

Hiroshima revisited in stylised Noh drama Oppenheimer



The story is told in English through classical Japanese musical drama, Noh, which integrates masks, props and costumes through the performance.

Oppenheimer: A Noh Play in English

Sydney Conservatorium of Music. September 30.

The dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima on 6 August 1945 seared its image into music as much as it has every facet of post-World War II life – from Penderecki's screamingly strident Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima (1960) for strings, to the jazz-fusion band Hiroshima, to John Adams' opera Doctor Atomic (2005).

In Oppenheimer, Allan Marett (text), Richard Emmert (music) and Akira Matsui (direction) have positioned the event within the stylised ritual of classic fourteenth century Noh drama, locating the error which led to such anguish within the tortured mind of the ghost of nuclear scientist, J. Robert Oppenheimer.

The narrative is rooted deeply in Buddhist philosophy, and Marett, an expert in

Japanese music, uses the discipline of Noh drama to create a tone of expressive purity in which exploration of the inner self becomes a parable for the error of humanity.

A troubled traveller is told by the God of Wisdom to go to Hiroshima, where he meets Oppenheimer's ghost who tells him his error is the same as that of an ancient monk.

He had thought the law of cause and effect did not apply to the enlightened "who have seen into the emptiness of things" and was condemned to be reborn as a fox five hundred times.

The traveller falls asleep and descendants of a Hiroshima victim perform a fox dance in memory of their dead father. When the traveller awakens they tell him the monk was released when he realised his error.

The traveller puts this to Oppenheimer, who eventually accepts his suffering and the God of Wisdom, who dances eternally for humanity in the flames, sets him free.

The story is told in English through ritual chant and dance in gorgeous costume. The accompaniment is a chorus and traditional hayashi ensemble of shrill flute and three drummers who also vocalise rhythms articulating the concept of Jo-Ha-Kyu which underlies Noh aesthetics.

John Oglevee, Akira Matsui and David Crandall move with stylised simplicity, while the stillness and meditative focus create a contemplative space to survey the devastation of the inner and outer worlds and their painful liberation.

Declaration: Allan Marett is a musicological colleague and former teacher of mine at the University of Sydney.