

VIEWS AND REVIEWS

Zeami on the Essence of Art

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THE FIRST TIME I ever saw a Nō play was at Kyoto's Kanze Kaikan, some fifteen years ago. I sat watching from the corner seat at the *shite bashira*, sketchbook at the ready, but I was too stunned to draw. It was almost a shock of recognition, as if being confronted with something one had always known but had forgotten or repressed. After that first god-play I climbed up to where my wife was sitting in the top row, and almost speechless I mumbled: "What do you think of it?" She stared at me and gasped: "Oh, how beautiful, how wonderful. . ."

On one of our subsequent trips to Japan we managed to see twenty-one Nō plays in three or four weeks. We did not return to Japan for sightseeing—the seeing is so much more important than the sights—but to be in and around Kyoto again, to keep priceless friendships alive—and of course to see Nō!

Since that first epiphany I have sat drawing in Kanze Kaikan, Kongō, Kawamura until I knew every waki, every drummer, every flutist, every single kyōgen actor, even kōken, and all the faces of the chorus, until they became as familiar as those of close relatives known since childhood.

All I had to guide me were brief summaries of the non-plot of these plays, these intensely poetic happenings, for I did not understand a word, was therefore deprived of all the verbal poetry for which I could only try to make up by finding some English or French translations. And yet, as I was drawing constantly—you cannot draw unless you became what you draw—I was sure that little that was of the essence escaped me. The Transmission of the Flower must indeed have taken

* The following article is a review of *On the Art of the Nō Drama: The Major Treatises of Zeami*, translated by J. Thomas Rimer and Yamazaki Masakazu (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. xlv + 298.

place from heart to heart through the eye—that lens of the heart—and through the ear, catching in the congratulatory or pathetic voicing the expression of profoundest human emotion issuing from a depth of interiority where all cultural disparities seemed to melt away and all exoticism evaporated. It was as if the very Ground of what is most basically, most specifically human had been touched. Buddha-nature had manifested itself.

What happened on the Nō stage I perceived as a profound zazen-in-motion, I heard it as zazen-in-sound. The act of drawing seems to be my way of doing zazen. . . I do not know whether, to either a Japanese Nō aficionado or a Western Nō scholar, these jotted-down perceptions of Nō through my Western eye have any validity. The act of drawing, however, opened me to, suffused me with these liturgies of Being/Non-Being, this High Art which seemed to embody all the esthetic-spiritual nutrients on which to subsist.

I relate this as an avowal of my awareness of how limited my competence is to review these translations of Zeami (1363-1443). I would consider myself disqualified indeed, were it not that in this Master's writings I find the vital criteria, the esthetic, the pedagogical and the spiritual touchstones by which to assay the intrinsic qualities of all the arts, to distinguish counterfeit, trivia and kitsch from what is of ultimate authenticity. For confronted with Zeami it becomes painfully clear where we fail. His stress on the Way, on the processes of training and development, his precepts on the quality of the commitment, on the discipline required to create something of abiding value, seem as valid for the Nō actor of six hundred years ago as for any musician, painter, draftsman, choreographer today who wishes not only to reach the mastery of his craft, but, beyond mere mastery, aspires to allow his art to lead him to the completion of his own inner human process, to be the spiritual disciplineto toward the attainment of the innermost core of existence.

Hence this book, *On the Art of the Nō Drama*, whatever its flaws, deserves to be welcomed in gratitude: it is no inconsequential achievement to make these normative teachings, these crucially important ponderings on esthetics by the greatest figure in the history of Nō, available in English!

To dispose of the flaws first, for they are quite minor in comparison to the merits: spoiled as we are by the combination of extraordinary

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esthetic sensitivity with the magistral erudition and elegant turn of phrase of a Donald Keene—for instance, in the introduction to his *Twenty Plays of the Nō Theatre* (1970) and so superbly in his *Nō, the Classical Theatre of Japan* (1966), which in Kōdansha's sumptuous hardcover edition is still further enhanced by the magnificent photographs of Kaneko Hiroshi—this Princeton University Press production strikes one as uninspiring, even dowdy. The photographic material, a mere eight pages of run-of-the-mill color plates, is random, hardly worthy to illustrate either Zeami's profound esthetics or the application of his translators. Dr. Rimer's essay on the "Background of Zeami's Treatises" is useful and of sound workmanship. But it, and the translations themselves, lack the lustre of the foreword by Wallace Chappell who, being an artist, is able to compress in his few pages the essence of Zeami's spirit with infectious enthusiasm.

What strikes me as a much more serious flaw is Yamazaki Masakazu's "The Esthetics of Ambiguity," which in its cerebral juxtaposition of things oriental and western is not helpful at all, marred as it is by that curiously pedantic attitude of superiority—not uncommon in Japanese writing of this kind—which can be so disturbing in its bland unawareness of the filters through which one is apt to observe cultural phenomena and traditions other than those one is born into. This is bound to result in absurdly prejudiced notions which subvert genuine transcultural communication, for valid criteria by which to judge alien cultural phenomena require a total submersion into and identification with that culture. Thus Yamazaki seems as insensitive to the function of *catharsis* in Greek tragedy as to the ambiguity of meaning in Shakespeare, Calderon, Ibsen, Strindberg and to the particular forms of stylization that characterize Western theatrical tradition. It is as if the profound appreciation in Japan of Dante, Rilke, Eckhart, Da Vinci, Rembrandt, Bach or Mahler would incite Westerners to derogate the sublimity of Bashō, Zeami, Hokusai, Sengai, Dōgen, and so on.

Reading these translations it seemed regrettable, for instance, that the important term *yūgen* is consistently translated as "grace." *Yūgen* may well have been used by Zeami in the sense of elegance, refinement, aristocratic restraint, but I cannot help feeling that the original overtones of mystery and the dimensions of ineffable profundity of *yūgen* must not be discounted. In a play like *Sekadera Komachi*, for instance,

it is surely not *yūgen* as mere “grace” that moves us so deeply in its combination with *monomane* which I also understand to signify more than merely the “imitation of things,” namely, their credibility, their plausibility. Zeami’s priceless clarification of artistic universals, however, makes this translation so timely and of momentous, transcultural significance, for if the most vital cultural values in both West *and* East are to survive, Zeami’s values and precepts demand not only to be seriously pondered but heeded. No wonder that an Ionesco declares NŌ to be “the avant-garde theatre of the future.” It is indeed, if there is to be a future!

It is impossible to summarize in this limited space the crucial content of these critical writings and “secret treatises”—“secret” only in the sense of never having been intended by their author for publication, but “as a legacy for my descendants.” In the concept of *hana*—“Flowers will bloom in endless profusion”—and the “Transmission of the Flower” Zeami stresses not only the indispensability of vast reserves of skill, the mastery of highest professional proficiency, but beyond this the need for spiritual maturation, the cosmic awareness without which neither High Art nor the real greatness of an artist can be achieved. Our contemporary superstition that “self-expression” (T. S. Eliot saw that “art is not to express personality but to overcome it”) can dispense with basic disciplines and which therefore tends to catapult “young” painters, “young” writers, “young” actors, “young” composers into positions of paradigmatic prominence, has not only resulted in shallowness and triviality. It has wreaked havoc with the self-appraisal and further development of those who, when no longer “young,” are destined to be replaced by successive waves of ever younger prodigies, like those “dazzling girls” whose Garbo-posturings become so sadly pathetic at forty.

Zeami teaches that artistic training in the two basic skills, in this case those of movement and sound, should start in early childhood and that the aspiring artist must be carefully guided through the vicissitudes of puberty and young adulthood to maturity. He warns that the young actor who believes that “the temporary flower of early success is the real Flower,” separates himself from the Way, and that all imitation of externals, all indulgence in gimmicks, blocks further development, so that “as such an artist grows older his art will wither.” This is precisely the trap set by our contemporary idolization of youth as a value in

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itself, for *hana* demands the distillation of experience to the point where all techniques become unified and transcended "through one intensity of mind." Only then can the artist hope to transmit to his public an insight into "the heart of the matter," "the matter of the heart" and, through a mysterious quality of his *being* rather than of his *doing*, to attain the "Flower of the Three Upper Levels" in which "what is felt in the heart is at ten and what appears in movement is at seven," and thus to create for others that "intensity of pure feeling that goes beyond the workings of the common mind."

The Three Upper Levels are:

1. "The art of the flower of peerless charm" which transmits "something beyond any level the artist may have consciously attained" and gives rise in the spectator to a "moment of feeling that transcends cognition" so that "a deep sense of joy lets a smile cross the face." (*"In Silla in the dead of night the sun shines brightly."*)
2. "The art of the flower of profundity . . . of which the depth cannot be measured." (*"Snow covers a thousand mountains, why is there one peak that is not white?"*)
3. "The art of the flower of tranquillity," which conveys a sense of still gentleness. (*"Snow piled up in a silver bowl."*)

Zeami may be speaking of the highest reaches of Nō in this intensely poetic classification. I hear him evoke at once a Rembrandt drawing of the simplest Dutch landscape, a Vermeer painting of a young girl, a Chardin still life. . . . But at the same time he implies a merciless indictment of our contemporary obsession with that showy originality in which every further indulgence in destructiveness is hailed as "creative," and to that "self-expression" that is blind to the nature of the Self. We even seem to ignore Zeami's "Three Middle Levels": of "Early Beauty as the first step on the Way," followed by "Broad Mastery," before the "art of the True Flower" can be reached. It is as if most contemporary art had condemned itself to remain limited to Zeami's "Three Bottom Levels," that of "the art of crudeness and leadenness," that of "strength in crudeness" and, at best, that of "the art of strength, in which a certain delicacy also plays a part." Hence it is reduced to accept the show-biz bottom of the arts, at the opposite pole of that "Perfect Fluency" which transcends all conscious effort

and where total freedom and ease is gained.

An Arthur Rubinstein playing Robert Schumann's *Carnaval*, in which all the surface effects, all the externalities are overcome so that profoundest interiorization becomes externalized, has this "fascination," *omoshiroki*, in which "ears and eyes are opened" and there is perfect communication between the hearts of performer and audience.

In the ritual of Nō, by means of the Two Skills, of chant and movement, and the Three Roles, of Warrior, Woman and Old Man ("an old tree that puts forth flowers"), all these factors, plus an extraordinary awareness of the receptivity of various levels of audience, coalesce in what I take the liberty to call the "transmission of peerless Meaning." The mere opening and closing of the Shite's hand as he steps from the *hashiga kari* to the stage, then becomes the disclosure of life-in-death, of death-in-life: in the human mode.

"The flower blooms from the imagination, the seed represents merely the various skills of our art," says Zeami, and he quotes the words of Hui-neng:

The Mind-Ground contains the various seeds
 With all-pervading rain each and every one sprouts
 Once one suddenly awakens to the sentiency of the flower
 The fruit of enlightenment matures of itself.