



The Secrets of Noh Masks

Michishige Udaka

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In terms of style, Noh drama is the quintessence of simplicity. Performed by a handful of players, mostly masked and using minimal props and exceedingly understated movements, this is theater pared down to its essentials. Yet, as an art form, Noh drama is highly complex -- richly symbolic, nuanced and exquisite in its austerity.

Since the emergence of Noh drama over six centuries ago, the masks worn by the actors have been integral to the work. A Noh mask, with its subtle fusion of the real and the imaginary, is a beautiful object; but it only comes fully to life when a talented actor is able to transcend the mask's unchanging expression and convey a wide range of emotions.

In recent years, Noh drama has seen a resurgence in prestige and popularity, both in Japan and abroad. Today, the masks worn by most Noh thespians are either old, passed down from generation to generation within a particular school of acting, or the work of an artist who specializes in this craft. Only one Noh master-actor continues to make masks in addition to teaching, writing and performing. Michishige Udaka is a shite-kata (lead and producer), with a career spanning almost 50 years. As an actor and playwright, he is able to bring to the task of mask-making a deep understanding both of the character the mask represents and of the actor's intentions while playing that role. These insights have enabled Udaka to add greater dimension to his own performances.

The Secrets of Noh Masks presents 32 pieces, a representative sample of the more than 200 produced to date by the author. Every one has passed the ultimate test -- use in actual performances -- and may be seen on stage today. The stunning photos are accompanied by captions and essays about the history of Noh, its performance style, mask-making philosophy and techniques. There is also an index listing each mask with a thumbnail sketch.

Those who know little of this ancient dramatic form, might assume that Noh masks lack expression. But the images showcased in this volume reveal an emotional depth and humanity that is as powerful in the 21st century as it was over 600 years ago.

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