



Tomoe, a *noh* play scheduled to be included in the January 19, 2024 Showcase

The play focuses on Lady Tomoe, a female warrior who fought under Kiso Yoshinaka around the time of the Genpei War. Although fighting bravely, she meets with defeat. Lady Tomoe's great sorrow, in not being allowed to die together with her master Yoshinaka, is profoundly moving. The performer in the photo has a *Fushiki-zo* mask with the face of a young woman and wears a *Karaori* robe (a weave robe with a raised pattern), the most gorgeous type of *shozoku* costume as a top layer. The photo shows the performer holding a weapon called a *naginata*.⁴

Photo: National Noh Theatre

An Introduction to Nohgaku Appreciation: From the National Noh Theatre to the World

The Japan Cultural Expo 2.0 aims to build momentum for the upcoming Expo 2025 (World Expo 2025 Osaka, Kansai), to support renewed interest in inbound travel to Japan, and to encourage further demand for domestic tourism. It also features a focus on “The Beauty and The Spirit of Japan,” promoting Japanese cultural arts and spreading awareness of their diverse and universal charms within Japan and around the world. This is a large-scale project with Japanese cultural facilities, arts organizations, and many others hosting and participating in a diverse range of projects and events. In this article, from among these participants, we will highlight the National Noh Theatre's involvement in the Japan Cultural Expo 2.0, offering an introduction to *nohgaku* appreciation.

Moribe Shinji

Nohgaku is the most traditional of Japan's performing arts, with a more than 600-year history of performance. The term embraces two contrasting forms of expression: *noh* with its stylized refinement, and *kyogen* with its cheerful humor. In 2001, UNESCO recognized *nohgaku* as an Intangible Cultural Heritage.

Special masks worn by leading actors, who are known as *shite*,¹ are a major feature of *noh*. *Noh* masks may represent figures including women, samurai warriors, and elderly characters, as well as otherworldly forms such as *kami* deities, spirits, and ogres. By subtly raising or lowering their faces

to emphasize the effects of light and shadows on the masks, *shite* are able to express a wide range of emotions. The showy *shozoku* costumes worn by performers to match their roles are another highlight of *noh*. These feature some of the most gorgeous and finely detailed weaving techniques of any kimono. *Noh* also features musical accompaniment by *hayashi* ensembles playing *fue* bamboo flutes, *kotsuzumi* small hand drums, *otsuzumi* hip drums, and *taiko* stick drums, as well as *jiutai* choruses that sing and chant out the storyline, setting, and so on. These form a complete whole, bringing the audience into the world of *yugen*,² or subtle and profound beauty.

Meanwhile, *kyogen* plays feature comedic dialogue with familiar events from everyday life as the subject matter. The plays highlight human foolishness and weakness in ways that modern audiences can relate to and laugh about.

These unique features of *nohgaku* have attracted attention outside Japan as well, leading to an increasing number of performances overseas. However, many *nohgaku* pieces are concerned with the world of medieval Japan. This can make it difficult for audiences to appreciate the plays if they are not familiar with the historical background, characters, culture of the era, and so on.



National Noh Theatre stage

Originally, *noh* stages were built outdoors. It has only been in modern times (from around the mid to late 19th century) that they have taken the form of the *nohgaku* theater, with the stage and audience seating brought together inside a large building. The central backdrop to the *noh* stage features a painting of evergreen pine trees.

Photo: National Noh Theatre



Karaori, Flower and raft design on red and white checkered ground

Mid-Edo period, 18th century

Shozoku costumes featuring red were said to indicate young women.

Photo: National Noh Theatre



Noh masks

Left: *Hakushiki-jo* (“white-colored old man”), a form of *okina-men* (old-man mask)

Center: *Ko-omote* (“young woman”), an *onna-men* (female mask)

Right: *Hannya* (horned demoness), an *onryo-men* (vengeful spirit mask)

Photo: National Noh Theatre

In response, the National Noh Theatre, has taken a number of approaches to accommodate audiences. Located in Tokyo’s Sendagaya area, the theatre regularly presents *nohgaku* performances. Its recent audience outreach efforts include preparing a guidebook written in English, installing screens to display subtitles on all seats, and providing explanations in English concerning the dialogue, the content of the *jiutai* chorus’s singing, chanting, and established routines, and so on—all in real time. In addition, the theater also regularly presents Showcases³ offering casual enjoyment of *nohgaku*. The National Noh Theatre posts information about regular performances and Showcases on its website. Also, beyond this, the Cultural Heritage Online portal website also displays *noh* masks, *shozoku* costumes, and other items in the National Noh Theatre’s collection (see below) to help audiences deepen their understanding of *nohgaku*.

As part of the Japan Cultural Expo 2.0, the National Noh Theatre website

began streaming a PR video on the Showcases (see below) featuring shots from a wide range of angles, numerous closeups, and more to convey the charms of *nohgaku* in a way easy for viewers to understand. In addition, the National Noh Theatre holds *nohgaku* appreciation classes and workshops for visitors from outside Japan. It also offered experiences including backstage tours led by *nohgaku* performers proficient in languages other

than Japanese. The Keio Plaza Hotel in Shinjuku, Tokyo, where visitors from overseas often stay, also hosted an exhibition as an introduction to *nohgaku*, with demonstrations by *nohgaku* performers and more.

On January 19, 2024, another Showcase will be held at the National Noh Theatre. If you have the chance, please take this opportunity to experience the charms of Japan’s proud *nohgaku* tradition.

Reference websites

■ Japan Cultural Expo 2.0-related information

Agency for Cultural Affairs website
<https://japanculturalexpo.bunka.go.jp/en/>

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■ National Noh Theatre-related information

National Noh Theatre
<https://www.ntj.jac.go.jp/en/theatre/noh/>

National Noh Theatre Showcase (January 19, 2024)
<https://www.ntj.jac.go.jp/schedule/nou/2023/11020.html?lan=e>

■ Cultural Heritage Online

<https://bunka.nii.ac.jp/>
 Search results for “*noh* masks”
<https://bunka.nii.ac.jp/heritages/search?page=1&title=%E8%83%BD%E9%9D%A2>

1. In *noh*, the main actor, or protagonist, is known as the *shite*, and the performer who serves to highlight features of the *shite*’s acting is known as the *waki*. There are five schools of *shite-kata*, or the groups centered on *shite-kata*, but also including other several positions. Kanze, Komparu, Hosho, Kongo, and Kita. In *kyogen* as well, the main protagonist is known as the *shite*. There are two schools of *kyogen* performers: Okura and Izumi.
2. The state of a deep and subtle lingering beauty that cannot be expressed in words. The term was first used in relation to appreciation of *waka* poetry. It has represented one of the fundamental aesthetic principles in the arts and entertainments of Japan, such as literature, painting, *nohgaku*, the tea ceremony, and architecture, since medieval times.
3. Compact *nohgaku* performances that can be enjoyed at low cost. Opening talks by *nohgaku* performers are also provided. These have made the events popular as introductions to appreciating *nohgaku*.
4. A weapon with a curved blade attached to the end of a long, wooden staff.

