

The Genesis and Brief History of Noh

From Sangaku to Sarugaku



(Gagaku)

During the Nara Period (710-794), a form of popular entertainment named Sangaku was imported to Japan from China. This led to the development of Sarugaku, which included pantomime, acrobatics and magic; and Gagaku, a more solemn form of music and dance. While Gagaku was being performed for the noblemen and the imperial court at festivals and ceremonies, Sangaku (or Sarugaku as it became) was spreading throughout Japan being performed at shrines and on the roadsides.



(Sangaku)

As time went on and Sangaku went through numerous changes, it took on the characteristics of Noh and Kyôgen and became known as Sarugaku. From the Heian and Kamakura periods to the Edo period, Noh was called “Sarugaku” or “Sarugaku Noh.”

Sarugaku Noh and Dengaku Noh

It is not clear when the word Noh was first used, but long ago the word may have been used to describe all kinds of performances. From the early 14th century to the late 16th century, Noh was widely divided into two categories called Sarugaku Noh and Dengaku Noh. Sarugaku Noh was largely based on mimetic movements while Dengaku Noh was

more associated with symbolic movement. And while Dengaku Noh was accepted by the nobility and performed largely in the capital, Sarugaku Noh was not accepted in the capital and played largely in Omi, Tamba, Ise and the areas surrounding the capital gaining popularity.



(Sarugaku Noh)



(Dengaku Noh)

The Four Troupes of Yamato Province

At that time both Sarugaku and Dengaku had formed groups known as the Sarugaku-za and the Dengaku-za. Each group had a leader who acted as the chief support for the performances. In Yamato there were four particularly strong groups: Yûzaki-za, Sakado-za, Tobi-za and Enmai-za. These four groups became the four oldest Noh schools that remain today the Kanze, Kongô, Hôshô and Komparu schools respectively. It was each group's desire to rise to be considered the best in the capital. For that purpose, they gathered to perform in a kind of arts competition. Whoever was the winner would be deemed the best and this led to a fiercely fought battle. Whoever was in the top seat would have the most influence on the development of the art. It can also be thought of as one of the reasons Zeami wrote his treatises "Fûshi Kaden."

After the Introduction of Zeami

The founder of the Yûzaki-za, Kan'ami, adapted a form of storytelling dance from Sarugaku called, *kusemai*. He was the first to introduce this kind of dance into Noh. Kan'ami also created to famous Noh plays, *Sotoba Komachi* and *Jinen Koji*.

Kanami's son, Zeami inherited Noh from his father and perfected it. In the Muromachi Period (1336-1573), with the support of Shôgun Ashikaga Yoshimitsu and the court noble Nijô Motoe, Zeami was able to develop his own art,

borrowing the techniques of his rivals. It was during this time that Zeami developed his notion of *yûgen* or "mysterious beauty," which he included in a number of his *mugen noh* (dream Noh) plays, including the masterpiece *Izutsu* which is one of over 50 plays that are attributed to Zeami's hand. Even now the same poetry and prose that he wrote are still being performed.



(Zeami)

Following the death of Zeami, his nephew, On'ami and the son in law of Komparu Zenchiku, took over as head of the troupe and continued developing the art even as the Ōnin War (1467-77) destroyed the capital. As all this was happening, Noh still played a very active role in the lives of the military commanders. Among them, Toyotomi Hideyoshi one of the great unifiers of Japan, took a great interest in Noh and studied with a Komparu Tayû and commissioned Noh plays with themes about himself to be created.

Recent and Modern Noh

Noh continued under the protection and patronage of the Tokugawa Shōgunate. The second Shōgun Tokugawa Hidetada made it a law that Noh and Kyogen would be the official art forms of the shōgunate and that the four Sarugaku troupes from Yamato and the newly formed Kita troupe would be recognized as the official licensed performance troupes. From this, Noh's standing in society was fixed and it continued to grow in popularity with both the elite and the commoners. To this day, it continues to refine itself, however the creative genius from the artists of the middle ages has been lost.

Following the fall of the Tokugawa Shōgunate, Noh too was in crisis. The following Meiji Period (1868-1912) saw the birth of a new government and industrial system in Japan as well as a return of entertainment for ordinary citizens. Noh too went through a kind of transformation with the development of the *iemoto* system, the merging of Noh and Kyogen into Nohgaku, and the building of indoor Noh stages. Recently, with the development of people practicing *utai* (vocal) and *shimai* (short dance) Noh is poised to spread.



(Noh today)

The Chronological Table of Kan'ami Kiyotsugu and Zeami Motomasa

- 1333—Kan'ami was born in the Province of Iga.
- 1363—Zeami was born. Kan'ami organized his troupe, Yūzaki-za, around this time.
- 1368—Kan'ami developed Noh (Sarugaku).
- 1374—Shōgun Ashigaka Yoshimitsu attended a performance by Kan'ami and Zeami in Kyoto.
Yoshimitsu became their major patron.
- 1378—The troupe of Kan'ami and Zeami changed its name to Kanze-za.
- 1384—Kan'ami died. Zeami became the leader of the Kanze-za.
- 1393—Zeami's son, Motomasa, was born.
- 1429—Ashikaga Yoshinori became the 6th Ashikaga shōgun and favored On'ami, Zeami's nephew.
- 1432—Motomasa died.
- 1434—Yoshinori exiled Zeami to the island of Sado.
- 1442—Yoshinori died. Zeami returned to Kyoto.
- 1443—Zeami died.