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# The Art of Japanese Noh Theatre in Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood*

Minae Yamamoto Savas

**T**raditional Japanese theatre has a continuous performance tradition spanning several hundred years. Japanese Noh theatre has a particularly rich theatrical and aesthetic heritage that offers a doorway into Japanese history and culture. Japanese Noh plays unify and harmonize mime and dramatic elements with dance, chant, and an orchestra composed of a flute and three drums. The other critical

elements involved in the performance of a Noh play are masks, robes, the mode of production, and the unique stage space in relation to the audience. These elements are intricately woven together into a harmonious whole creating a unified aesthetic experience. As Komparu Kunio, an established contemporary performer of Noh, stated in *The Noh Theater: Principles and Perspectives*, "Noh is an event to be experienced directly and personally. It is not a panorama like opera or Kabuki, aimed at a large group of spectators in a one-way process.

Thus a person who goes to see Noh has certain responsibilities. A different drama is created for each member of the audience because Noh effects a direct exchange between the hearts of the performers and of each spectator... [A] given actor will perform in a given play with a given group of performers only once on any given day."

The subdued and symbolic movements of Noh depict impressive images of classical and medieval heroes and heroines. Noh plays draw on episodes from older texts, as well as folktales featuring histor-

ical or legendary figures. Many of the Noh plays written and revised in the medieval period are performed to this day while going through changes reflective of shifts in patronage, audiences, and social climate. The ideal of simplicity in the art of Noh and other art forms, such as flower arrangement, tea ceremony, landscape gardening, and monochromatic painting that flourished in the Muromachi period (1336-1573), is closely associated with the aesthetic concepts of ideal beauty. The study of Noh theatre and its significance as a living art today thus not only gives us an insight into the culture of medieval Japan, but also helps us focus on certain cultural continuities bridging traditional and contemporary Japanese societies.

## Akira Kurosawa's Adaptation of *Macbeth* in his Postwar Japanese Film

The influence of Noh on the films of Akira Kurosawa (1910-1998) is particularly evident in *Kumonosu-jō* ("Castle of the Spider's Web," also known as *Throne of Blood*, 1957). Basing his work on Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Kurosawa set this film in the middle ages (1185-1600) of Japan, a period when samurai warriors first rose up to challenge the authority of the established court. While the early medieval period marks the firmly established governance by the shoguns, hereditary commanders of a military force, the late middle ages saw more frequent incidents of the overthrow of a superior by his own retainers. This significant historical and social phenomenon of the late medieval Japan coincides with the phenomenon presented in the world of *Macbeth*. By transplanting *Macbeth* to medieval Japan and incorporating Noh elements in *Throne of Blood*, Kurosawa has further pursued the theme of *Macbeth*. In *Throne of Blood*, Kurosawa allows his audience to scrutinize human desire for power, cruelty, and weakness



A Noh performance within the film (*Throne of Blood*, 1957 Toho Company)

that yields to temptation. The *Throne of Blood* begins with the following song.

*Look upon the ruin  
Of the castle of delusion  
Haunted only now  
Of those who perished  
A scene of carnage  
Born of consuming desire  
Never changing  
Now and throughout eternity*

This introductory chant gives a vivid description of the emptiness of General Washizu's (Macbeth) ambition and of human desire for power. After defeating rebel armies, Generals Washizu and Miki (Banquo) are lost in the dense Cobweb Forest on their way to the fortress of Lord Tsuzuki (King Duncan). In the forest they meet a ghostly prophet. As she predicts, Washizu and Miki are both immediately promoted by Lord Tsuzuki. The prophecy further deludes Washizu into believing that he will ascend to the throne. Encouraged and manipulated by his ambitious wife, he plots the murder of his lord, which eventually brings him and his wife to ruin.

In *Throne of Blood* Kurosawa emphasizes the narcissism of *Macbeth*, underling the

struggle of the individual for ego. This struggle is artistically manifested in the Noh-style interaction between Washizu (Macbeth) and his wife Asaji (Lady Macbeth), not through the soliloquy as in *Macbeth*. While Washizu and Asaji work together to achieve their mutual goals driven by their own desire for power, they struggle with their own internal contradictions. Washizu is torn between two irreconcilable feelings: his loyalty toward Lord Tsuzuki (King Duncan) as well as his friend Miki (Banquo) and his ambition of becoming the absolute authoritative figure. Asaji criticizes such ambivalence that Washizu reveals, enticing him into proving himself to be the man. She says, "Ambition makes the man." Much of Asaji's apparent mercilessness is, however, merely protective camouflage to conceal her own innermost fragility. Not able to cope with her own internal conflicts at the end, she is the one who loses her mental equilibrium, not Washizu.

Such struggle of the individual featured in this postwar film is in some way indicative of Japan's constant struggle between preserving Japanese cultural tradition and yielding to the forces of

modernization to enjoy the fruits of progress. The struggle within Japan is manifested in the film, crafted by the hand of the director. Kurosawa was born at the tail end of the Meiji period (1868–1912), the dramatic era of modernization and westernization. He lived through the twentieth century, experiencing the war years of intense nationalism and Japan's postwar period of rapid economic growth. The battle between old and new has been conspicuous in the films of Kurosawa, who was educated in both Japanese tradition and western knowledge. In Japanese cultural tradition the importance of joint responsibilities linking members of the group is highly valued while in western culture a special emphasis is placed on individuality. In *Throne of Blood*, the complex interplay of eastern and western cultures is embodied, and Noh performance is effectively incorporated to reflect the historical era in which the film is set. Kurosawa also used ritualized elements of Noh to highlight the tension and intensity Asaji (Lady Macbeth) conveys. For example, her fixed expression reminds the audience of a Noh mask with its suggestion of restrained or suppressed emotions hidden behind the mask. Her highly stylized movements often conceal the deliberate nature of her actions. Chants resounded through *Throne of Blood* are modeled on the traditions of Noh songs. There are many allusions to well-known Noh plays, creating a cinematic world of multiple dimensions. Kurosawa maneuvered such highly evocative substances of Noh to awaken the imagination of the audience, which is the essence of Japanese Noh theatre of medieval origin.

### The Influence of Noh on the *Throne of Blood*

In his 1984 book entitled *The Films of Akira*, well-known American Japan film critic Donald Richie delineates Kurosawa's indebtedness to Japanese



Asaji (Lady Macbeth) sitting next to Washizu (Macbeth) (*Throne of Blood*, 1957 Toho Company)

Noh drama, quoting Kurosawa's words: "I like [Noh] because it is the real heart, the core of all Japanese drama. Its degree of compression is extreme, and it is full of symbols, full of subtlety. It is as though the actors and the audience are engaged in a kind of contest and as though this contest involves the entire Japanese cultural heritage... I wanted to use the way that Noh actors have of moving their bodies, the way they have of walking, and the general composition which the Noh stage provides." Richie argues that another reason for using Noh in this film is that Kurosawa was interested in the limitations of character; that is, "the Noh offered the clearest visual indication of these limitations." There are certain "limitations" that one can express using stylized movements and masks of Noh, as Richie points out. However, these visibly imposed "limitations" are indeed effective at expressing restrained or suppressed emotions on the Noh stage.

Richie indicates the Noh elements are mostly associated with Asaji for "she is the most limited, the most confined, the most driven, the most evil." Similarly, Keiko McDonald, in her 1994 book



A fukai mask is expressive of the sorrow of the woman who has lost her child.



Asaji's madness (Throne of Blood, 1957 Toho Company) – this image is from the final scenes of the film in which Asaji loses her mind after she discovers her baby is stillborn.

entitled *Japanese Classical Theatre in Films*, claims that in some scenes, while Washizu's features work in expressions of horror and dismay, his wife Asaji's face is a study in absolute control: static, cold, and impassive, like a female blank Noh mask.

Asaji's face resembles *fukai* or *shakumi* masks designating a middle-aged woman. Some scholars claim that the female Noh mask is virtually expressionless because it represents what may be called "neutral expression" or "intermediate expression." However, the "expressionlessness" of Noh masks is deliberate. Using the expressionless Noh mask is one of the most effective ways to express what is beyond expression. In this scene her Noh mask-like expression effectively reveals the hidden power of the dark side of human nature, bringing out intense moments. It is true that Asaji conceals her feelings more thoroughly than her husband does. As a result, she is more overwhelmed with the intensity of internal conflict than Washizu.

In madwoman Noh plays, this would be the most dramatic moment in which



A Hannya Mask

a protagonist displays her madness, hidden under the expressionless masks. A madwoman in Noh plays often forgets herself because of some kind of traumatic event that triggers the mental disequilibrium. The majority of these types of plays feature a mother's affection for her child and her suffering when parted from that child. The madness is expressed in a subtle yet intense manner. Such restrained madness often



A demonic woman in the Noh play *Kurozuka* (*Black Mound*)

effectively conveys agony, suffering, and despair of the female protagonist. With a strong indication of derangement, her dramatic expression resembles that of a demonic woman wearing *hannya* or *ja* masks. Her expression of madness reveals profound sadness, rooted in the vanity of all desires of the will.

Kurosawa's adoption of Noh is not limited to the performance of Asaji and Washizu. The film also contains a significant allusion to the well-known Noh Play *Kurozuka*, or *Black Mound*. The Noh play begins when two itinerant

monks seek lodging for the night in the house of a poor woman at Kurozuka in Adachigahara. To entertain the guests, the mistress of the house spins a hem thread on a spinning wheel while reciting a lament for her empty and bitter life. For the Japanese audience, the early scene from the film in which Washizu encounters an obscure woman spinning thread on a wheel deep in a forest thus signifies the cycle of sufferings of all beings.

In the Noh play *Black Mound*, the mistress warns the monks not to look into her bedroom when leaving them to collect firewood to keep them warm, but one of the monks is unable to restrain his curiosity. Peeping into her room, there he finds a pile of skeletons. Realizing that they are in the house of a demon, they flee hurriedly. Appearing as an angry demon, the mistress chases them down until she finally is overcome by the power of the monks' prayers. This scene from the Noh plays reminds us of the scene from the film in which Washizu and Miki (*Banquo*) pass mounds of unburied human skeletons. This scene effectively presents multiple

dimensions of the film. For those who are familiar with the Noh play *Black Mound*, it indicates human weakness and falling into temptation. What is ironic about this play is that the ascetic monks who are practicing severe service of self-discipline and abstention cannot simply resist their curiosity. Their lack of self-discipline ignites the anger of the demonic woman who attempted to offer some help by providing them with shelter and warmth.

For those who see the horrifying scene as is, it signifies the futility of human egos, which in some cases drive people to kill each other. Throughout the film we do not see any brutal murder scenes. Instead of relying on what is visible in the film, Kurosawa makes the best use of what is invisible by allowing the imagination of the audience its full play, which is the fundamental principle of Japanese Noh theatre. Based on the same principle, to conquer our fear, we must look at everything straight on. According to Kurosawa in his 1982 book *Something Like an Autobiography*, Kurosawa's brother said to him, when he took Kurosawa to the ruins of the Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923, "If you shut your eyes to a frightening sight, you end up being frightened. If you look at everything straight on, there is nothing to be afraid of." We have to look at the pile of the skeletons straight on. This is a reality from which we cannot escape. This brief shot is more visually powerful than any of the actual brutal murdering scenes ever filmed.

Finally, the structure of Noh has also greatly influenced Kurosawa's filmmaking. Kurosawa adopted one of the most important aesthetic concepts in Noh, the three organizational steps based on the ancient Chinese court music: *jo* (beginning and preparation), *ha* (break



An old woman in *Throne of Blood* (*Throne of Blood*, 1957 *Toho Company*)



*A pile of skeletons in Throne of Blood (Throne of Blood, 1957 Toho Company)*

and rupture), and *kyū* (rapid or urgent). In relation to the full dramatic action of *Throne of Blood*, the introductory chant in the film, as mentioned above, constitutes the first *jo* section, where a slow and dignified tempo is used for the opening part. The rapid *ha* phase effectively builds and vacillates. This section designates a shift to a faster tempo, which accentuates Washizu's torment due to his own troop's betrayal as well as the death of his wife. The final *kyū* scene reaches a state of controlled frenzy, in which an even more rapid tempo is adopted to conclude the story. In this final scene, Washizu's own archers turn on him and fill his body with a barrage of arrows, including one straight through his neck. The final *kyū* thus builds to climax.

In *Throne of Blood*, Kurosawa exploits various theatrical elements of Noh such as its structural organization, masks, music, chant, and choreography to reproduce the total theatre experience of Noh in his film. The highly stylized Noh movements and expressions

Washizu and Asaji delicately apply in their performance emphasize the tension and intensity that they intend to convey. The allusion of a Noh play that Kurosawa includes in the film produces multiple layers of meaning. Kurosawa's employment of the three organizational *jo-ha-kyū* steps effectively builds up to a climax at the very end of the film, which allows the effects of the vanity

of human desire to linger in the audience's mind. Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* embodies the intricate interplay of eastern and western cultures.

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*Washizu's body filled with arrows (Throne of Blood, 1957 Toho Company)*