

The Function of the Imagination in Modern Noh Versus Kabuki Theatre

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The driving force behind art lies in the imagination, which defines how a creative vision is built, relayed to an audience, and then how the audience takes in what they have been given. In some art styles, imagination is more heavily present in the creation of the work. The creator spends a significant amount of time dedicating themselves to making their piece exactly as they pictured it so that the audience can fully comprehend the idea. In other cases, the creation itself is abstract and the audience is left to come to their own conclusions, depicting each brushstroke or sentence to have whatever meaning they can find. Theatre varies between these two ideas, with some being far more expressive and obviously detailed so that the viewer misses nothing, while others are more subtle in how they present the stories. Japanese Noh and Kabuki theatre encompass both of these ideas, showing how an area of the artistic community can have various uses of the imagination spread between different styles of performance.

The imagination in relation to creating a performance is found in all aspects of the presentation. Between building a story, choosing and making costumes, and determining the appearance of the stage, the entire work is a creative project before it is ever a reality. Beyond that, some performers may take the piece and imagine themselves as the characters they are portraying, adding their own style into their work so that the story is honest to itself and their own interpretations. Finally, by the time the production reaches the audience, they are left to gather what they see on the stage and fill in the missing pieces. In some instances, these missing

pieces include things like setting details and the voices of characters. In each of these situations, the imagination plays a different and yet equally significant role by contributing to the overall performance.

In Noh plays, the role of the imagination is most specifically important to the performers and the audience. While new Noh plays are still created, those that are performed at traditional theaters are generally chosen from a set list and rotated accordingly; in comparison to the imaginative work done by the performers and viewers, the inventive process in developing a modern and recognized Noh play is arguably small. Of course, the original creation of the plays that are rotated, which was seen as early as the 14th century, required a great deal of imaginative power, less in the creation of the story itself, but in the development of dances and music to go alongside it. That being said, in regard to modern Noh, new plays are not regarded nearly as highly as the older ones and a fundamental aspect of Noh theatre is the repeated use of the same list of plays, rotating depending on the year and season.

In a performative sense, Noh is imaginative in the way that the actors envision themselves as the characters and how they practice for their roles. Performers are given a specific choreography that is used every time the play is performed. That being said, each performer puts their own style into the motions. An example of this can be seen in *Yoroboshi*, which tells the story of a blind boy seeking enlightenment.¹ In this play, there is a scene where he is describing the difficulties of blindness and at one point, he drops his walking stick on the ground. Some of the actors choose to emphasize his actions more strongly, making him search more dramatically for the stick that is laying near him whereas others move slowly and methodically. These choices

¹ Nippon Gakujutsu Shinkokai. Tr. "Yoroboshi". *Japanese Noh Drama: Ten Plays Selected and Translated from the Japanese* (1960)

who how the actors are envisioning the character that they are playing, displaying how their creativity plays a distinct part in the presentation of their role.

Another instance in which the imagination plays an important role to the performers in Noh plays is their training. Noh plays are not performed as monthly programs like Kabuki, but traditionally are staged only once, and there is no dress rehearsal aside from run-throughs of the major parts.² This means that as the actors and musicians are practicing for the performance, they have to envision the other people alongside them. They imagine that they are doing the steps in full costume with the mask or playing the music in time with the other musicians as the *shite* does their dance. Without this ability to imagine the different pieces working together, each individual would learn their parts without regard to the others; an endeavor that would cause disruption to the final product and result in an unsuccessful performance overall.

Similarly, the imagination of the audience is key to the interpretation of Noh plays. Because Noh performances have a limited number of performers involved and the set-up of the stage is generally similar with the exception of the occasional *tsukurimono*, which are props that help to portray the story. With the assistance of the *tsukurimono* as well as the costumes and dances, the audience is expected to be able to create the scenes that are being described in their heads based on what they are seeing and hearing. In the play *Kochō*, the main character is a butterfly.³ Despite being an insect, she is portrayed with a mask depicting a woman's face and a brightly colored costume. The audience, of course, does not see a butterfly on stage based on these images alone, but rather they take the words and the music in combination with the actor's movement to envision a scenario where a butterfly is mourning its ability to smell the plum

² Pellecchia, Diego and Monica Bethe, 2020, JPARC.online/nogaku/performance/

³ Shimazaki, Chifumi Tr. "Kocho" *The Nōh, Volume III: Woman Noh* Book 1. (Hinoki Shoten, 1976).

blossoms in the spring. This use of the imagination is vital to the understanding and interpretation of what is occurring on stage.

In comparison to Noh, Kabuki is a continuously creative pursuit when considering the development of performances in the modern day. While Noh plays involved a great deal of imagination when they were first made, the same plays have been used over and over again, whereas Kabuki plays are constantly made and performed for large audiences. In Kabuki, the greatest concentration of imaginative energy can be found in the development and planning for the performance itself, where the visual aspect is far more complex and varied than in Noh. While props and costumes are used in both types of performance, Kabuki plays can incorporate things like fire, different styles of music, elaborate costumes created by teams of specialized individuals. For instance, while the performance and design adhere to specific rules set for the creation of Kabuki plays, the presentation varies greatly. In some cases, the costumes used are realistic and truer to traditional dress while in several other instances, costumes and makeup are "highly inventive", implying that a great deal of imaginative effort goes into their construction.⁴ While this is only a single example, the creative aspects of Kabuki theatre spread through the entirety of performances.

In regard to the creation of Kabuki plays themselves, creative freedom is far more abundant than in Noh plays. Stories in Kabuki plays can revolve around traditional themes or focus on more modern matters⁵. In some cases, traditional themes are adapted to reflect ideals that are more contemporary or parallel to modern times. Additionally, plays can be adapted from

⁴ Iezzi, Julie A Salz, Jonah (ed). *A History of Japanese Theater Kabuki: Superheroes and femme fatales* (Cambridge UP, 2016) 111

⁵ Iezzi, Julie A Salz, Jonah (ed). *A History of Japanese Theater Kabuki: Superheroes and femme fatales* (Cambridge UP, 2016) 118

different styles of theatre giving it a wider range of source material, which allows for a larger pool of ideas to create new performances from. The play *Terakoya*, which is centered on the life of Sugawara no Michizane, was originally made to be performed with puppets. A month after it was performed as a Bunraku play, it was adapted for Kabuki and performed in Kyoto.⁶ Regarding this adaptation, one could assume that a great deal of imaginative thought was used to convert from puppetry to human actors and how the story could have been revised or reconstructed to better fit the style of theatre.

When comparing Noh and Kabuki it is easy to see that the imagination plays an important role in both, though the areas in which it is featured most prominently differ greatly. For example, the story of Sugawara no Michizane is featured in both *Terakoya* and *Oimatsu*. Sugawara no Michizane's tale essentially describes his life as a scholar, until he was exiled to Kyūshū where he spent the rest of his days regretting the loss of his home and more importantly, his beloved plum and pine trees. In *Terakoya*, Sugawara no Michizane is referred to as Kan Shōjō and the trees are reinterpreted as triplets based on real events from the time. In this play, the role of the imagination is seen in how ancient and modern events are adapted to fit together to create one cohesive story, again when it was reconstructed from a Bunraku performance to a Kabuki performance, and then finally when the production itself is created and the actors bring it to life.

Alternatively, *Oimatsu* focuses on the spirit of the pine tree, depicting it as an old man who visits a young man guarding the tree at Michizane's residence.⁷ The play was made specifically to be a Noh performance and while it is adapted from the story of Michizane, the

⁶ Izumo, Takeda, Miyoshi Shoraku, Namiki Senryu I, Takeda Koizumo I, *Terakoya* translation, <https://www.kabuki21.com/terakoya.php>

⁷ Shimazaki, Chifumi. Tr. "Oimatsu" *God Nōh*. (Hinoki Shoten, 1972)

more imaginative perspective comes from the actors performing as the pine. While they are dressed as old men, their identity is that of a tree, and their role expresses great depths of feeling regarding the separation from their master and the joy of being remembered even so many years later. At the same time, the audience is watching the performance and imagining that the man in front of them is not in fact a man but rather a spirit. They must envision the scene of a guard at a pine while the spirit speaks to him about the tree itself. Of course, while there are pine trees lining the bridge, there are none on stage, and the characters are singing to each other as opposed to having a conversation, but the image of the scene can still be imagined.

Based on the comparison of these performances, one could arguably say that the imaginative aspect of Kabuki remains more in the realm of creation and construction as opposed to in Noh where the imagination is utilized more by the actors and audience. In the examples, imagination plays a key role in the final product, however its role varies greatly and is shown more prevalently in two very different areas. Of course, this does not mean that there is no imagination in the viewing of Kabuki plays or in the creation of Noh but rather that the emphasis is placed differently, which allows for a broader range of theatre and allows the two types of performance to define themselves independently while simultaneously being major areas of traditional Japanese theatre.

In conclusion, the imagination is a key contributor to the creation of any art style, and can be seen very clearly in different aspects of Noh and Kabuki theatre. Noh theatre uses it primarily in the performing and viewing portion of the plays whereas Kabuki depends on it more for the construction of the performances themselves. Both adapt traditional stories to a more modern stage while carrying traditional values and rules to define the style. As in all theatre, the implications of certain aspects of the stories combined with the vivid imagery or detailing joins

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together to form a cohesive presentation in which all who are interested are able to understand what is going on and envision the situations for themselves.

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