

## The Classical Noh Theatre of Japan: An Indian Approach

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**T**he logical beginning, theatrically, is made in India. India was the source of most theatre in Asia and still remains the immediate origin of some of its most highly evolved and important arts. From there one can orient oneself naturally and with proper perspective for a comprehension of the whole of Asia's variegated and complex fabric of actors and dancers and their craft. From India the miscellaneous fragments and pieces fall into a reasonable pattern of association one with the other. More important, perhaps, is the fact that out of India and from Indian theatre-forms themselves an aesthetic basis applicable to all Asian dance and drama definitely emerges. Even in those instances such as Chinese opera or Japanese theatre, where Asian arts flowered independently, the underlying principles are similar and a subtle relationship binds them. There is a kind of uniformity in motivation, in aim, in style, in execution of dance and drama which connects it all together and makes it 'Asian' theatre rather than European, African or anything else.

FAUBION BOWERS: 'Theatre in the East'

The Indian histrionic art is known as *abhinaya*<sup>1</sup> in Sanskrit. The word is used in the Sanskrit theoretical treatises to cover every aspect of the classical Indian dramaturgy. *Abhinaya*, meaning mode of histrionic representation, is said to be fourfold: *āṅgika*, *vācika*, *āhārya* and *sātvika*. The *āṅgikābhinaya* denotes the movements of the body and the *vācikābhinaya* indicates the spoken words. The *āhāryābhinaya* means the decorative element of the play and the *sātvikābhinaya* refers to the expression of aesthetic sentiments. According to Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* (circa 200 A.D.), the oldest treatise on dramaturgy in Indian literature, the four modes of histrionic representation have equally important functions to perform on the stage.

In the mode of expression known as *āṅgikābhinaya* the various movements and actions of limbs or parts of the body such as the *aṅga* (the head, breast, hands, waist and feet), the *pratyāṅga* (the shoulders, shoulder-blades, arms, thighs, knees and elbows) and the *upāṅga* (the eyes, eye-lids, pupils, cheeks, nose, teeth, tongue, heels, toes, fingers, palms, face and lips) are used by the actors to convey emotions and ideas to the audience. The numerous hand gestures (*mudrā*) as well as postures (*cārī*, *maṇḍala* and *gati*) are employed with the same purpose. Dance is one of the important media through which the feelings and thoughts are expressed in the classical Indian theatre: the stage acting cannot be considered as an art separate from the dancing. K. Bharata Iyer, commenting on the nature of the *āṅgikābhinaya*, says: 'A language so austere, full of ceremonious beauty and infinite suggestiveness as this, needs no aid, either of the spoken word or of painted curtains or scenes.'<sup>2</sup>

However, *vācikābhinaya* does play a vital role in the classical theatre. The dramatists are instructed by Bharata to 'take care of words', which form 'the body of the dramatic art.'<sup>3</sup> The function of the *āṅgika*, *āhārya* and *sātvika* modes of expression is to 'clarify the meaning of words.' On the role of the *vācikābhinaya*, Bharata further says: 'In this world the literary arts are made up of words and rest on words, hence there is nothing beyond words, and words are at the source of everything.' Thus the *Nāṭyaśāstra* has recognized words as a directive force in drama.

The *āhāryābhinaya*, like the other two modes of histrionic representation, is an important element in the classical drama. It is treated in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* under four headings: *pusta* (model work), *alaṃkāra* (decoration), *aṅga-racanā* (make-up) and *sañjīva* (living creatures). The stage properties representing mountains, castles, chariots, shields, armour, banners and elephants are known as *pusta*. There are three kinds of *pusta*: *sandhima* (the joined object), *vyājima* (the indicating object) and *veṣṭima* (the wrapped object). The *sandhima* is a stage prop which is constructed with bamboos and covered with mats, skin or cloth. Any stage object which is manipulated through a mechanical device is called *vyājima*. A stage accessory which is wrapped round with cloth is named *veṣṭima*. The costumes and ornaments worn by the actors are known as *alaṃkāra*. Flower garlands, head-dresses, wigs, beards and masks are also included in this category. The painting of the face and certain other parts of the body is described by the term *aṅga-racanā*. The animals, birds and serpents made up of bamboos and cloth for the dramatic performance are known as *sañjīva*. Bharata says that any producer who wishes for the success of a dramatic production should pay attention to the costumes, make-up, props and accessories.

The delineation of aesthetic sentiments through facial expressions and bodily movements is known as *sātvikābhinaya*. The primary function of the *sātvikābhinaya* is to evoke *rasa* or sentiment in the minds of the audience. The number of aesthetic sentiments according to the *Nāṭyaśāstra* is eight. They are *śṛṅgāra* (the erotic sentiment), *hāsyā* (the comic sentiment), *karuṇā* (the pathetic sentiment), *raudra* (the furious sentiment), *vīra* (the heroic sentiment), *bhayānaka* (the sentiment of fear), *bībhatsa* (the odious sentiment) and *adbhuta* (the sentiment of wonder). Bharata believed in a total theatre where every aspect of a dramatic performance is equally important.

The purpose of this paper is to examine whether the concept of *abhinaya* as set out in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* is applicable to the Noh drama, the oldest form of classical theatre in Japan. The Noh took its present form in medieval Japan during the time of Kan-ami Kiyotsugu (1333-1384) and his son Zeami Motokiyo (1363-1443). This is a form of dramatic art based primarily on singing (*utai*), instrumental music (*hayashi*) and dancing (*mai*).

The *Harivaṃśa* (circa 300 A.D.), a Sanskrit work, uses the expression *nāṭakam nanṭuḥ* meaning 'they danced a play.' A similar idea is found in the Japanese phrase *Nō o mau* which means 'dancing a Noh play.' The Japanese word *mai* is used

in a broad sense to describe any form of action or movement, either dancing or miming or gesturing or posturing, performed on the Noh stage. The word *mai* is used in a narrower sense to describe several varieties of dance enacted in the Noh plays. These dance forms may be divided into two categories: *kigakubuyō* and *seigakubuyō*. The dances performed to the accompaniment of a flute at a time when the chorus is not singing are named *kigakubuyō*. The dances executed while the chorus is singing are called *seigakubuyō*. The following are some of the dance forms seen in the Noh plays: *jo-no-mai*, *chū-no-mai*, *kyū-no-mai*, *tennyō-no-mai*, *ryūjin-no-mai*, *shinnojo-no-mai*, *otoko-mai*, *kami-mai*, *shishi-mai*, *ranchōshi*, *okina*, *kagura*, *gaku*, *midare*, *hatarki*, *iroe*, *tachimawari* and *kirikumi*.

Zeami<sup>4</sup> lays particular stress on the vital function of dancing, miming and other bodily movements. Highly stylized gestures, postures and steps are executed on the stage. It is necessary for the principal characters to wear masks when playing certain roles. The Noh actor lifts his hands softly before his masked face or bows slightly to represent a person in grief. Raising the masked face slowly indicates a feeling of joy.

By taking a step backward, an actor can convey the feeling of anger, surprise or happiness. Actions such as carrying water from the sea, watching something from a distance, wrestling or fighting with someone and so on can be expressed by bodily movements. As a general rule, the Noh actors, unlike their counterparts in the classical Indian theatre, do not use eye movements or facial expressions to communicate ideas to the spectators. However, eye-movements are employed by the unmasked Noh actors to express emotions on the stage. A critic comments on the function of the eye-movements of the unmasked Noh actors as follows: 'Movements of the eye are also important. There is nothing less attractive than an actor with unsteady eyes. It sometimes happens that a single glance reveals the emotions of a character.'<sup>5</sup>

Sometimes, bodily movements are employed for the purpose of creating the atmosphere appropriate to the occasion. This technique is particularly effective on a stage which is devoid of any scenery or setting. The use of gestural language to create the atmosphere is a stage practice common to several dramatic forms in the Orient.

The idea of realistic acting, primarily a Western notion, is alien to the spirit of Noh drama. Noh acting, like classical Indian acting, cannot be considered as an art separate from dancing. It may be described as a style of acting resulting from the synthesis of dancing, miming, gesturing and posturing. *Āṅgikābhinaya* or gestural interpretation plays a prominent role in this performing art, as in Sanskrit drama.

The importance of the text of the play is emphasized by Zeami as follows: "The composition of Noh texts is the life of this art: *Nō no hon o kaku koto, kono michi no inochi nari*" The dancing and singing are centred round the text of the play. In the Noh drama, these two elements cannot exist apart from the words of the play.

Further, Zeami analyzes the relationship between singing or chanting (based on the words of the text) and dancing or miming (also gesturing and posturing) as follows:

There is another point that must be understood in some detail. If the actor bases his chanting on his movement, he shows himself as a beginner. For an artist of experience, movement will grow from the chant. The audience hears the text and watches the movements. In any aspect of life it can be said that our intentions give rise to the various aspects of our behaviour. It is through words that these intentions are expressed. In the case of the Nō too, therefore, the chant provides the substance of which the movements of the actor serve as a function. This is because functions grow out of substance and not the other way around. Thus, at the time of an actual performance, the actor stresses the importance of the chant. In this fashion, a performer will be able through experience to blend chant with gesture, and the dance with the chant, so as to become the kind of accomplished player who has within himself every element of his art. The fact that he can do this is due ultimately to the playwright's art.

Elegance, lucidity and purity are the essential qualities of the language used in the Noh drama. Even the low class characters speak excellent poetry on the stage for the sake of the beauty, or *yūgen*. Only the most appropriate and easily understood words should be selected in composing the text. The language employed by the dramatist should appeal to the ear. Utmost care should be taken to avoid vulgar words and crude expressions that could bring down the level of the performance. These are some of the views expressed by Zeami on the language of the theatre. Zeami, like Bharata, has accepted *vācīkābhīnaya* as a controlling force in drama.

The costumes, masks, wigs, head-dresses, props and accessories have an important function to perform in the Noh theatre. Noh actors wear many varieties of costumes on the stage. The characters are assigned specified types of costumes. Generally, the Noh costumes are graceful and beautiful in accordance with the aesthetic principles laid down by Zeami. Even the humbler characters wear gorgeous costumes. The colours of the costumes are significant. The colour of the collar worn with certain dresses varies with the character portrayed in the play. Here, white stands for nobility, red for youth, dark-blue for strong characters and green for menials. Sometimes the design of the costume also symbolizes character. For instance, the serpent-maiden in *Dōjōji* wears a costume with a design suggesting a snakeskin.

Masks, too are used in this art. However, only the *shite*—the principal character—wears a mask. Even he appears without one, when performing in the genre of plays known as *genzai-mono*, except in the female roles. His subordinate, the *shite-zure*, uses a mask only when he is impersonating a female or is playing a supernatural role. All other secondary characters such as the *waki*, *waki-zure* and *kokata* perform without masks. Generally there is a neutral expression on the masks, in keeping with the highly restrained style of Noh acting which conceals emotions rather than displaying them.

The masks used in Noh plays are of a wide range. There are about forty varieties of male masks such as *okina*, *sambasō*, *chichi-no-jō*, *enmeikaja*, *imawaka*, *jūroku*, *dōji*, *yorobōshi*, *tobide*, *shōjo* and *shishiguchi*. There are about twenty varieties of

female masks, some of the prominent ones being *ko-omote*, *waka-onna*, *magojirō*, *fukai*, *yamauba*, *hannya* and *ja*.

Wigs and head-dresses are essential make-up for the Noh actors playing certain roles on the stage. There are three varieties of wigs known as *kazura*, *tare* and *kashira*. The term *kazura* is used for wigs worn by male actors who are playing female roles. To this group belong the *naga-kazura* and *midaregami* worn by a heavenly maiden and a crazy woman, respectively. The *tare*, a short wig falling to the shoulders, is of two kinds, the black and the white. The former is worn by a youthful god or a young man and the latter by an aged god or a warrior. The *kashira*, a long wig falling behind as far as the hem of the garment, is of three kinds: *kura-gashira*, *shira-gashira* and *aka-gashira*. Here, the black one is used for gods, the white one for aged persons and the red one for demons. The last two kinds of wigs are used in the lion dance, too.

The head-dresses of the actors may be divided into three groups, *hachimaki*, *kazura-obi* and *kanmuri-mono*. There are four kinds of head-dresses belonging to the last group, *eboshi*, *uikan*, *sunbōshi* and *tokin*. The head-dresses of the actors, like the costumes and masks, vary with the characters portrayed.

Like the classical Indian stage, Noh has no elaborate setting or scenery to distract the attention of the audience from the play. The huge pine tree painted on the *kagami-ita* which serves as a background for any Noh play is the only scenery visible on the stage. Nevertheless, a large number of stage properties are used in the production of plays. Classified into two groups as *kodōgu* and *tsukurimono*, the stage properties are indispensable for the effective presentation of Noh plays.

The minor stage properties worn or carried by the actors are called *kodōgu*. The most commonly used article is the fan which is an essential item in dancing. The design painted on the fan symbolizes the character of the part portrayed. There are also other articles such as bamboo hats, paper umbrellas, rosaries, mirrors, letters, bags, drums and swords used as stage accessories. Most of them are similar in appearance to the actual objects used in everyday life.

The major stage properties are named *tsukurimono*. They are of two types, the small or medium sized properties carried by the actors, and the large sized properties placed on the floor of the stage. The bows, arrows, staffs, torches, fishing rods, pails, litters, brooms, sprays, gems, musical instruments and fishing nets belong to the former category. The boats, coaches, temples, palaces, shrines, shrine-gates, huts, prisons, tombs, grave-mounds, mountains, bell-towers, well-curbs, cherry trees and pine trees belong to the latter. The large sized properties seen on the Noh stage are mostly symbolic or abstract representations of the actual objects. Some of them are merely wooden or bamboo frameworks wrapped round with cloths suggesting the objects intended.

It should be evident from the foregoing account that the decorative element called *āhāryābhinaya* by Bharata plays a significant role in the Noh theatre. It is interesting to note that both Bharata and Zeami in their theoretical writings have treated drama as primarily a performing art.

According to Bharata, the basic function of the various modes of dramatic

expression is to create *rasa* in the minds of the audience. The term *rasa* means taste, flavour, savour or relish. In the context of drama it refers to the pleasurable experience gained from witnessing a dramatic performance. The *rasa* theory was formulated by Bharata in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* as a criterion of Sanskrit drama. The eight principal aesthetic sentiments delineated on the Sanskrit stage are the dominant type of emotions or moods portrayed on any classical stage in the Orient.

The purpose of Noh drama, in the words of Zeami, is 'to being sweetness to the hearts' of the audience. This object could be achieved by emphasizing *yūgen*, an aesthetic ideal highly valued in medieval Japan. The theory of *yūgen*, like the concept of *rasa*, is an aesthetic principle adopted by Zeami as a canon of criticism of Noh drama. The word *yūgen* was originally used in poetic criticism to describe things profound, obscure or dark. But in the later period the term was used to convey a meaning quite different. *Yūgen* is defined by Zeami as follows:

The essence of *yugen* is nothing but beauty and gentleness: *Shikaraba, tada, utsukushiku, nyūwa naru tei, yūgen no hontai nari.*

The uniformity of the beauty of various forms of dancing and singing should be known as *yūgen*: *Miru sugata no kazukazu, kiku sugata no kazukazu no, oshinamete utsukushikaran o mote, yūgen to shirubeshi.*

In Zeami's opinion, elegance, gentleness, grace and refinement are the sources of *yūgen*. The *yūgen* mood may be created on the Noh stage by a combination of the beauty of singing, dancing, instrumental music, costumes and make-up. A play in which *yūgen* finds full expression, like one with *rasa*, is treated as superior.

The concepts of *rasa* and *yūgen* may be considered to be the most original contributions to the theory of drama in the Orient. Zeami's concept of *yūgen*, though similar in certain respects, is not the same as Bharata's concept of *rasa*. Nevertheless, both terms express the idea of beauty and perfection in dramatic art. It would seem that Noh drama, the most significant form of classical Japanese theatre, is in harmony with Bharata's concept of *abhinaya* as expounded in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. □

#### NOTES

1. Manmohan Ghosh, tr., *The Nāṭyaśāstra ascribed to Bharata-Muni*, Asiatic Society of Bengal, Calcutta, 1951, chap. viii. The word *abhinaya* in a narrower sense means only miming or dancing.
2. *Kathakali: The sacred dance-drama of Malabar*, K. Bharatha Iyer, Luzac & Company Ltd., London, 1955, pp. 78-79.
3. *The Nāṭyaśāstra*, chap. xv.
4. *On the Art of the Nō Drama: The major treatises of Zeami*, tr. U. Thomas Rimer and Yamazaki, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1984.
5. Donald Keene, *Nō: The classical theatre of Japan*, Kodansha International Ltd., Tokyo, 1974, Revised paperback edition, p. 72.