

THE SECRETS OF NOH MASKS

by Michishige Udaka
photography by Shuichi Yamagata

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photographs; 32 masks.

Noh master Michishige Udaka is the only living actor to continue to create masks while still performing and teaching. In this book he presents 32 of the more than 200 masks he's made to date, accompanied by compelling revelations about the masks and the highly nuanced ancient dramatic art of Noh itself. Ruth Ozeki, who studied Noh theatre under Udaka in Japan, has contributed a new Foreword to further complement the stunning photographs.

Noh, in which few performers employ a range of intricately understated movements and gestures to weave myriad tales on a compact stage, must be one of the world's most elemental forms of theatre. Its superficial simplicity, with only a very limited number of stage props and sets, has been a factor in masks playing a sustaining and central role. Noh masks, with their unique and nuanced fusion of real and imaginary, may be carved from wood to fixed designs, but the subtle movements of a talented, well-trained actor render them infinitely expressive. Making a Noh mask demands profound insight into the relevant role, combined with an original interpretation. While on stage, the mask must embody the actor's intentions perfectly. To fulfill these two requirements simultaneously and add an extra dimension to his performances, Michishige Udaka makes his own masks. He is the only Noh master to do so, and his book presents rare insights into the heart of soul of both masks and Noh itself.

Noh 「能」—its name derived from *nō*, meaning “talent” or “skill”—is one of the oldest extant theatre forms in the world, having been performed since the 14th century, when it was formalised by Kan'ami and his son Zenami. It is unlike Western narrative drama. Rather than being actors or “representers” in the Western sense, Noh performers are simply storytellers who use their visual appearances and their movements to *suggest* the essence of their tale rather than to enact it. Little “happens” in a Noh drama, and the total effect is less that of a present action than of a simile or metaphor made visual. Educated spectators know the story's plot very well, so that what they appreciate are the symbols and subtle allusions to Japanese cultural history contained in the words and movements.

Needless to say, the most iconic feature of this unique performing art is the MASK....



孫次郎

MAGOJIRO

Magojiro takes its name from sixteenth-century founder of the Kongo school of Noh acting, Kongo Magojiro Hisatsugu, and is reputedly modeled on his wife, who died at a young age. Kongo is said to have worn the mask on stage. Nicknamed "Omokage" (face, visage), Magojiro is a typical Kongo school onnamen, of which this is a copy.

If one were to rank the attractiveness of female characters in Noh, this would be the pinnacle of noble feminine beauty. To perfect it thus demands more than simply superficial, symmetrical features. Magojiro has a longer, narrower face than Ko-omote (p. 14), and a trace of a smile playing about her lips. This poses the greatest technical challenge for the maskmaker. Young, gentle features, a face pure yet of womanly charm; a mask that speaks not so much of youthful naivety as of someone's wife, just that fraction older. It is the smooth, rounded curves that express this. Of paramount importance is the smile. Forming an open mouth, the corners slightly upturned, is the greatest challenge in Magojiro—a subtle alteration to any angle of the mouth will affect the quality of the entire mask.

In Kongo school performances, Magojiro is used for beautiful women of amiable disposition, in plays such as *Yûju* and *Matsukaze*.



Known as 'Noh-men' 「能面」 in Japanese, these stylised, beautiful creations are art forms in their own right and the artists are greatly admired. They are carved from blocks of Japanese cypress, or "hinoki", and painted with natural pigments on a neutral base of glue and powdered seashell. There are approximately 450 different masks, mostly based on sixty genres, all of which have distinctive names.

真蛇

SHINJA

Shinja is an apparition more nightmarish even than Hannya (p.52). Jealousy flares within her even more fiercely, and this mask is its ultimate expression.

Here there can be no vestigial humanity: Shinja is a vengeful, violent, vile spirit, a malevolent monster that rains catastrophe on the living. Her heart is closed to any opportunity to save her tormented, turbulent soul. She no longer wishes to hear, thus the absence of ears.

Her expression surpasses that of Hannya for sheer intensity: eyes bulging, tongue blood-red in her gash of a mouth, the jutting lower jaw, the throbbing veins in the forehead. To create her, Shinja's maker must distill all his powers into his hands. Once Shinja has someone in her sights, she never lets go. Here in a sense she resembles the Medusa of Greek mythology, a creature with snakes for hair, the teeth of a wild boar, bronze arms, and golden wings, who could turn those who saw her to stone with a single glance. Snakes are emblematic of both.

Shinja is used by the *noshi-shite* in the play *Dojoji*, a major work in the Noh repertory sometimes referred to as the "final exam" for Noh actors. The story is that of a dancer who develops an unrequited passion for a young itinerant monk. Following the fleeing youth into the temple of Dojoji, where he has taken refuge in the bell, she immolates him in



YOROBOSHI

弱法師

This mask is used exclusively for the *shite* in the play *Yoroboshi*. The young man's anguished countenance offers a glimpse into the depths of despair. Hollow-cheeked despite his youth, the absence of pupils in his eyes betrays his blindness. As the mask is designed for a specific role, the maker must be well versed in the background story. Why is the boy blind? Why did he have to endure such a tragic fate? Capturing him perfectly demands profound insight into his heart-rending circumstances. Most challenging for the maskmaker is reflecting in the mask both the sorrowful lamentations of Yoroboshi, "the beggar monk," and his air of calm resignation.

The protagonist in *Yoroboshi* is a boy named Shuntokumaru. Falsely defamed by his stepmother, he is disowned by his father. After much wandering, he is struck blind by sorrow and spends his days begging.

The piece is dominated by the interplay between the main character's bitter loneliness, and his feelings of resignation, or perhaps enlightenment. In the second half, *Yoroboshi* is reunited with his father, but it can hardly be called a happy ending. The father recognizes his son, but fearing the taunts of others, waits until dusk to speak to him. The boy is left to dwell in darkness, both literally and figuratively.

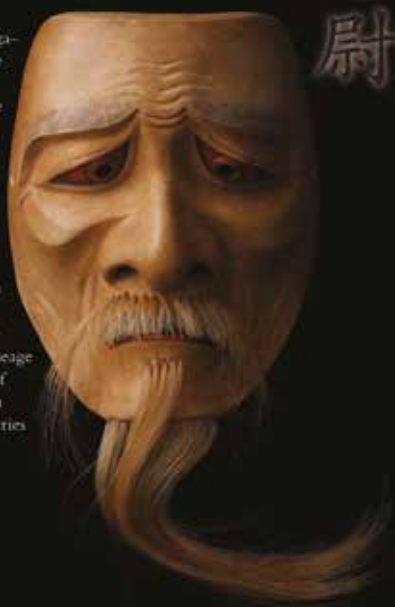


Noh masks signify the characters' gender, age, and social ranking, and by wearing masks the actors may portray youngsters, old men, female, or nonhuman (divine, demonic, or animal) characters. Only the *shite*, the main actor, wears a mask in most plays, even though the *tsure*, or supporting actor, may also wear a mask in some plays to represent female characters.

MYOGA-AKUJO

茗荷悪尉

The face of an elderly man of striking appearance, the Myoga-akujo mask takes its name from the shape of the eyes, which in their mournful downward slant resemble spikes of the *myoga* ginger used in Japanese cooking. Myoga-akujo is distinguished by his deeply chiselled features, his intense, wide-eyed gaze, and his broad nose. His thinly painted eyebrows and beard are further evidence of age. The mask takes divine roles in plays such as *Domyoji* and *Shinagige*, but there is something un-Japanese about its appearance. Perhaps its lineage can be traced to the ancient gods of those who made their way to Japan from China and Korea many centuries ago.



邯鄲男

KANTAN-OTOKO

Kantan-otoko is designed exclusively for the *shite* role in the play *Kantan*. The story is based on the Chinese tale of the "Pillow of Kantan." A penniless young man anxiously pondering his future, stops in the village of Kantan and meets a wizard with a magical pillow. Borrowing the pillow, the young man lays his head upon it and falls into a deep slumber in which he has a very long dream. The tale tells of how, having experienced all the vicissitudes of life in his dream, the hitherto ambitious youth realizes the futility of pursuing fleeting glory and pleasure, and begins to have doubts about his direction in life. The role is acted using this one mask right up to the moment the protagonist recognizes the truth for himself.

The nose, dominating the face, is broad and stumpy. The long eye slits and firm mouth are also associated with youth, but the wrinkles of uncertainty etched between his brows betray his turbulent state of mind.



A RARE INSIGHT INTO BOTH THE THEATRE OF NOH AND ITS UNIQUE MASKS,
BY THE ONLY ARTIST WHO IS AN ACKNOWLEDGED MASTER OF BOTH.

Michishige Udaka, a *shite*, or leading role Noh actor, is a member of the Kongo School, where he was apprenticed to Iwao Kongo 11, the late hereditary head (*'iemoto'*) of the school. At present, Udaka is the only Noh maskmaker who also performs on stage. For his contribution to the arts, Udaka has been designated a *National Intangible Cultural Asset* by the Japanese government. In addition, he teaches actors, dancers, designers, mask-makers, musicians, psychologists, and scholars from all over the world at the International Noh Institute, which he founded in Kyoto in 1986.

This first softcover edition of the 2011 original offers the reader a surprisingly profound appreciation of the depth of nuance of the elements comprising this inimitable performing art. This is achieved not only through the author's telling of his own story, but through the stunning visual feast which the photos present.

Noh is, after all, a highly visual art form.



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