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From noh to butoh, the performing arts have been one of the cultural treasures of Japan.

The older arts have been carefully handed down from master to student for generations and the strong tradition has enabled the arts to last to this day. But the same tradition may have left little room for new experiments.

Innovations, however, exist. Recently in Tokyo a group of foreign noh performers and Japanese noh professionals joined forces to present "Eliza," an English noh play written by Allan Marett, associate professor at the University of Sydney.

Noh is a classic musical dance-drama which originated in the 14th century. The art, perfected by the father and son masters Kan'ami (1333-84) and Zeami (1363-1443), is characterized by set themes and stylized acting on the undecorated stage, by elaborately masked and costumed male performers.

Most of the 240 or so noh plays performed today date from the 15th and 16th centuries, and new plays are few in number.

Though an original play, "Eliza" is written in a typical noh style. Marett, specialist in Japanese traditional music and aboriginal music, says he felt the noh style would fit the story of Eliza Fraser who was shipwrecked along with her ship-captain husband and his crew off the coast of Australia in the 1820s.

Marett uses the noh structure to treat the story in two lights. In the first half of the play he depicts Eliza, who survived the shipwreck and lived with the local aboriginal people before returning to her native England, as a "victim at the hands of the savages," a metaphor for the insecurities which the white European settlers faced in dealing with an incomprehensible indigenous culture. But in the second half she appears as a visionary figure, who due to her stay with the Aborigines, was granted access to the spiritual power of aboriginal wisdom.

In the text the ethnomusicologist, who has been inter-



Richard Emmert

ested in noh since 1972, has pointed out the similarities between Buddhist philosophy found in noh and aboriginal lore.

#### Avant-garde theater

"Eliza" was presented by two American performers accompanied by the *hayashi* instrumentalists and *jiutai*, a chorus of nine chanting narration and the thoughts of the *shite*, the main character.

"Noh is the most avant-garde theater in Japan. There is more of a relationship between noh and butoh than between noh and *shingeki*, or realistic theater. Noh happens to be a very old stylistic theater," observes Richard Emmert, 40, who played the role of Eliza, the *shite*, in the play.

Emmert, who composed the music for the play, began studying noh in Japan in 1973 under Akira Matsui, a *shite* actor of the Kita School whom he met through an introduction by kyogen performer Don Kenny. "Eliza" was co-directed by Emmert and Matsui.

David Crandall, another long-time student and performer of noh, led the chorus in "Eliza." When Emmert performed aboriginal steps on stage the chorus chanted an aboriginal incantation while Crandall kept time with two boomerangs.

Intrigued by the energy and movements of noh, the Michigan-born composer began studying noh in 1979 on a Ministry of Education grant. Crandall has three more plays to do before he com-

pletes the entire repertoire of noh. Once completed, he will move on to something else, he says.

In "Eliza," the traveler, (the *waki*, or supporting character), who challenges Eliza to acknowledge her true experiences, was played by Joseph Houseal, an American dancer-choreographer based in Kyoto. A student of noh, which he calls "theater of contemplation," for four years, Houseal observes, "in noh you cannot fake it. The movements are slow and concentrated. You must reach out to someone's guts."

#### Flesh and blood

On stage the cast was backed by Japanese noh professionals on the flute, small and large hand drums and large drum.

Gentarō Mishima, 54, a *tai-ko*, or large drum, master who took part in "Eliza," commends the foreign students of noh for their earnestness. "They seem to be set on grasping something," he says.

Since "Eliza" follows the noh structure, the master does not find the English noh play out of place. "There are noh professionals who disapprove of new experiments.

They may not criticize outright but will just ignore the experiments," observes Mishima, who has been teaching Emmert the drum for more than 10 years.

Matsui, 43, who choreographed the movements for "Eliza," says experiments are necessary. "We must value and guard tradition, but we must also create. We are not antiques but flesh and blood." He admits that it is costly to stage new noh plays. "But it is a necessary step to add fine plays to the noh repertoire."

Matsui, who has performed and taught noh on many occasions in the United States and Europe, recalls that when he first went overseas to perform noh he found himself under pressure from fellow noh professionals for standing out. "Times have changed. Performing overseas is common now."

Matsui says the number of noh performances being held in Japan has increased over the years. "But the audience consists mostly of pupils of the masters performing. The art has yet to reach the public at large."

Emmert, who teaches Asian theater and music at Musashino Women's College in Tokyo, says he has not

committed himself to being a professional so that he can retain his freedom.

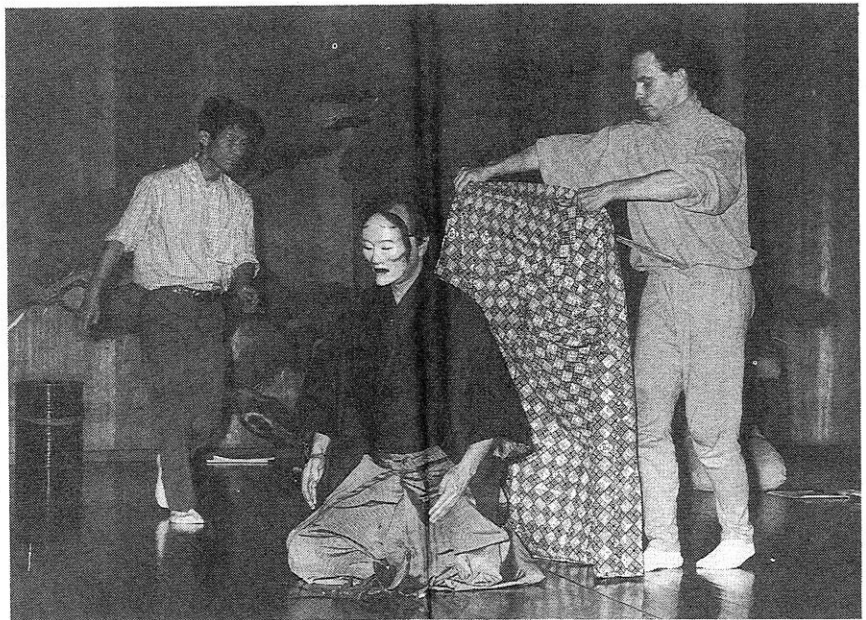
If he was a professional, doing English noh plays might be more problematic, adds Emmert. The associate professor has taken part in all three of the English noh presented in Japanese so far: Yeats' "At the Hawk's Well," Janine Beichman's "Drifting Fires" and Arthur Little and Leonard Holvik's "St. Francis."

Emmert objects to the common notion that holds noh as being something upper class. "Fortunately I didn't have those preconceptions."

He does not think noh, "a strong tradition," will die out. "There is a tendency in the noh world to think that things will always be this way. But things will change, society will change. Noh is influenced by that."

Emmert and friends are planning to have "Eliza" translated into Japanese. They hope that it will stimulate "a certain group of noh actors who want to create something new but aren't confident enough."

Said Emmert: "It's one more thing which helps to open up the world of noh just a little bit more."



AKIRA MATSUI (left), Richard Emmert (center) and Joseph Houseal prepare for productions of the English noh play "Eliza" at the UmewakaNoh Theater in Tokyo on May 16. The play was presented on May 28 and 29. PHOTOS BY SENJI SUUKI

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