noh play which is usually performed only once at a time is very unlikely to be revived for consecutive years. So this was a rare occasion for theatregoers to see this Noh adaptation of *King Lear*.)

It can be said Noh is a theatre genre that rewrites familiar stories in order to create its own theatrical world by choosing to focus on one single character and his or her reaction to one or two incidents. This transfocalisation affords a different point of view on the play, thus encouraging a reading of it from a new, unexpected or revised viewpoint. In his *Noh King Lear*, Ueda focused upon Cordelia, and he centred his Noh version on the reunion between Lear and Cordelia, whilst removing the references to the other characters in the original. Also notable is that Ueda rewrote the English play from the vantage point of death so as to follow the conventions of Noh, on whose stage a dead person comes and goes freely in the space-time of real life.

Ueda utilises Noh masks to illuminate the characters of Cordelia and Lear. Cordelia wears an *Ômi-on’na* mask which is a face of a young woman who

has persistent devotion and emotions of a mature woman. Lear wears an *Akujô* mask that represents a strong and fearsome face of an old man with violent temper, sometimes suggesting madness as well. This visual contrast of the masks works perfectly in the scene where Lear enters.

Noh King Lear starts with a scene where Cordelia has landed at Dover with the French army. After the scene which depicts Lear in rage through his dynamic dance (Fig. 1), we see Lear and Cordelia get captured and imprisoned. The second act is preceded by *Ai kyogen*, the scene between the acts. In this scene Fool narrates a brief summary of the original play whilst giving no specific names of the other characters at all. Yet here Ueda gives more than a simple storyline of the play by adding two songs chanted by Fool at the beginning and the end of the scene. As he appears on the stage, Fool chants:

Fool: There are two worlds:
One is seen; the other is unseen.
One is of language, the other is of mind.
The world of appearance, and the world of truth.¹

The idea about the discrepancies between appearance and truth in this song helps its audience focus upon what Ueda thinks is a basic theme of *King Lear* when they listen to the brief summary narrated by Fool. In other words, this song suggests why and how Lear made an error before the original play, *King Lear*, starts. At the end of this *Ai kyogen* scene, Fool chants the other song to suggest a possibility of Lear's redemption and relief from the agony in this world, which is to take place at the end of the second act:

Fool: There are three worlds:
The world of words, the world of behaviours,
And the world of mind and heart;
The three are all important,
But, until they accord with one another,
Lear will not be saved.

If the first song suggests Lear's error, the second song encourages the audience to anticipate the salvation of Lear and the reconciliation of Cordelia and her father as well as re-establishment of public peace through the harmonious unification of three different worlds.

Act Two starts with Lear, who laments Cordelia's death, staggering on to the stage with Cordelia's outer robe of *karaori* (a stiff silk robe of colourful brocade to be worn by a young woman) in his hands. Lear sits down at the centre front, places the outer robe which represents Cordelia's body, and draws his last

¹ All the English quotations from the script are taken from the handouts given at the performance. Ueda Kuniyoshi, *Noh King Lear*, tr. by Ueda Kuniyoshi (2007), 4.

breath. Then Lear quietly moves to the centre stage left, when the ghost of Cordelia appears and chants the following lines:

Cordelia's Ghost: How happy
To know that thanks to my husband's love of truth,
My father's ghost is settled and comforted!
Look up, my lord. Come this way.

[DANCE]

Cordelia, after addressing her father, starts to dance *Hayamai*, a rather quick and elegant dance, showing the joy of her reunion with her father (Fig. 2). As she dances, the tempo of the music and that of the concentric dance increase for a while and then slow down. Cordelia goes up to Lear and silently invites him to join the dance. When Lear stands up, his hunting robe is removed as if to illuminate his liberation from his physical/earthly body. Lear gradually mirrors Cordelia's concentric movements, and both of them dance in circles often facing to each other as if they are carrying on a dialogue through the dance (Fig. 3). After this reunion between Cordelia and Lear, Cordelia guides her father to "The Land of Truth" in the end. Here the *shite* (protagonist: Cordelia) gets the *tsure* (protagonist's companion: Lear) liberated from the agony and anger, and thus bringing him to the other world. "According to Buddhist teachings, the human spirit reaches perfection by its sublimation to zero. That is, humans are in error if they carry beyond death the emotional ties of the living" (Masaki 144). The removal of the hunting robe before his dancing suggests that Lear has freed himself from the grudges he harboured in this world. Finally, after seeing her father off to enter the other world, or "the Land of Truth," Cordelia leaves the main stage.

Reshaping Shakespeare's plays into Noh is an attempt at reading into the plays Buddhist concepts of transitory nature of this world and the eternal nature of sentiments. Just as is illustrated the metaphysical as well as physical presence of Cordelia on the stage, Noh Shakespeare gives an opportunity to see a subject of Shakespearean texts in a striking closeup, specifically from a Buddhist point of view. The Buddhist perspective on *King Lear* was fully illuminated when *Noh King Lear* was presented in 2007 and 2008 on a proper Noh stage with *hashi-gakari* bridge, a passageway between the main stage and the mirror room (dressing room), for the *hashi-gakari* bridge is regarded as a bridge between this world and the other world. But as this revival was given in a western-style theatre with a conventional proscenium arch, the revival consequently gave a somewhat different impression on its audience. Donald Keene once wrote about a Noh stage in comparison with a western theatre:

The absence of a curtain, the unvarying lighting before and during a performance, the great pine painted on the back wall, all suggests less a Western stage—shabby and bare until it

takes on life from a play—than a church, itself an architectural masterpiece but ready for the drama of the mass. Each event that takes place in a performance emphasizes the presence of the stage. In a Western theatre, (...) the stage itself is no more than the platform on which the actors perform. (74)

The ritualistic element perceived in the previous performances of *Noh King Lear* was partly lost in this revival because of the venue, yet the “loss” turned out to be a gain in theatrical terms. The performance space without the symbolic *hashi-gakari* bridge could not fully convey the ritualistic and religious significance of Lear’s exit or “journey” to the other world at the end of the play. But, interestingly enough, the conventional western-style stage served to direct the spectators’ attention to the performative bodies of the two actors, Reiko Adachi (Cordelia) and Yoshihisa Endo (Lear). Without the overwhelming presence of the Noh stage, the actors’ physical presence stood out in bold relief against the black backdrop and the white trees in a manner completely different from that of the usual performance against *kagami-ita*, the panel behind the stage depicting an old pine tree. Ms Adachi, who created Cordelia for *Noh King Lear*, demonstrated her incredible versatility in vocal and physical expressions on the western-style stage. Donald Keene also noted that Noh “makes the greatest demand on the audience” (15). And so does Adachi’s *Noh King Lear*, not merely because it is an impeccable Noh but because the performance encourages its spectators to encounter the Shakespearean performance in the realms not of literary but of theatrical and performative imagination. Isn’t this the proof of a successful Noh Shakespeare?

Works Cited

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Fig. 1. Lear Enters. Photo by Akira Hayakawa.

Fig. 2. Cordelia dances a concentric dance. Photo by Akira Hayakawa.





Fig.3. Cordelia and Lear dance a concentric dance. Photo by Akira Hayakawa.