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## Oppenheimer plot summary ›

by [Professor Allan Marett](#)

Oppenheimer traces the spiritual journey of Robert J Oppenheimer from tormented ghost to agent of redemption. In Japanese Noh drama, agents of suffering (often warriors) first appear trapped in the form a ghost and then—in the course of the play—attain liberation. Oppenheimer is an allegory about the tragedy of Hiroshima and how it affects us all. Here is the Yorimasa mask that will be worn by Oppenheimer in the first part of the play.



Photo: Lee Nutter

We first meet a pilgrim who, through an encounter in dream with the fierce Wisdom King, Fudô Myô-ô—"he who dwells amidst the flames"—has been sent on a quest in search of an ancient temple and two foxes. "Go now to Hiroshima. Seek out a temple, where you will find two foxes. Only in this place can you be liberated from your heavy heart."

Arriving in Hiroshima on the eve of the anniversary of the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, the pilgrim discovers the pair of stone foxes outside a ruined temple. As night deepens the figure of a priest appears and in response to the pilgrim's questioning, tells the founding story of the ruined temple—an old Zen story about a priest who was turned into a fox for 500 life times. But the conversation quickly moves to Robert Oppenheimer and his role in developing the atomic bomb. As his agitation increases the priest reveals that he is in fact the ghost of Robert Oppenheimer, condemned to endlessly return to Hiroshima on the anniversary of the bombing to be consumed by its fires.

In a comic interlude, the pilgrim meets two locals, on their way to conduct a memorial service for their father, who was killed by the Hiroshima bomb. The pilgrim recounts his encounter with the priest only to be told that in fact there is no temple there and no priest. Was it all just a dream? At the pilgrim's request, the locals nonetheless recount the story of the priest who became a fox, but in their version the priest is eventually returned to human form. Why, wonders the pilgrim did Oppenheimer's ghost not tell of the fox's redemption? Horrified that the pilgrim has brought Oppenheimer's ghost—the ghost of the very person who killed their father—into their midst, the locals urge the pilgrim to conduct rituals to Fudô in order to rid them of the ghost.

Summoned by the pilgrim's rituals, the ghost returns and is questioned by the pilgrim about their previous encounter. "Why did you not tell me how the fox was freed?" "Because in my heart, I cannot believe it," replies the ghost. Like Faust, the ghost cannot believe in redemption. Through an intense exchange with the pilgrim however, the ghost of Oppenheimer realises that the only way to escape his ghostly existence is to willingly enter the flames of Hiroshima and remain there forever. Entering the fires, he encounters Fudô, the Wisdom King who set the whole play in motion. "By my power" sings Fudô, "this humble pilgrim brought you to me." He offers the ghost his weapons, a sword and snare, and commands him to dance for the liberation of all beings. "Take now these weapons, that all may be freed from pain." And so we leave Oppenheimer—or has he now become Fudô?—eternally dancing amidst the flames of Hiroshima for the liberation of us all from the suffering that he caused.

### THE AUTHORS

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### ABOUT THE BLOG

The Oppenheimer Noh Project focuses on the creation and performance of a new English-language Noh play, Oppenheimer, in the Music Workshop Theatre at 6.00pm on Wednesday 30 September and Thursday 1 October 2015.

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