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Staging Two Unperformed Nō Plays by Zeami: *Matsura* and *Furu*

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With many people in many places experimenting variously with theatrical productions based more or less closely on Nō plays, one easily forgets that it takes a good deal of trial and error merely to revive a hitherto unperformed Nō play. This article discusses some of the problems involved in reviving *Matsura* and *Furu*, two plays for which no performance tradition exists, even though they are probably by Zeami himself.

**Key words:** JAPANESE THEATER, NŌ THEATER, ZEAMI, FURU, MATSURA

Western interest in the Japanese Nō theatre (to say nothing of kabuki, bunraku, butō, and so on) began in the first years of this century and has inspired all sorts of more or less experimental productions. Nō plays have been performed in English on a proscenium stage, to the original music and with authentic Nō dance, costumes, masks, and props. They have been done with modern dance, electronic music, non-traditional costumes and masks, and extravagant sets. They have been adapted and reshaped in all sorts of ways. Meanwhile, ventures like the NOHO theatre group in Kyoto have been pursuing “Nō fusion theatre,” seeking to exploit Nō techniques in the performance of non-Nō plays. In a similar spirit, the Sydney-based dancer Chin Kham Yoke recently presented (1995) in Sydney and Melbourne a solo dance drama entitled *Inflamed* and derived from the Nō play *Kinuta*.

There have been many performances of Nō plays, or of plays derived from Nō, by actors unfamiliar with Nō and for audiences that may hardly have heard of Nō. In other projects, equally experimental in their way, non-Nō plays, or “new” Nō plays (*shinsaku nō*) in Japanese or English, are performed by trained Nō actors and musicians for audiences already familiar with Nō. Examples include *Takahime*, Yokomichi Mario’s Nō adaptation of Yeats’s *At the Hawk’s Well*, Janine Beichman’s *Drifting Fires*, and Allan Marrett’s Australian Nō play *Eliza*, all of which have been performed in Japan. In fact, *Takahime* itself was recently transformed by Okamoto Akira and his Renniku Kōbō group into a new, “contemporary Nō” entitled *Mizu no koe*. Meanwhile, an entirely different, quasi-nō adaptation of *At the Hawk’s Well* has been performed in Japan by Chin Kham Yoke and others.

Projects like these place many unfamiliar demands on everyone involved. Even when the intention is to follow accepted Nō style and technique closely, the result is bound to differ somewhat from that achieved by any normally staged play from the standard Nō repertoire (genkōkyoku). All reach in one way or another beyond the established world and techniques of Nō. In contrast, one might assume that at least normal Nō performances (performances of authentic Nō scripts, by professional Nō actors and musicians, in dedicated Nō theatres, and for regular Nō audiences) are stable and no longer involve experimentation. Staging *Takahime* or *Eliza* as a full-scale Nō play is one thing, but a play from within the Nō tradition itself
should pose no novel problems. However, this is not so.

Nô actors have been experimenting for a long time. Take the example of Matsukaze and Izutsu, two masterpieces by Zeami (1363-1443), the classic genius of Nô and a major figure in the history of the theatre worldwide. No one knows how Zeami himself performed them, but documents show that in the sixteenth century they were done in a style quite unlike that taken for granted today. Matsukaze and Izutsu as we see them now on stage are an invention, or a reinvention, of the seventeenth century.³

The case of Semimaru, Kinuta, Yoroboshi, or Koi no omoni is even more striking. All are now accepted as major works, and they have always been available for study by amateurs devoted to Nô singing (utai). However, none is known actually to have been staged until the seventeenth century. When it was at last decided to perform them, there was no tradition on how to do so. All the problems they posed had to be solved at once, almost as though they were shinsaku nô. As a result, Kinuta, for example, has an unusual number of performance variants even now.⁴ However, it was at least unnecessary to compose all the music for them (as it is for shinsaku nô or for the two plays discussed in this article), since they had long been sung.

These four plays were Tokugawa-period revitalizations (fukkyoku). In the twentieth century there have been many more. Some Nô actors or groups of actors are particularly keen to revive plays for which no performance tradition exists. Recent examples include Tôgan Botô (revived at the National Nô Theatre in 1991)⁵ or the colourful Kasui, performed by Umewaka Rokurô at the National Nô Theatre in 1995.

And what of Zeami himself? Surely, by the twentieth century all plays known to be by him, or plausibly attributed to him, were established in the repertoire. But not at all. Some of the plays preserved among his own manuscripts have never become current. An example is Unoha, which was first performed by Ōtsuki Bunzo in 1991.⁶ Two more such plays are Matsura and Furu. Matsura was revived in 1963 by Kanze Sakon and Furu in 1984 by Yamamoto Nobuyuki. The staging of both is still in flux, as actors try one thing after another to meet the performance challenges that they pose. In the process, Matsura, at least, is showing signs of throwing up a wide variety of performance variants, just as Kinuta did in the Tokugawa period. If this is not yet true of Furu, that is only because Furu has been performed far less often and seems to be more intractable than Matsura.

Zeami dated his manuscript of Matsura the tenth month of 1427.⁷ Of course, the fact that he copied the script does not prove that he wrote it himself, and the play’s flaws have led some people to doubt that he could have. Matsura is strikingly disjointed, largely because of the way the playwright used his source materials, and the various theatrical devices it calls for do not work very well together. Still, many passages in the script are to my eye characteristic of Zeami and remind me of specific plays by him; and the opinion of Iō Masayoshi, an outstanding scholar of Nô texts, supports this view.⁸ One may therefore assume that Matsura is by Zeami, although it may have of course be his adaptation of an older play.

Matsura, an ancient harbor on Matsura Bay along the northwest coast of Kyushu, may be one of the petty kingdoms mentioned in the earliest Chinese accounts of Japan. In the earliest historical times, diplomatic missions and military expeditions set out from there for the continent, and it is from there that Hideyoshi’s troops sailed for Korea in the closing years of the sixteenth century. Matsura’s role as a gateway to the continent gave rise to the two
legends dramatised in the play. Both appear in the eighth-century Fudoki (gazetteer) of Hizen, the local province.

The first legend concerns Empress Jingū herself a legendary, fourth-century figure said to have conquered the Korean kingdom of Silla. The Fudoki tells how, before setting out from Matsura, she fished for ayu in the river there, and how the local women then took up the custom. This and a series of early poems about young women fishing for ayu at Matsura9 is the reason why, in the first part of the play, the shinete (a young woman) carries a fishing pole and wears a broad, conical hat (kasa). Zeami’s written instructions require both items.

The second legend concerns a nobleman named Otomo no Sadahiko and a local girl called Sayohime. Sadahiko, who had been sent to conquer the Korean kingdom of Mimana, stopped for a time at Matsura, where he became intimate with Sayohime. Before leaving, he gave her a mirror to remember him by. As his ship sailed away, Sayohime rushed to the top of a nearby hill and waved her scarf to call him back. (Since then, according to the Fudoki and later materials, the hill has been known as Hirefuri-yama. “Scarf-waving hill.”) Then, clasping the mirror to her breast, she leaped into the river and drowned. Sayohime is the shinete in the second part of Zeami’s play.

The play goes as follows. A traveling priest, the waki, arrives at Matsura. (Zeami’s manuscript specifies two priests, the waki and a silent wakizure, but the performance I saw omitted the wakizure.) The priest praises the beauty of the hilly landscape, on which snow is falling. A young woman then enters, carrying a fishing pole. She sings of awaiting the evening moon over the river and over Matsura shore.

Seeing her, the priest questions her about the place. In reply, she tells him the story of Sayohime and urges him to pray for Sayohime at the Kagami no Miya (“Mirror Shrine”) of Matsura, where Sayohime’s spirit is enshrined.10 She then narrates at greater length the sad parting of Sadahiko and Sayohime.

At this point the priest asks her about the mirror. In reply, she begs him to save her from sinful attachment and to give her the priestly stole that he wears. The priest complies. She then promises in return to show him the “sacred mirror.” After this, she withdraws from the stage. The first part of the play is over.

During the interlude that follows, a local man (the ai-kyōgen) enters. In answer to the priest’s questions, he repeats in colloquial language, and in a good deal of garrulous detail, the tale of Sayohime.

The priest now knows that the girl he saw was in fact the phantom of Sayohime. As the second part begins, he sings of awaiting a dream vision of Sayohime. Sayohime then enters and shows him the mirror. On looking into it, he sees the face of Sayohime’s beloved Sadahiko. Meanwhile, Sayohime laments her attachment to her love and summons up the past. In the play’s final passage, she reenacts waving her scarf and drowning herself with the mirror. Dawn then breaks, and the priest wakes from his dream.

Between 1427 (the date of Zeami’s manuscript) and 1963 (the date of the play’s first modern revival), the only confirmed performance of Matsura took place in 1722. However, the script itself, which went by several variant titles, was fairly well known and was probably sung at times by amateurs. In 1771 it was rewritten, perhaps for an unrecorded performance, by Kanze Motoaki, the major Kanze school actor of the time. In an attempt to give the play greater unity, Motoaki eliminated the business with priest’s stole and suppressed the mirror.
Instead, he stressed the motif of waving the scarf. He called the revised version simply Sayohime.  

Kanze Sakon revived *Matsura* in 1963, under that title, for the 600th anniversary of Zeami's death; the companion piece on the same bill was a *shinsaku no*. The performance script was provided by the No scholar Ikeda Hiroshi, who retained some features of the 1771 version. He also supplied the interlude text, for which Zeami gave only a one-line summary. This version of *Matsura* has been performed a good many times since then by various actors in the main Kanze line.

Other revivals of *Matsura* have followed, independent of the first but still within the Kanze school. The two most notable actors involved have been Umewaka Rokurō (in 1984) and the Osaka actor Ōsuki Bunzō (also in 1984). Bunzō established the script for these performances in close conformity with Zeami's original. The Kyoto kyōgen actor Shigeyama Sennojō wrote the interlude text. In subsequent years both Rokurō and Bunzō have done the play several times. For example, Bunzō performed it at the National No Theatre in April 1996. In February 1995, I saw it done at the Umewaka Nōgakudō (Tokyo) by the young actor Umewaka Shin'ya, who followed Rokurō's performance practice.

The first lesson I learned from Shin'ya's performance was that even when the script is by Zeami himself, and even when it lacks any hallowed performance tradition, what one hears from the stage may not be exactly what one sees on the page. I had with me a printed version of Zeami's original script. The performance omitted several passages; the cuts affected both *waki* and *shite* speeches. For example, in part one of the play, the *shite's* short, opening song (an *issei*) is followed by a fairly long *sashi* passage, which was cut. Moreover the words actually spoken by the priest were not Zeami's.

Later on, the theatre kindly sent me a xerox copy of the *utaibon*, which had been sold out at the time of the performance. The *utaibon* is in principle the actual performance text, and I hoped that it would reflect these changes, but it did not. The cuts, presumably made by Rokurō himself, had been unofficial, like those made for a particular performance of a Shakespeare play. Published discussions of the play—ones involving Rokurō himself—do not mention them. As for the priest's speeches, the actor (Takai Matsuou) or a predecessor in the role had probably rewritten them himself. Zeami's *waki* speeches are so different in style from what *waki-gata* actors are now used to that Takai would have felt uncomfortable declaiming them.

In short, the text of *Matsura* as actually performed is not identical with Zeami's, even though Zeami's text is that of the *utaibon*; and the differences between it and Zeami may well vary with each performance. The same is probably true of the interlude text written so recently by Shigeyama Sennojō. Other kyōgen performers (including Sennojō himself) are entitled to modify it at will.  

As for staging and props, many matters remain unsettled and continue to be discussed among performers and scholars. As Nishino Haruo has pointed out, this is a common problem with old plays that lack a performance history, for they may pose problems that are not addressed by established practice. For example, it seems to be widely felt that something should be done about the first half of the play. The *shite* (the young woman) has to stand in the same place for too long after her opening speech. (Perhaps this is why the *sashi* I mentioned was omitted.) Several authorities have suggested bringing a boat on stage, although
Zeami’s manuscript says nothing about one and no one seems actually to have tried the idea out. (This “boat” would be the sort of light framework prop, evoking the outline of a boat, that is characteristic of Nō.) A boat would provide some variety and movement, and some feel that it would also help to give the play greater unity. Of course, it would also create staging problems of its own.

The mirror, which is central to the story told by the play, seems to raise particular difficulties. Zeami himself is perfectly clear about it. His instructions for part two specify that Sayohime appears carrying the mirror, that she displays it to the priest, and that in due course she gives it to him. Nevertheless, Kanze Sakon in 1963 did not use a mirror. In 1984 Umewaka Rokurō used a mirror, but in later performances he gave it up. The combined manipulation of the mirror and of Sayohime’s scarf is simply too tricky. Ōtsuki Bunzō adopted, instead, a plain gold fan (one made especially for the play) that Umewaka Rokurō found excessively “kabukiesque.” Rokurō and, following him, Umewaka Shin’ya, now use a plain silver fan, equally special to this play. However, the matter of the mirror remains unresolved. For myself, I regretted its absence in the performance that I saw. Shin’ya’s Sayohime displayed her silver fan to the priest across the full diagonal width of the stage (from jōza to wakiza), which rendered implausible the idea that the priest could recognise anyone’s face in it. Perhaps in the future someone will find a better solution. At any rate, the mirror seems to be as difficult to handle as any odd prop that might be required by a shinsaku nō.

Another focus of concern is the priestly stole in part one. Neither the priest nor the stole appear in the play’s pre-Buddhist source material, but the motif is normal for Nō, being found in such plays as Miwa or Teika. From the standpoint of current practice it looks odd for the priest himself to place the stole around the young woman’s neck, as Zeami’s instructions require. The actors find the whole business awkward, and as noted earlier, in some performances it has simply been suppressed.

The scarf, too, poses difficulties, for it is unique to this play. So does the kasa worn by the young woman in part one. Not that a kasa is unusual in Nō, but in Matsuura it seems to be in the way. Since the text says that it is snowing, the actors have sometimes sprinkled it with “snow,” but there is no consensus on the subject so far. For the time being, the play as a performance event remains, as it were, under construction. Such is the distance that can separate even one of Zeami’s own plays, transmitted to us in Zeami’s hand, from the Nō of today.

The same distance separates present Nō from the play Furu. Zeami’s manuscript of it is dated to the second month of 1428, and a mention in a document dated 1524 suggests that it may have been performed in that year. Otherwise, the play has been performed only at the Isonokami Shrine in 1984, and in Tokyo in 1989 and 1995. Furu is even more convincingly by Zeami than Matsuura.14 It celebrates the deity of the Isonokami Shrine, south of Nara, and it may have been written for the shrine festival of 1428.15 This shrine is one of the oldest and most venerable in Japan.

In the play, a priest (the waki) bound for Kumano stops on his way at the Isonokami Shrine. A nameless young woman, the shite, then enters carrying a length of cloth. After describing an early winter scene with light snow on the hills, as in Matsuura, she says, “Come, come, I must wash the cloth.”
The priests asks her why. She explains that the “cloth” is the deity’s robe; she is washing it because Furu, the name of the spot where the Isonokami Shrine stands, means “stays [ru 留] in the cloth [fu 布].” This deity, she says, is the sword with which the god Susanoo slew the eight-headed serpent in Izumo, and with which the first emperor, Jinmu, quelled evil deities at Kumano. It protects the realm and destroys all enemies. It is called the “Sword of Furu,” she goes on, because long ago a maiden was washing cloth at this spot in the river when it came rushing down the stream and stopped in her cloth. Can one see this sword? the priest asks. No, the young woman answers, but it may manifest itself in a vision to a suitable pilgrim. Whether or not one has this vision depends entirely on one’s faith.

The first part of the play is now over, and the woman vanishes behind the shrine fence.

In part two, the woman reappears as a divinity, or perhaps as a medium in a state of divine possession. Zeami’s instructions have her holding both cloth and sword so as to display the moment when the sword lodged in the cloth. The sword is blazing with light. The divinity then dances, amid offerings of white and green sacred streamers and among waving green, snow-dusted branches of the sacred sakaki tree, while firelight gleams on the red shrine fence, and the chorus sings of “the sword that shines like the sun” and that forever confers peace and prosperity on the realm. At dawn, the divinity reenters the portals of the shrine.

Furu follows the same “dream-vision” (mugen nō) pattern as Matsura. In mood it is clearly a “god play” (waki nō), that is, a congratulatory play of which the central figure is a divine being. However, the defining criteria for a god play seem to have been settled only in the seventeenth century, long after Furu was written, and the play lacks several of them. It is set in late autumn, not spring; the shite figure is female, not male; and the waki is a Buddhist monk. As a result, Furu is now unacceptable as a god play and in fact fails to fit any of the five categories into which the repertoire is divided.

There seems to be little or nothing published about performing Furu, but I saw the third performance of it, on February 12, 1995, in the National Nō Theatre. Koyama Hiroshi, a senior Nō scholar, told me at the time that it was quite different from the two previous ones. Clearly, Furu is more disconcerting to perform than Matsura and poses problems to which no consistent approach has yet been worked out.

The shite, especially in part two, is particularly unusual. Nothing in the current repertoire prepares the actor to play a goddess who is at once a sword deity, a sacral woman, and a divine robe. Her appearance recreates the moment at the winter solstice when the sword (a ray from the life-giving sun) impregnated a divine woman, thus bringing about the spiritual rebirth of the sovereign. So impossibly hermaphroditic a shite is outside a Nō actor’s normal range. In fact, confirmation of the strangeness of this shite can be found in the repertoire plays Tatsuta and Sakahoko. Tatsuta, probably a youthful work by Zeami’s son-in-law, Komparu Zenchiku, is modelled on Furu. However, the shite in Tatsuta is purely female: the female aspect of the deity of the Tatsuta Shrine. The male aspect of the same deity appears in Sakahoko, a completely separate play.

Technically, the performance that I saw was extremely accomplished, and most of the actors and musicians were strikingly young. The shite, Yamamoto Nobuyuki, was an outstanding representative of the Kanze school. The costumes were beautiful and the masks exceptional. In this performance, the shite had a tsure, or “companion,” in accordance with Zeami’s instructions, and even the tsure’s ko-omote mask was unusually fine, while the
wakaonna worn by the shite was a rare treasure. Together, the shite and tsure looked perfectly lovely. The music was expert and lively, and the shite’s dance in part two was a long display of complex Nō dance technique.

But while I admired the performance, I did not like it. The confusion over how to treat the play, and the shite, seemed all too plain. The solution had been sought in fast-paced virtuosity, overly dramatic staging, and excessively emphatic gesture. The performance seemed jazzy and overdone. For example, the arrival of the ai-kyōgen (the interlude character, in this case a minor sword deity) was announced by a tattoo on the taiko drum—an unorthodox device. And why was a taiko introduced in the first place? This drum is used for strong, dramatic dances, but it sounded odd accompanying a beautiful young woman dressed all in white, even if she was at the same a sword deity. Moreover, the major dance in part two made it clear that the sword in Furu is just as troublesome a prop as the mirror in Matsura. In order to be able to dance properly, the actor had to get rid of it.

The solution adopted was to have the goddess hand the sword to the priest a short way into the dance, then take it back just before the end. For the actor, this may have been an adequate solution, but as a spectator I found it shocking. Nothing in Zeami’s manuscript authorises it, but more than that, it short-circuits the play. I suspected contamination from the repertoire play Nomori, which is also by Zeami. In Nomori, the shite figure (a demon) has a magic mirror that the waki (another priest) wants keenly to look into for himself. However, when the shite first displays it to him he recoils, for what he sees is too awesome to endure. He can withstand the sight only after gathering into himself all the powers of the deities whom he honours, so that when the shite actually hands him the mirror, the moment is one of supreme, triumphant insight—a personal triumph that he has been actively seeking. In Furu, on the other hand, the priest seeks only to behold the divine sword and to receive its blessing, not to derive personal mastery from wielding it himself. Besides, properly speaking, the sword is separable neither from the divine woman’s "cloth" nor from the divine woman herself; so that Yamamoto Nobuyuki’s handing of the sword to Hōshō Kin’ya (the waki) destroyed—at least for me—the vision that is the explicit point of the play. Perhaps a better solution will have been found by the next time Furu is performed.

In this way, two Zeami plays that lack any performance tradition have in the last thirty-three years (in the case of Matsura) or in the last twelve years (in the case of Furu) begun at last to acquire one. Whether either will enter the established repertoire remains to be seen. In the meantime, the actors who perform them are trying out different approaches to the problems that they pose. Some repertoire plays have been through this process too, but long ago. Many of them have accepted, named performance variants known as kogaki, most of which involve staging and the choice of costume or mask. A few kogaki are surprisingly recent, and the choice of one can at times produce startling results. For example, Miwa can be transformed by a Kanze school kogaki known as hakushiki into a completely different performance event. Just this sort of thing is happening with Matsura and Furu, as the actors attempt to assimilate their various flaws, strangenesses, and possibilities into the received tradition.
NOTES

1. For example, a production of Funa Benkei at the University of Wisconsin (Madison) in 1983, using a translation that I made for it. The translation was attuned phrase by phrase to the music, in consultation with the production director, the Kita school Nō actor Matsui Akira. Also in 1983, Mr. Matsui directed an equally authentic production of the same play, done in the original Japanese, at the University of Michigan (Lansing). The performers were students in each university's drama department.


7. Neither play has been translated. The text of *Matsura* is found in *Yûkyoku sanbaku gojû ban shû*, pp. 719-723 or, in a reproduction of Zeami’s manuscript, in Kawase Kazuma, ed., *Zeami jihtsu nihon jûchibun shû*, Wan’ya Shoten, 1994 pp. 107-114; the current utaihon was published by Ōtsuki Bunzô (Osaka: Nô no Kai) in 1985. *Furu* appears in *Yûkyoku sanbaku gojû ban shû*, pp. 655-658 or, in facsimile, in *Zeami jihtsu nihon jûchibun shû*, pp. 121-130. For a study of *Furu* and a fuller summary than the one below, see Royall Tyler, "Korean Echoes in the Nô Play *Furu*." *East Asian History*, no. 7 (June 1994), pp. 49-66.

8. See Itô Masayoshi’s introduction to the utaihon cited above.


10. Kagami no Miya, well known throughout premodern Japanese history, is mentioned even in *The Tale of Genji*. Similarly, Sayohime figures in a complex of folktales found in many regions of Japan.


16. This topic is discussed at length in "Korean Echoes in the Nô Play *Furu*.”


18. *Nomori* is translated in Royall Tyler, *Pining Wind: A Cycle of Nô Plays*, Ithaca: Cornell East Asia Program, 1978, pp. 177-

黒曲「松浦」と「布留」の諸問題

要旨：日本にも欧米にも、能をもとにして実験的な劇がさまざまなに演じられることがある。しかし、その方向や舞台上のしくさなどが伝承されていない能を「復曲」する場合にも、色々な実験が必要となる。この論文は世阿彌の「松浦」と「布留」の例を取り上げる。