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## **Noh Performance Guides (review)**

Thomas Blenman Hare

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REVIEW

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

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*Noh Performance Guides:  
Matsukaze, Fujito, Miidera, Tenko, Atsumori, Ema, Aoinoue*

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*Noh Performance Guides: Matsukaze, Fujito, Miidera, Tenko, Atsumori, Ema, Aoinoue.* By Monica Bethe and

**Richard Emmert.** Tokyo: National Noh Theater, 1992-1997; illustrations. \$20.00-23.00 each, paper.

For the better part of the past decade, Monica Bethe and Richard Emmert have been producing detailed commentaries and analyses of celebrated plays of the classical *noh* theatre of Japan. Seven of these booklets have appeared so far, representing a satisfyingly diverse range from the *noh* repertory.

The subject of the first guide to appear, *Matsukaze*, is exemplary in two senses. It is, on the one hand, a fine example of what happens in *noh*: a traveling priest comes to a site of some fame; a mysterious apparition approaches and engages him in a dialogue of reminiscence; the apparition rehearses parts of a life lost but still beloved, then does a slow and stately dance. It is also exemplary as one of the most famous and successful plays in the repertory, a reputation it has held since its inception in the early 15th century.

*Atsumori* is also a much-celebrated play, and as a dream-vision (or *mugen noh*), it is even more typical in formal terms than *Matsukaze*. It tells the story of a boy warrior slaughtered in battle by a man old enough to be his father. The killer, in contrition for his deed, takes the tonsure and it is he, exceptionally, who appears as the traveling priest in this play. The dead boy returns disguised as a menial field worker with an extraordinary talent on the flute, and in the finale of the play, the victim and his assailant achieve a reconciliation. *Atsumori* is known in the West largely through Arthur Waley's sensitive rendering (1921:63-73), but readers will gain a far more detailed understanding of the play with the version under review.

*Aoinoue* is deservedly well known for its reenactment (with substantial changes) of a central episode from the *Tale of Genji*. The demon of jealous rage which animates the latter part of the play illustrates an ancient stratum of *noh* performance, and contrasts instructively with the two plays mentioned above, as does *Fujito*, a dark story of memories of betrayal and murder.

*Miidera* is a good representative of a common theme in *noh*, the recovery of a lost child, and it represents as well a *noh* of the *genzai* genre, where the characters are not, like *Matsukaze* and *Atsumori*, ghosts, but rather people living in the contemporary world. The play *Tenko* combines the theme of the loss of a child with a vexing ambiguity regarding ethics and imperial authority, and scholars still argue over its meaning. It is, nonetheless, a popular play whose intriguing potential is well articulated in Bethe and Emmert's work. *Emma* comes from a category of *noh* little translated and little known in the West. It is a "god play," a somewhat ritualistic celebratory genre, perhaps underappreciated except by particularly ardent fans. However, within that category, *Emma* is noteworthy: it reenacts one of the foundational myths of the indigenous belief system concerning the emergence of the sun goddess from a cave. It also has an unusual pairing of dances in its last act. **[End Page 173]**

All in all, then, this selection of plays gives the reader a good sense of the range of *noh*. The booklets are conceived primarily as guides to the performance of the plays in question and have accordingly been produced and are sold by the National Noh Theater in Sendagaya, Tokyo. (They may be purchased in the U.S. from Learning Tomorrow, 53 West Main, Bloomsburg, PA 17815.)

The booklets all follow a consistent and sensible format, and are attractively produced. Each guide opens with a bird's-eye view of the *noh* stage keyed to the choreographic vocabulary used in *noh*; next comes a set of suggestions about how the guide might best be used. Then one finds a standardized list of notes about the play in question...

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