

ON JAPANESE DRAMA

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Ivan Rumánek, the author of this Slovak book on Noh drama,¹ demonstrates an expertise in both Japanese sources and western Japanese scholarship on the topic. Part of this is in fact the result of fieldwork conducted in Japan. Rumánek manages his sensational hypotheses soberly and the Slovak lexical items he proposes as translations of Japanese terms are convincingly explained and substantiated.

His comparisons and approximations are made on a large scale, making his style reader-friendly. I particularly appreciate this because I, myself, when working on my monograph on African theatre, struggled with a similar problem how to achieve scientific

clarity in an environment where there is almost no context to which one can refer. In such cases, the author must first provide a considerable amount of background, before moving on to his/her own theoretical musings. In this sense, a researcher publishing in English or French is in a far easier situation than Ivan Rumánek, who publishes in Slovak.

In this book Noh does not appear in a reduced textual version but as a living theatre tradition. However, since Noh is still rarely seen as a stage phenomenon in Central Europe, some passages of the book may appear rather abstract to the Slovak readership. Thanks to his field trips to Japan and especially to his studies at the *Nogami Memorial Noh Theatre Research Institute of Hosei University*, Rumánek's translations are a pioneering act of great importance within the Slovak context. In addition, he makes available new information that had not been published anywhere outside Japan. It is worth mentioning that it is only quite recently that Japanese theatre science has begun using research methods similar to European ones: for instance, we can compare the completion of Shakespearean *quartos* with the reconstruction of whole plays out of the song books (*utaibons*) of individual Noh actors.

¹ Rumánek, Ivan R. V. *Japonská dráma nō. Žánr vo vývoji* [Japanese Noh Theatre: A Genre in Development]. Bratislava: Veda, 2010, 459 pp.

In Rumánek's historical synthesis, situations reveal themselves as if they were four-dimensional, and this makes his theoretical conclusions appear convincing. We can easily imagine how the young shogun Ashikaga Yoshimitsu 足利義満 (1358–1408) provided a talented boy Zeami Motokiyo 世阿彌元清 (1363–1443) with an education like no other player had received before. It was out of this education that classical Noh drama grew. If we consider the lowly social status which theatre people originally had, we are fascinated by their awareness of their mission in society, revealed in the genealogies that have been passed on down to us. The development in Noh towards ever slower speech can really be explained quite convincingly by the estrangement of the audiences from the language and literary context of the Noh plays—the slow pace became a condition *sine qua non* for its very perceptibility. Accordingly to the speech went the process on stage: here, the slow pace gradually developed into ever slower movement. The book also introduces the reader to a translation of a recipe for acting mastery, which was long kept secret—the oldest Japanese theatrical poetic *Fūshikaden* 風姿花伝, and translations of five Noh plays. These plays were carefully chosen to represent the pre-classical, classical and post-classical periods of Noh. The most archaic drama translated in Rumánek's book is *Tsurukame* 鶴亀, while the newest play, not translated but described in detail, is *Pagoda* by Jeanette Cheong (performed in London, Dublin and Paris in 2009). The latter follows the same path as *Our Lady Princess* (premiered in Bratislava in 2001 and subsequently performed at the 3rd World Theatre Olympics in Moscow) that is also described in the book). The most recent—thus not featured phenomenon of this kind—is the splendidly written play *Jeanne d'Arc* by Haruo Nishino (performed in Orléans, Paris and Aix-en-Provence in 2012).

The classical Noh plays include *Matsukaze* 松風, *Atsumori* 敦盛, *Yamamba* 山姥 and *Sumidagawa* 隅田川 —representing three generations of Kanze ryu: Kannami, Zeami and Motomasa. In terms of staging, Rumánek compares classical Muromachi (or, pre-Edo) Noh practice with the more formalized and remarkably slowed down style that was introduced during the Edo shogunate.

Rumánek's theoretical work and translations mean that any future conducted theatre research will be able to rely not only on foreign, but also domestic sources. I have read much about the Noh in Anglophone, Francophone and Russian literature and I am convinced that—while the translations are intended for a Slovak readership—the theoretical parts of the book should be translated into either English, French or Russian in order to attain the concerned readership.

In its apparent simplicity, Noh reveals something deeply universal. By revealing the quantitative dactyl in the rhythmical passages of Noh, Ivan Rumánek suggests that it may have Greek and Indian roots, thus underlining a universal aspect in a phenomenon which appears to be exclusively Japanese.

Although marginal in terms of the subject of the book, I would like to question the suggestion, concerning the drama of western antiquity, that a direct link can be drawn between the cruelty of contemporary Greek life and *The Oresteia* (43). If that were the case, then it could be inferred from the *Obasute* 姥捨 (Carrying Away an Old Woman) that at one time it was common practice for the Japanese to carry their old parents off into the mountains to be left to the ravens.

In fact, at their height (and long before and after) both cultures were characterized by ancestor worship. The horror of transgressing this reverence was such that any extreme situation of similar kind had to be set within the framework of a drama, in a performance of masks, thus excluded from real life, and fixed as a warning to future generations. In my opinion, Noh has something in common with ancient Greek drama: both of them exclude futile cruelty and scenic naturalism (let us not be misled here by modern practices in staging Greek drama), and both pursue the goals of purification and restoration of order.

The modern theatre science integrated books by theatre practitioners into the very discipline of contemporary theatre science under the pre-requisite that they will be approached in a distinctive way but Ivan Rumánek sometimes does not consider the fact that whilst they may have brilliant thoughts, they are often unconcerned with objective phenomenon and sometimes simply express their own personal artistic standpoints.

Almost no 20th century director was to remain untouched by Oriental theatre. However, many of them were not interested in Oriental performance per se, but used it to support their own ideas. In his politically engaged theatre for example, Brecht considered the Noh mask to be a means of alienation effect (299)—an approach that strongly reduces the *nōmen* phenomenon. Such details call for a critical reading of certain sources and more precise theatrological formulations.

By contrast, Britten, Claudel and Eliot approached Noh from a Christian perspective, thus stimulating inter-religious dialogue. Here, I would like to mention that this is not a unilateral approach: Noh connoisseur and specialist, Haruo Nishino, chose a theme from Christian martyrology for his modern Noh.

Let the flames of my criticism be tempered now by my persuasion congenial with the author's that wars, ensuing epidemics and famines have always had a destructive impact on fundamental human relations. From the above it is obvious that I fully appreciate Rumánek's openness to the challenging comparative method—the fact that he does not indulge in the safety of his initial specialization as an expert in Oriental culture alone, but offers instead impetus for further deliberation on general issues. In this respect, his work grows out of all that refers to Japan and its culture on the one hand, yet its character is religionist and anthropological in its core. It is very rare to see the author not walking on the thin ice of speculation but, all the time backed up by solid material. Rumánek demonstrates a remarkable personal feel for the intercultural dialogue both in the domain of beauty and aesthetics.

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