Noh Performance Guides (review)

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REVIEW

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

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. Ema 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, Ema 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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Asumori is also a much-celebrated play, and as a dream-vision (or magen 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 same age and 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 assassin achieve a reconciliation. Asumori is known in the West largely through Arthur Waley’s sensitive rendering (1932:65–73), but readers will gain a far more detailed understanding of the play with the version under review.

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