

An Article in *Nichigo Press* on *Oppenheimer* - 2 November 2015
<http://nichigopress.jp/enta/culture-eye/111352/>

Culture Eye

Oppenheimer, a Noh play in English

reporter: Marie Sekiwa

Translated into English by Ikuko Sorensen

Noh is a traditional Japanese performing art form. I couldn't imagine what it would be like to see a Noh play in English until I actually sat in the theatre. Virtually all the words and song (*utai*) are in English but here, the metrical convention with regard to the drawing out of syllables and the characteristic melodic movements are maintained just as they would be if the Noh were in Japanese. A large screen mounted at the back of the stage projects the surtitles both in English and Japanese.

Oppenheimer, which was premiered on 30th September at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, is a new Noh work in English especially written by Allan Marett, who formerly taught Musicology at the University of Sydney. As is appropriate on seventieth anniversary of the end of the Pacific War in 2015, it takes as its theme Robert Oppenheimer, who created the atomic bomb that was dropped on Hiroshima. With its many philosophical and Zen dimensions, the play was well worth the view.



オッペンハイマーの亡霊 (左) と巡礼者

The ghost of Oppenheimer (left) and the pilgrim

On a stage set up in almost the same manner as a Japanese Noh stage, both Asian and Western faces could be seen among the actors in their Noh costumes and the chorus in their formal kimono. I realized that I had a preconception that Noh was supposed to be seen in Japanese, but drawn in by the movements of the performers and the stage assistants (*kôken*), and the timbre of the flute and the drums of the familiar hayashi musicians, I found myself in a world that was unmistakably that of Noh.

The Story of *Oppenheimer*, a Noh play in English



Flyer of the *Oppenheimer* performance

Although written in English, the story takes place in Japan. The secondary actor (*waki*) is a Buddhist pilgrim (*henro*), who has come from Shikoku to an old temple in Hiroshima, where he meets a ghost. This is the ghost of Robert Oppenheimer, played by the main actor (*shite*). He confesses that he himself made the atomic bomb that burned so many people alive and that because of that he is condemned to wander this world as a tormented ghost. His ineluctable anguish grows stronger each time he goes through death and rebirth, unable to escape from the wheel of karma. With these painful departing words, he vanishes from sight. This concludes Act 1.

During the interlude (*ai-kyōgen*, that is a *kyōgen* inserted between the two acts), local residents, a brother and a sister (whose father was killed by the atomic bomb), tell the story of a priest to the pilgrim. The priest was not able to escape from the law of karma and was compelled to go through death and rebirth as a fox. The story prepares the audience to link the fate of the fox with that of the formidable ghost of Oppenheimer in Act 2.

The world of the law of cause and effect in *Baizhang (Hyakujō in Japanese) and the Fox*

The episode of the fox told in the play is based on a tale called *Baizhang and the Fox* in *The Gateless Gate (Wumenguan/Mumonkan)*, a collection of Zen koans from the Sung dynasty in China. The tale presents itself as the key to understand the story of *Oppenheimer* as a whole. The tale is one of the lessons on ‘the law of cause and effect’, in which the concept of ‘the wheel of karma’ is also introduced.

The outline of *Baizhang and the Fox*

A fox appeared in the form of an old man in front of a Zen priest Baizhang. The fox begged him to save him and Baizhang asked why. 'I was once a priest myself,' the fox said to the priest, 'A monk asked me whether or not someone who underwent ascetic training and attained spiritual enlightenment falls under the law of cause and effect. I replied that such a person does not fall under the law of cause and effect. On account of this reply, I was changed to a fox and condemned to be reborn five hundred times as a fox.'

When the fox asked Baizhang the same question that he was asked long time ago, Baizhang said: 'Such a person cannot escape the law of cause and effect.' Baizhang's words caused the fox to achieve enlightenment and freed him from his vulpine form. No sooner had he regained his human form than he met his death as a human being.

The law of cause and effect is a principle that states that everything is a result of a cause and that nothing occurs without a cause. The law is applied to explaining not only everyday matters but is also observed in traditional physics. It is a principal that is inseparable from the life of us humans.

The priest who turned into a fox in the tale of *Baizhang and the Fox* boasted that: 'A person of high moral virtue (like myself) who successfully underwent ascetic training does not fall under the law of cause and effect.' His transgression of the law was the reason why he was changed into a fox as punishment (presumably by the Buddha). Furthermore, he is not able to escape from the life of a fox for five hundred lifetimes. When he accepts the law of cause and effect and reaches enlightenment, however, he is finally released from the nightmarish wheel of birth and death.

In modern times of course, we have theories such as the special theory of relativity and quantum mechanics that cannot be fully accounted for by the law of cause and effect. The trend of our time is that we tend to see possibilities in these relatively new theories and attach high value to them. In practice, however, when we look at man's life and society, we still find phenomena that can be explained by the law of cause and effect.

The Death of Oppenheimer



Act 2, *Fudō Myō-ō* (left) and Oppenheimer

The English Noh play *Oppenheimer* is an attempt to reflect upon the law of cause and effect in light of the historical event of 'dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima' during the World War II. In Act 2, the ghost of Oppenheimer is summoned again by the *prajna paramita* sutra that the pilgrim chants. During the course of their dialogue, the ghost of Oppenheimer makes a firm resolve to accept the blame in order to seek deliverance from the torment of the endless cycle of life and death. He chooses to accept his fate and to be burned by the flames of *Fudō Myō-ō*.

Dancing solemnly, the companion actor (*tsure*) as *Fudō Myō-ō* appears and yields his sword. He has a terrible countenance and is covered in flames. He is a forceful figure in the world of Buddhism who 'inspires dread to those who are impermeable to Buddhist teachings and crushes down demons as well as all earthly desires'. The play ends when the ghost of Oppenheimer, just like the fox in the tale of *Baizhang and the Fox*, accepts the law of cause and effect and frees himself from the cycle of birth and death with the aid of the power of *Fudō Myō-ō's* sword.

The Noh masks used

The ghost of Oppenheimer appears in different masks in the two parts of the play. In Act 1, he wears a 'Shunkan' mask that expresses despair and emaciation. In Act 2, the mask is a newly commissioned one created by a Noh mask carver in Japan, Hideta Kitazawa. It shows vehemence as well as a trace of sadness. Prior to the performance of the Noh play, the Japan Foundation of Sydney held an exhibition of his work showcasing masks in both traditional forms such as *ko-omote* (young woman) and *han'nya* (demonic woman) and others of more contemporary designs.



ジャパンファウンデーションで行われた能面の展示会の様子

展示会では能面の制作過程の展示も見られた

The Noh mask exhibition at the Japan Foundation Display showing the process of making masks

The performance of *Oppenheimer* made me realize that masks, costumes, musical instruments, as well as stage props that form part of a Noh play are all backed by the traditional techniques and thoughts behind them. It also made me take a good look at the beauty and Zen value system in Japan, which are normally kept out of our consciousness in our daily life.

Allan Marett, the writer and producer of the play, has a blog to tell the circumstances and process of the production of *Oppenheimer*. His blog is at: blogs.usyd.edu.au/oppenheimer-noh.