

The Serpent's Dance

By Christopher Blasdel

Ryūji had always felt the presence of the Shintō deities. The hills and mountains around Nara, his home town, were full of shrines, both large and small, and even in the city itself tiny sanctuaries were tucked away in places one would least expect: beside pachinko parlors, next to 100 yen shops and in the shopping arcades. Even around the main station there were numerous shrines with *kami* deities that seemed to greet the arriving passengers. Like the ubiquitous crows that flew overhead, the city co-existed with the gods. Everywhere one went in Nara, the past deeply informed the present, but so much was it a part of daily routine that the townspeople had mostly stopped noticing.

Not Ryūji, however. He loved the sense of serenity and purpose of the old shrines, with their numerous festivals and legends. It was silly, he knew, no one really believed those old stories of the kami anymore, but he often recalled the tales his grandmother told him when he was a boy. One story he liked especially was the tale of the youthful god Wakanomiya, the son of the two main deities at Kasuga, the vermillion colored Shrine built centuries ago on the small mountain above Nara.

His grandmother said that the young deity Wakanomiya originally appeared as a snake by his parents' shrine during a particularly bad drought, and so the elders built him his own shrine further up the mountain. After that, she said, the rains fell and crops grew in abundance.

Though Ryūji's school friends never thought much about the old shrines that dotted the forest paths around Nara, Ryūji, even now as a worldly twenty-two year old, still held his child-like feeling of awe toward them. That was why, a few years back, he joined Kasuga Shrine's traditional music ensemble and began to learn *bugaku* dance so he could perform for Wakanomiya's yearly festival in mid December, the On Matsuri.

His friends couldn't understand this. Though nominally proud of their city's heritage, they were only vaguely interested in it. They were more interested in the latest fashion, cars or girls. On their free days they all went to Osaka to shop or hangout. Ryūji joined them when he could, but lately he felt

distant to them, especially as the festival approached and the rehearsals took up more and more of his time.

The final rehearsal was tonight, and Ryūji rushed through the streets of Nara so he wouldn't be late. He rode his skateboard—his preferred means of transportation—to the rehearsal hall, feeling the cold December wind sting his face as he raced along the winding pathways through Nara Park, past the ancient ponds, towering old pines and rows of stone lanterns. He arrived at the Kasuga Shrine hall, flipped his skateboard up, deftly caught it as it spun around and walked in. He tried to look nonchalant in front of the others, but inside he was excited and nervous about the rehearsal.

This was because he had been chosen this year to dance the solo Serpent Dance at the festival. It was a coveted role and the most demanding piece of the entire repertory. Not many of the ensemble members—especially those as young as Ryūji—were asked to dance it. He practiced hard to perfect the movements, but he was still unsure of himself.

The musicians had already taken their places along the side of the rehearsal room. They faced the hard, polished cypress floor where Ryūji would dance. Ryūji put on a simple kimono and took his place amongst the gagaku musicians. As they prepared, the ensemble *sensei* stood up to announce the presence of a visitor from Tokyo. Ryūji glanced to his side and was startled to see a young foreigner, about his own age, sitting right next to him. The sensei then turned to Ryūji and said, “please look after our new guest.”

Foreigners often came to Nara to study the festival music and dance, and sometimes they observed the rehearsals. But there was something different about this one. Most of the foreign visitors were older, professorial looking men or women who, although obviously interested in the subject, always seemed a bit out of place. This one was different. He was dressed in loose jeans, a colorful sweater and had bleached his long, curly hair in the local fashion. Ryūji, who rarely spoke to foreigners, thought he was probably handsome, but then Ryūji didn't really know how to judge a foreigner's looks. Perhaps he was a model here for a photo shoot?

But no. He was holding a *ryūteki* flute and was studying the score, so he must be here to perform. Ryūji's eyes wandered to backpack lying behind him. On top of the backpack was a skateboard, exactly the same brand as Ryūji's.

The only foreigner amongst a group of Japanese, this young man would normally have stood out, but he looked so at ease and comfortable sitting there that no one seemed to take any notice of him. Ryūji, suddenly remembering his duties, thought he should at least try to begin a conversation and started to introduce himself, but then halted, wondering if the foreigner could speak Japanese. But before Ryūji could continue, the young man announced:

"Hi. I'm Andrew. I'm studying gagaku music at the university in Tokyo and I'll be playing flute for this year's festival."

That was in perfect Japanese.

"Oh, I'm Ryūji."

Ryūji looked into the Andrew's eyes and was greeted with a warm but slightly mischievous smile. That put him somewhat at ease, but still felt a bit self-conscious. Andrew then furrowed his brow and looked like he wanted to ask questions about the music.

"Would you mind if I ask a few questions?"

Ryūji hoped they would not be difficult ones. Although he knew the movements for the dance and could follow the music, he wasn't sure he could explain, at least not in a way that Andrew might be able to understand. But before he could reply, Andrew continued:

"It's about the music for the Serpent's Dance. I was taught that the dancer comes in when the lead drummer cues a beat around the third round of the opening flute canon, but I was also told that it may be done differently here..."

Ryūji was stunned. He didn't expect the foreigner would be so fluent in Japanese or know so much about the music. Most visiting foreigners spoke in a halting, formal Japanese—if they spoke it at all—and to his knowledge, none of them had actually tried to play the music, although many of them came to hear it.

Normally, Ryūji felt self-conscious talking about the dance or music, especially in front of his older colleagues, since they might think he was trying to show off. But there was something immediate and even reassuring about Andrew's question, so Ryūji answered naturally and automatically.

"Well, the dancer just takes the cue from the group leader who plays the small drum. Usually it occurs about two rounds into the flute canon, but

depending on the dancer and the size of the stage, it can differ. You just have to listen for it."

"Who's dancing the solo part in this performance?"

"I am," Ryūji said, trying to sound as if he performed it every year.

"Wow, I heard that's one of the hardest dances. That's great!"

Ryūji didn't quite know how to react to Andrew's sudden enthusiasm; his modesty prevented him from smiling, but yet he didn't want to seem indifferent. Fortunately, the sensei signaled for the rehearsal to begin, and Ryūji excused himself and got up to prepare for the dance.

Ryūji waited for his entrance. The musicians began with a simple four-beat rhythm marked by the hard, leathery raps of the lead drum and metallic clang of a suspended cymbal. Soon, the solo flutist played a single pitch that soared up an octave and gained in intensity until it seemed to pierce the walls of the room. The tone then cascaded back into the lower octave and began a simple melodic pattern. A few bars later, a second flute player began the same pattern, like a canon, and a few bars after that, the third player joined in until six flutes, including Andrew's, were all playing the same melody out of synch. The simple melody, disjointed as it was, became a cacophony of flutes, defying any sense of sequence. This sonic chaos prepared the stage for the dancer's entrance.

Ryūji loved this part. When he was little, the violent disorder of the flutes frightened him, but he had learned to appreciate the cacophony, and now it excited him and sent sharp, energetic shivers through his body.

For the Serpent's Dance, the dancer had to circle a small wooden snake placed in stage center, pick it up and hold it aloft, then exit. This dance was transmitted to Japan over a thousand years ago, and the explanation was that these simple movements were supposed to depict the story of a man from far west China who was an expert in hunting and devouring snakes.

Ryūji went through the dance, concentrating on each movement just as he had been taught. It didn't look so difficult when his teacher did it, but now there was so much to remember. He had to keep his arms parallel, head at just the right angle, and make long enough strides that took him exactly to the edge of the stage. At the climax, he had to feign surprise at discovering the snake, lean down, pick it up and hold it above his head. The final movements expressed joy and victory.

Ryūji finished the dance and returned to where Andrew was sitting.

"That was awesome!" Andrew exclaimed.

"This time was easy," Ryūji said. Although the rehearsal room was cold, Ryūji had broken out into a sweat. "I was just in this light kimono, but when we perform it for the festival tomorrow night, I'll be wearing a heavy costume along with a mask. I hope I can see what I'm doing."

Again, Ryūji suddenly remembered his manners. "By the way Andrew-san, you play the flute very well. Did you study long?"

"Only a bit, but it's nowhere as good as your dancing," he demurred.

There were a few moments of silence, then Andrew looked at Ryūji and said, "I like best the part where you lift the snake up. It's amazing, like you have discovered some special, natural power. I think lifting it up high above your head like that signifies that you have somehow made that power part of yourself. One of my professors told me that this dance probably originated from an old Indian religion that worshipped serpents. Picking up the snake in the dance maybe signifies the discovery and mastery of a powerful energy; you know, like, um, the so-called serpent power in Yoga."

This grabbed Ryūji's attention. He understood Andrew's words, but he wasn't sure what he had meant. No one else—his teachers or elders in the shrine—had ever said anything like this about this dance. He thought the dance was about a faraway man who was delighted to find and eat a delicious snake. But the idea of discovering a new power and making it one's own intrigued him. Maybe it was like learning not to be afraid of the flutes any longer. Ryūji decided he would have to think about it a bit more.

After Andrew said this, he put his hand on Ryūji's lower back and quickly rubbed it in an intimate gesture of friendliness. This move took Ryūji by surprise. Andrew's hand was warm and felt pleasant on his sweat-drenched back which was quickly chilling in the un-heated room. Once again Ryūji felt an energetic surge throughout his body.

Late the next day, on the eve of the festival, Ryūji and the other ensemble members gathered in the rehearsal room to prepare for the walk up to Wakanomiya's shrine. They must accompany the deity down the mountain to the temporary shrine where he will be feted with food, dance, music and

prayers. After exactly twenty-four hours, they would accompany the deity back to his home.

Preparations finished, the head priest entered and motioned for the group to follow. Ryūji, Andrew and the rest picked up their instruments and entered the cold December night.

The entourage walked past the main shrine and out the gate. Already, many tourists had arrived to watch the spectacle of this famous festival. They carried flashlights, chatted and slowly made their way up the hill to witness the ceremony. When the priests and musicians came out, they parted to allow them to pass.

The entourage soon arrived at the door of Wakanomiya's shrine. The priests gathered around the shrine door while the musicians warmed their instruments.

Ryūji kept his eye on the door of the shrine. He knew the head priest would open the door and remove the deity Wakanomiya precisely at the stroke of midnight. Only the head priest was allowed to look inside and touch the sacred object that represented the deity. What the sacred object actually consisted of, no one but the head priest knew.

Finally, as midnight approached, the priest in charge of the crowd told them to extinguish all lights and keep silent. One of the tourists, a young woman whose slick, urban fashion made her seem out of place in the ancient surroundings, ignored the warning and instead turned her flashlight on so she could see the activities. The priest ran over to her, grabbed her flashlight and threw it into the forest. She looked surprised and almost angry for a moment before she realized what she had done and hung her head in shame.

A hushed darkness fell over the crowd and only the illumination of the stars and half-moon remained. Out of the silence a very low, sonorous tone rose from the host of priests gathered around the shrine door. The chanting crescendoed, and the head priest opened the door and entered the sanctuary.

The chant climaxed, and the head priest emerged from the darkness holding the deity tightly to his chest. The other priests quickly surrounded him as if to offer protection. The lead flute player performed an opening stanza and the procession began. The entourage, headed by two large torches and brass censers, moved away from Wakanomiya's shrine and began its descent down

the trail. Andrew heard his musical cue and lifted the flute to his lips and played. Ryūji walked next to him, playing the double-reed *hichiriki*. Soon its shrill sounds and the smooth harmonies of the *shō* bamboo mouth organs joined in and mingled with the gentle fragrance of the incense wafting in the cold air.

After about an hour, they arrived at their destination. The head priest mounted Wakanomiya into his temporary shrine that faced a grassy stage surrounded by bonfires and electric lamps. It was here, the following evening, that Ryūji would perform the Serpent's Dance.

The next afternoon, Ryūji arrived early to prepare. His costume was elaborate, heavy, and putting it on required the assistance of several of the elders. Andrew was there and offered to help.

With Andrew watching, Ryūji unwrapped his costume, took off his street clothes and put on the undergarments. These were the only parts of the costume that were modern and warm. Next came an under kimono; a soft, gray cotton garment tied with a simple sash around the waist. The outer costume consisted of multiple layers of colorful robes, made of finely woven silk embroidered with traditional family crests on a rouge background of cloud patterns. One of the robes had a long embroidered tail that swung with the movements of the dancer. Ryūji knew he had to take care not to step on it when he made sudden turns.

Andrew helped Ryūji into these clothes. The boy already looked splendid, but the most elaborate part of the costume—an orange outer vest—was yet to be fitted. Shaped like a poncho and suggesting a warrior's armor, it consisted of heavy, woven silk and adorned with elaborate designs of dragons; two each on the front and back, floating on a background of multi-colored clouds. Andrew picked it up and admired its richness and color. He then placed it on Ryūji's shoulders and bent down to fasten it.

Andrew put his arms around Ryūji's waist to tighten the band. The costume, dating back hundreds of years, was elegant but not very well insulated, and to Ryūji the warm proximity of another human, however fleeting, was a welcome relief from the cool night air.

It was time for the musicians to take their places. Andrew took a last look at Ryūji, smiled, and then went to the musicians' tent. Ryūji paused before he

donned the final but most important part of the costume, the mask. Carefully, he opened the old pine box where it was stored and lifted the centuries-old mask.

Ryūji placed the vermillion mask firmly on his head and went to the mirror. His young, smooth face was transformed into a grizzly warrior from ancient China: a man, certain of himself, who knew the secrets of hunting dragons or serpents and was about to begin his quest for one.

Waiting off stage, Ryūji felt nervous. The cold exacerbated his stage fright and he began to shiver. He remembered that had to dance facing the shrine. This performance was not for the townspeople or the tourists, but for the deity, Wakanomiya himself.

By the time Ryūji made his entrance to the sounds of the flutes, it was late afternoon and the sun had already set. Bonfires, set at four corners of the stage, filled the air with a scent of pine and provided illumination in the waning light. The grass was dry and brown, and the evening chill had created a light condensation on the grass that made footing precarious.

Ryūji began circling around the stage, each time getting a little closer to the coiled serpent prop placed in the center. During practice, he imagined this part of the dance as a hunter closing in for the kill, but now he had a distinctly different sensation. This sensation had to do with the deity, which he could feel watching from his perch towering above the stage. It was an unmistakable presence, hovering over him and scrutinizing his every move, but it was familiar, if not a bit frightening. At one point in the dance he experienced a sudden jolt. Thinking that Wakanomiya had actually stirred, he momentarily turned to look, but all he saw was Andrew's face, intently looking at him while he played the flute.

Ryūji turned his head downwards to regard the serpent. He remembered what Andrew said yesterday at rehearsal, and a connection between the deity and the serpent suddenly became apparent to him. The epiphany was as clear as the December night: picking up the snake meant that he was picking up the deity himself.

Ryūji experience a moment of intense confusion and disorientation. He lost track of the music and forgot his movements. His mind went blank, but

fortunately, before he had time to panic he heard the distinctive drum patterns, and these enabled him to regain composure.

He quickly remembered his choreography and reached down to pick up the snake. He lifted it to a position high above his head and tilted his mask upwards in an expression of victory. For a few moments, Ryūji held the snake aloft. The music stopped, and a single flute played a short segue into the opening of the next movement.

The moment of confusion passed, Ryūji felt again a powerful and warm sensation in his lower back, slowly making its way up his torso. The remaining dance movements were crystal clear in his mind and he carried them out perfectly.

There was no more cacophony. The soft, harmonious chords of the mouth organ floated above the melody of the flutes and the reed pipes. The drums punctuated dancer's final steps. In the last refrain, Ryūji brought the snake to his hips and faced the shrine. He bowed, made two steps in perfect time with the large drums, arched his hand one last time and briefly squatted. The flutes and drums stopped. It was time for the dancer's exit. Slowly, grandly, Ryūji made his way off stage.

The small local pub was tucked away in the little warren of shops below the main shrine complex. The festivities were complete, and Ryūji went out drinking with Andrew to celebrate their success.

Ryūji talked about the dance. He wanted to explain the extreme disorientation he felt followed by a sudden enlightenment during the dance, but he couldn't quite find the right words to describe it to Andrew, so he just said the obvious.

"The grass was too wet. I thought I would slip."

"This sake should help you regain your balance." Andrew joked.

Ryūji took a sip of the chilled, local sake and he felt a rush shooting through his body, still tense from the dance. He deserved to relax: his dance had been successful, the festival was finished and he was with his new friend. Suddenly, it occurred to Ryūji that he didn't know much about Andrew, so he asked him why he came to Nara.

“Well,” Andrew began, “it is like the sensei said. I’m a foreign exchange student at the Tokyo National Conservatory. I was researching the Wakanomiya On Festival, but I felt in order to grasp how such festival worked, I should actually experience it, not as an observer, but as a performer. My teacher in Tokyo introduced me to the sensei, who invited me down to participate. I was also very curious to observe how the locals view the festival.”

What Andrew couldn’t really articulate to Ryūji was that his interest in the festival was because it was a symbol of all that in Japan which fascinated him—the beauty of ancient ceremony, the awareness of the awe inspiring forces of nature, the elegant, other worldly music and dance and, of course, the people who made the festival happen. Andrew grew up in the Panhandle of Texas. It was a place of raw beauty and elemental power but sparsely populated. He understood the sway nature had on human activities and how one could both fear and respect it—indeed, the Panhandle weather itself could at times feel like the wrath of the gods—but the relative newness of human inhabitation in his part of the world provided no cultural or historical insights for how one might understand one’s relationship with nature. He hoped that the ancient city of Nara with its festivals and ceremonies might just provide him with a vital connection to the past for which he yearned, especially if he could participate in the festival that went back almost a thousand years. Whenever Andrew heard gagaku it conjured in him a certain longing, a desire to belong, a wish to hold on to it as long as he could.

Andrew had other longings that he yearned to share with Ryūji; a desire that two souls might connect in a common interest and work together like a dance, but this longing, although the most important and pressing on Andrew’s heart, was even more difficult to articulate.

Ryūji, for his part, had always wanted to visit the US and could not quite fathom why Andrew might want to leave his home country to come to Nara. Wasn’t the US the most modern and advanced country in the world? What could possibly be so attractive about Nara? But, yes, he realized that there was something special about the Wakanomiya festival, and Andrew seemed to share Ryūji’s enthusiasm about dancing for the deity.

The pub, in the meantime, was getting full, and as more customers entered Ryūji found himself crowded closer to Andrew until their shoulders were touching. For a while he tried to maintain a polite distance, but after a few more drinks it didn't seem to matter. They were both leaning into each other.

Ryūji drank much more than usual, and the boys stayed until late and were eventually turned out when the pub closed well after midnight.

They got on their skateboards and began riding down the street. Andrew was still somewhat sober, but Ryūji couldn't stand very steadily and felt relieved when Andrew pulled alongside him and put his arm around his shoulder to steady him. In fact, it was Andrew who was now leading the way, and Ryūji felt the curiously embarrassing sensation of having an outsider guide him through the familiar streets of his own city. He wasn't sure where they were going, but it seemed to Ryūji that they were heading back in the direction of Wakanomiya's temporary shrine.

But instead they arrived at Andrew's hostel, which was near the shrine. Ryūji turned to say goodbye, but Andrew remained silent. He then took Ryūji by his hand and led him into his room, saying only that since he was so drunk he should probably stay here for the night.

Ryūji was glad to be out of the cold air. He sat on the bed and nervously began talking about the dance. He was going to ask Andrew about the serpent and the strange sense of disorientation that he had experienced on stage, but Andrew, without saying a word, walked over to the bed, sat down and put his arm around Ryūji's shoulder and drew him close. For a moment, Ryūji didn't know what to do. He felt the same kind of sudden confusion as during the dance: circumstances were once more spiraling out of control. What brought Ryūji back to awareness was the incredibly peaceful and reassuring feeling of Andrew's warm shoulder and strong arms. Ryūji relaxed and let his head fall against Andrew's shoulders. He felt Andrew's hand reach around to caress his face and closed his eyes as their lips joined. Andrew pulled him closer and their hands began exploring each other's bodies. At that moment, Ryūji thought he heard the flutes begin their canon.

The next morning Ryūji awoke alone. Andrew was nowhere to be found. What's more, Ryūji was not in a room, but lying next to the bonfire which was kept going near Wakanomiya's temporary shrine, his head propped on his

skateboard. How had he gotten there? he wondered. As he roused himself, Ryūji thought about the previous night and then remembered what had transpired.

He heard that foreigners often did that sort of thing, and indeed it had been pleasurable—after all, Ryūji had been quite drunk. But where had Andrew gone? Then he remembered something Andrew had said in bed last night; a comment about a rising serpent, and how it looked like the one in the dance. They both laughed at this silly joke, but now Ryūji wondered if that might possibly be another interpretation of the dance as well. Perhaps, he thought, I should ask Andrew when I see him. As he picked up his skateboard and prepared to leave, he felt once more the unmistakable gaze of the deity on his back.