

JAPANESE NŌ THEATRE IN THE PHILHARMONIE BERLIN

by Felicitas BLANCK, freelance journalist



ENSEMBLE OF THE UMEWAKA KENNŌKAI FOUNDATION TŌKYŌ

Due to the initiative and the contacts of the [Japanisch-Deutsches Zentrum Berlin \(JDZB\)](#), there was the rare opportunity to experience a Nō theater performance with real masters of their field. The JDZB is an organization offering many interesting events centering on Japan-related topics. At the beginning of last year the JDZB and the Japanisches Kulturinstitut Köln ([The Japan Foundation](#)) came up with the idea for the performance and approached Dr. Winrich HOPP, the artistic director of Musikfest Berlin. After extensive coordination, the performance could be included into the programme of the [Musikfest Berlin](#).

**„The Nō-actor has the task to mediate between the world of the afterlife
and this world“,**

wrote the Nō master Kanze Hisao (1925-1978).



This article is combining a review of the performance of the UMEWAKA Kennōkai Foundation Tōkyō in the Philharmonie Berlin on 3 September 2019 with observations on Nō theatre in general.

Also quoted in the text are extracts from an interview with the Nō actress UMEWAKA Norika, who was involved in the performance at the Philharmonie. Traditionally Nō theatre is played only by men. From the middle of the 20th century it slowly opened up to women. Even today there are only about 200 Nō actresses. UMEWAKA Norika, who started her training when she was three years old, performs in „The Burden of Love“ as the lady-in-waiting, who has the function of the *Tsure*, appearing after the main character or *Shite*.

Time is a major element in Nō theatre. Unlike in many Western plays, the passage of time is hardly possible to measure or grasp. Time stretches and expands, and sometimes it seems to skip a hundred years in a moment when it shrinks. When we watch the actors move slowly across the stage, we begin to question our perception of time. In their motions, the actors are subjected to a rhythm by the beats of the drum, divided into units similar to the beats of a metronome. The guttural, evocative song reinforces the impression that during a Nō Performance, we move into a space completely beyond time.



UMEWAKA Norika on the spiritual meaning of Nō:

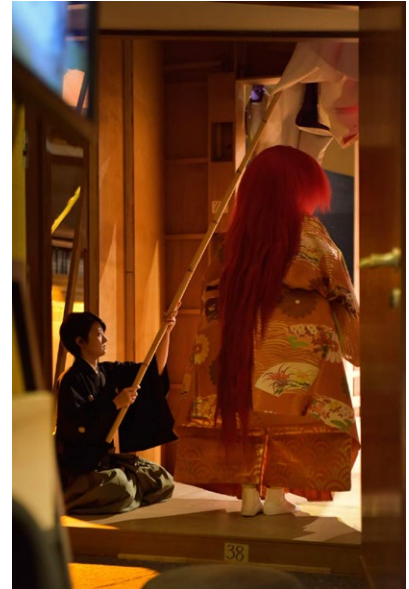
“Nō was originally a ritual for the gods, and so we play already backstage for the deity. This does not only apply to the actors, but also to those who support us. All people who work with us on and around the stage pay a service to the deity. That’s why you are subjected to not let yourself go even backstage.”

Next to me in the Nō performance in the Philharmonie sits a white European, dressed in Japanese style - she wears a kimono-like robe, the Tabi socks are spotless. You could see it as a cultural appropriation - or as enthusiasm for Japanese culture, depending on your perspective.

The Tōkyō -based Ensemble UMEWAKA Kennōkai shows tonight three classical pieces: „Shōjō - Midare: So no mai“ (The Rice Wine Spirit) – a cult-like dance play, „Kaminari“ (The Thunder God) – a Kyōgen posse as intermezzo and finally „Koi no omoni“ (The Burden of Love), a dramatic Nō play. Each piece has its own mood, which is reflected in the movements and the costumes.

The ensemble consists of the *Shite* main cast members of the UMEWAKA family, the *Waki* side actors and the Kyōgen interludes. Each actor specializes in a specific type of role and comes from a family in which the art of each of these types is passed on from generation to generation. This also applies to the musicians. They learn from an early age to master their instrument to perfection and families take great pride in it.

The UMEWAKA family, which manages the ensemble and the associated foundation, is part of the Kanze School and one of Japan's oldest acting dynasties; today, all Nō actors come from one of five schools. Each of these schools was founded by a family whose roots go far into the past. According to the UMEWAKA Kennōkai Foundation Tōkyō the family UMEWAKA can even trace their family tree back to the 8th century, to the time when the forerunner of Nō, the Sarugaku, came from China to Japan.



UMEWAKA Norika on her childhood:

"I was exposed to Nō already in the womb. At home we had a stage and [...] even while eating you could always hear someone practicing the vocals. [...] My grandfather and father [have] taught me Nō theatre- because I was still a kid, they told me not to try to embellish my role, but rather focus on the beauty of movement and gestures. What I did in my daily life - if I did not move well there or if my mind wandered - would all be reflected on stage. So I should try to lead my everyday life very well. And they said, that I should pull myself together on stage, I would have to endure a lot."



“SHŌJŌ - MIDARE: SŌ NO MAI”

The first piece, “The Rice Wine Sprite” takes place in ancient China. It revolves around the legendary character Shōjō, the god of rice wine. Shōjō gives a faithful farmer a rice wine jug, which never gets empty. There are several legends centred on Shōjō. The actor playing the part always wears a red wig, and the typical mask with a laughing mouth and a long fringe. His ecstatic dance is one of the most intriguing moments of the evening and climaxes as the companion of the *Shite*, the *Tsure*, comes in the same costume and wig. In this type of Nō play, a simply-dressed *Waki* actor always appears first. His plain robe, in muted colors, is very similar to kimonos still customary for Japanese men today. This supporting actor prepares the spectators for the leading role: The *Shite* appears in a lavish red-and-gold brocade costume; several garments in different shades of color overlay each other. His voluminous costume creates the impression of a very tall person, massively enlarged compared to the other actors. The *Shite* seems like a huge statue presiding over the stage and the audience.

UMEWAKA Norika on the topic of women in Nō theatre:

“We have a six hundred year old tradition in our family and of course it would be nice if the children, [if I will have any] would be interested to try. And for me it doesn’t matter if it’s a boy or a girl.”



“KAMINARI”

The second piece is a Kyōgen, a farce, and tells an episode about the god of thunder falling from the sky and pulling his hip. A young healer finds him and treats him with acupuncture. In contrast to the serious pieces, the movements in the Kyōgen are much more dynamic. The music is restrained and the colours of the costumes are dominated by blue instead of red.

During the break, I discover a very tall woman in the audience wearing a red-patterned kimono and bright red-dyed hair - like a reincarnation of Shōjō.

UMEWAKA Norika on the various schools in Nō:

“There are different schools within the art of Nō. [We...] belong to the Kanze School. It is a bit more colorful and luxurious compared to other schools. The vocals also have a higher pitch than in the other schools. That’s why the joyfulness and brightness in the music comes out stronger. The dances are also more acrobatic than in the other schools. [...] What we are doing now, as a Kanze school sub-school, the UMEWAKA Kennokai, is a style my grandfather has created. And my great-grandfather probably played a slightly different style again.”



“KOI NO OMONI”

The third piece is shown after the break and is the dramatic climax of the evening: „Koi no omoni „(The Burden of Love). It tells about the unrequited love of the old gardener Shoji to an elegant lady-in-waiting. To impress her he is supposed to circle the garden hundreds of times with a chest wrapped in fabric. Inexplicably, Shoji can't lift the parcel and dies in grief caused by his embarrassment. In his last minutes before he dies, he curses the lady-in-waiting and swears his revenge. When the lady-in-waiting finds the dead gardener, she freezes as if under a heavy weight and isn't able to move. In the second scene of the drama, the gardener appears as his ghost and severely chastises her for her behavior. When he sees how she suffers, he relents and promises to be her guardian deity.

At the beginning of the performance, a helper carries the bewitched chest on stage. It looks as if he too can barely handle the weight. Unlike in Western theatre, stagehands act in context of the narrative. At the performance of the lady-in-waiting, played by UMEWAKA Norika, the important function of these stagehands becomes clear: By commanding and carefully pulling on her voluminous costume, the helper directs her to her place in front right on the stage. The most impressive robe of the evening, however, is worn by the *Shite* after he has transformed himself into his spirit. Several layers of golden, white and black brocades make the viewer think of a snowy mountain - perhaps a picture of old age. When the *Shite* raises his hands, he seems to undergo a change once more, because the inner sides of the sleeves are dark in contrast to the outside. In the libretto it says, “Oh, deep resentment becomes apparent, as if Kuzu leaves turn”.

UMEWAKA Norika on stage fright:

“At the Cologne performance, my hands were trembling with excitement. But the others are supporting me, so I have opportunity to gather and get the performance done well. My grandfather has played “The Burden Of Love” countless times. But he also says that he always has a concentration boost, which he needs to tune in on the role.”



The ensemble UMEWAKA Kennokai borrowed a Nō stage from the Japanisches Kulturinstitut Köln. The front posts and the roof of the stage were not used so that all spectators can follow the play. What the theatre guests see is, in principle, a classic Japanese wooden house. The stage is a fascinating aspect of Nō theatre because a Shinto temple or a traditional residential building do not look so different from one another and are constructed largely along similar lines. Thus theatre in Japan, the worship of ancestors in shrines or a traditional farmhouse have more in common than western people might think: The buildings look all very similar - everything is connected.

UMEWAKA Norika on the question of how to teach Nō to young people these days:

“Education is very important to us and we are very active in this regard, because many Japanese teenagers know Nō only from the textbooks. That’s why we go to schools in Japan and bring a stage that we set up in the gym. Thus, where the students otherwise do sports, they [can] experience a Nō -performance. If somebody asks me about my job, I would normally say I am Nō actress. As I cannot assume that my counterpart knows what that is, I have to ask first: “Do you know Nō?” And if not I have to explain it. That annoys me now and then.”

The fascination that this centuries-old theatrical tradition holds is unbroken. Through the contact between cultures, we can learn a lot about ourselves through forms of expression that was perhaps previously unknown to us. So many similarities live on for centuries, such as the search for spiritual truth, the search for beauty and for peace.

The guest performance was part of the European Tour 2019 (Zurich - Basel - Cologne - Berlin) on occasion of the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Japanisches Kulturinstitut Köln and 25 years [twinning Tōkyō - Berlin](#).

An event of the Berliner Festspiele / Musikfest Berlin and The Japan Foundation / Japanisches Kulturinstitut Köln in cooperation with the Japanisch-Deutsches Zentrum Berlin