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An Evening of Noh – Presentation by the students of Intercultural Theatre Institute (Singapore) 7 March 2017, Malay Heritage Centre



ITI students present Noh play, Momijigari Oni-Zoroe

月報1月号にて既報の通り、シンガポール日本商工会議所基金「2016年度基金」からは、16の団体と2名の学生への寄付金授与が決まりました。その中から、今回は Intercultural Theatre Institute (Singapore)が主催としての「An Evening of Noh」についてご紹介します。

また、現在 JCCI 基金から奨学金を得て就学中である留学生2名（2017年7月帰国予定）にもインタビューを行いました。

Japan has many lauded traditions, and one of them is the ancient performing art of Noh. Believed to have its beginnings in “Sangaku” (comprising of songs, illusions, imitations, puppetry and dance), it is a form that had found its place into Japan’s royal courts by way of China during the Nara period (8th century A.D.).

As with a number of art forms that enjoy royal patronage, it evolved and broadened in popularity to the publics in the temples and streets, and so “Sangaku” became “Sarugaku”. “Sarugaku” was popular between the Heian and Kamakura period (8th – 14th century A.D.), but in an about-turn, with the inclusion of more specifically Japanese history, literature, song and dance, the form once again took on refined aesthetics and came to be the

Noh that is known today.

Noh, established in 14th century, is credited significantly to the father-and-son duo of performer-playwrights Kan-ami and Zeami, respectively.

Kan-ami founded the Kanze schools (one of five prominent Noh schools active today, and the largest of them), while Zeami was responsible for many of the plays that form part of the repertoire, performed even till this day.

So what does this traditional performing art form have to do with actor-students from Singapore, Malaysia, Australia, France, India, Philippines or China?

At Intercultural Theatre Institute (ITI), a specialised, independent actor-training school in Singapore, immersions in a number of traditional Asian performing art forms is a critical part of the three-year programme. While the school trains actors for the contemporary stage, the co-founders – the late Kuo Pao Kun and current director, T Sasitharan (a.k.a. Sasi) – have passionately

believed in the richness of the region's traditional art forms in lending context and an acting vocabulary for the actors of today and tomorrow.

"The touchstone of the [traditional form] method is the master-teacher. S/he is the living embodiment of the knowledge we seek, and as such, must be acknowledged as *primus inter pares*," Sasi recalls, "Kanze Hideo (1927 – 2007), who personally inaugurated ITI's link to Noh in 2002 was such a living embodiment of an exquisite tradition; an almost unbroken lineage extending back 600 years. We shall always be grateful and honoured that Master Kanze came to teach and act as consultant in connecting ITI with Noh."

That is why, once every two years, renowned Noh performers and teachers from the Kanze school, Kanze Yoshimasa and Kuwata Takashi, spend between eight to 10 weeks imbibing the Year 1 and 2 students at ITI with the critical aspects of Noh.

For ITI's students from Singapore and around the world, the training in Noh gives them insights into a rich theatre heritage and exposure to a different cultural perspective. The aim is to instill in them the aesthetic discipline and skills of Noh theatre that will enhance their own contemporary practice.

Other than Noh, the other traditional art forms taught at ITI are Kutiyattam, one of the oldest dance-drama forms originating from Kerala, India, Beijing Opera from China, and Wayang Wong, a courtly dance-drama from Java, Indonesia.



Intensive Noh term of training for ITI students with Kanze Yoshimasa and Kuwata Takashi

From January to March this year, Kanze sensei and Kuwata sensei were back in ITI to teach new cohorts of students for the Noh term. It was a big class of 21, including visiting students from the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts that demanded the attention of the senseis in their training every afternoon.

ITI's master-teacher in the form, Kanze Yoshimasa, hails from a renowned lineage, and is a descendent of Kan-ami and Zeami. An active shite-kata actor in Noh in Japan, he is the oldest son of Master Kanze Yoshiyuki, the fourth head of Kanze Kyuhkoh-kai, a branch family of the umbrella Kanze school. Trained by his father, he made his professional debut at the age of three. Aside from continuing the tradition, Kanze Yoshimasa has also founded Know Noh Company, is a member of the Japan Nogaku Association and is certified vocationally as shite master of the Kanze school.

In his teaching capacity at ITI, Kanze sensei is assisted by Kuwata Takashi, also an actor and teacher at the Kanze Kyuhkoh-kai. Trained as a live-in disciple under Master Kanze Yoshiyuki, he is an active performer in Japan and overseas.



Noh master-teacher, Kanze Yoshimasa, explains to an ITI student how to position a Noh mask

For many of the students who have not encountered the art form, it was a challenging journey learning not just the principles of Noh, but the culture and language that inform it as well. Every afternoon, class was taught in Japanese, with the assistance of a translator who sat in every session.

At the end of the immersive training with the master-teachers, the students present a showing of *shimai* (short dance sections), as well as selected scenes from *Kantan* and *Momijigari Oni-Zoroe* to a by-invitation audience.

The presentation evening is, itself, a departure from a Noh performance. In strict, classical Noh training, actors' roles are fixed and an actor can only perform in the part he is trained in. As such, main character or shite actors perform only those roles in different plays; the same applies to actors who train for companion roles such as shite-tsure, secondary character roles of waki, or play intermediary character role ai-kyogen. There are no crossovers between the positions and this extends to the

hayashi ensembles, where musicians of one instrument do not play other instruments.

As such, Noh schools in Japan are role-specific in their training. However, specially customised for ITI's training purposes, to allow the actor-students to understand Noh in a comprehensive manner, students are taught all roles of a play to allow them to experience the different characters' approach.



ITI students presenting an abridged version of Noh play, Kantan

For the evening, the students took turns presenting short Noh dances, known as shimai, before putting up an abridged version of Kantan. Kantan tells the charming tale of a traveller, Rosei, who is on a journey to seek enlightenment. At an inn enroute in the village of Kantan, he settles down after a meal and has a glorious dream of being an emperor, celebrated by dances and pageantry. But awoken to take his humble millet meal, Rosei realises the fleetingness of time as revealed by his dream, and gains a little epiphany from his sleep.

Momijigari Oni-Zoroe, also known as "Autumn Foliage Viewing" ended the evening's presentation. The story takes off from its title, when a group of autumn-appreciating ladies encounter a general and his entourage in the mountains. After much drinks and dancing, the general awakes from a dream's insights, to realise that the ladies are, in fact, demons to be fought.

The Japanese Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Singapore supported this year's term and presentation, for the first time. Guests from JCCI Singapore were also invited to attend the presentation evening.

Ringo Lee, of JCCI Singapore, said, "Our members and I had enjoyed the performances tremendously! I am personally touched by the keen efforts put in by the students for this presentation."

The eight weeks of immersive learning has definitely

made a lasting impact on the students. Year 1 student from the Philippines, Earnest Hope Tinambacan, reflects on the Noh term, "In these short months at ITI, aside from the skills I learned – such as vocal, body, and acting techniques – I have also learnt how to appreciate one's own local culture and how to be inspired by it in order to create a culture-inspired contemporary performance. I have also learnt the importance of one's responsibility as artists in uplifting, promoting, and protecting culture and cultural rights. One such experience and example is in our [recently completed] Noh theatre training, which has made me appreciate further the richness of Asian culture."



ITI students with Noh teachers (front row, centre) after the presentation

We look forward to welcoming our master-teachers back in 2019 when new cohorts of students will experience and be enthralled by the first-hand training in a new Noh term.