

# Eliza Fraser inspires first Australian Nō play

**A unique event in Australian theatre will take place at the University this week — the premiere of the first Australian Nō play.**

**The production, a Performance Studies Project, is a joint effort by the Department of Music and the Theatre Studies Service Unit, with assistance from two visiting scholars from Japan. Students from Music, East Asian and Performance Studies have contributed.**

The Nō play, *Eliza*, is based on the real story of Eliza Fraser who in the 1830s was shipwrecked on what was later named Fraser Island and spent time living with Aboriginals.

The Nō drama on this theme is written by Allan Marett, with music by Richard Emmert and choreography by Akira Matsui. The drama draws on a number of literary and musical sources (in the tradition of Japanese Nō plays), among them the Patrick White novel, *A Fringe of Leaves*, the Barbara Blackman text for the Sculthorpe work *Eliza Fraser Sings* and musical references to Aboriginal music.

The structure of *Eliza* is closely modelled on Japanese Nō plays, in which in the first act the focus is often on a character trapped in the form of a ghost as the result of past deeds or mistaken views. In the second act the character, freed from its ghostly existence through dance, appears in its true form. In literary portrayals of Eliza Fraser, she has been cast either as a victim, 'the poor white woman, in the hands of savages', or at other times as a visionary power because of her experience in living with the Aboriginals. The structure of *Eliza* draws on this dichotomy. Thus, in the first act Eliza is a ghost, trapped by the myth which sees her as a victim: in the second act she has been liberated and has been able to re-enact what actually happened to her, through dance.

A cast of seventeen performs *Eliza* — principal actors and dancers, a chorus, actors and a musical ensemble of drums and flute.

On the same program as *Eliza*, two Japanese Nō dramas will also be performed, *Tamakazura* and *Kantan*, and members of the Tokyo-based *Tesarugaku No Kai* group will perform excerpts from *Sbojo* and *Tsunemasa*.

Dr Marett, an ethnomusicologist and a senior lecturer in the Department of Music, is one of the few Australian scholars to have made an impression in scholarly circles in Japan because of his research into ancient Japanese music. He is also a scholar of Aboriginal music. Akira Matsui is a professional Nō actor from Japan and Richard Emmert, an American is a scholar and performer of Nō who has worked in Japan for many years.

This is the second visit of Matsui and Emmert to the University. They

in addition to performing traditional Nō drama during that project, students performed a Nō presentation of W.B. Yeats's play *At the Hawk's Well*. A 40 minute video was produced on the project. This shows the intense effort and activity which goes into the production of Nō. Revealed on the video are the subtle, controlled and fluid movements required of the actors and the endless practising that goes into mastering the choreography. Musicians and chorus rehearsing are also shown as well as the intricacies involved in applying masks and arranging wigs and costumes. Discussions between the cast, producer and choreographer complete the overview.

A video is also being made of the current Nō project. Both will be invaluable for teaching and research, says Dr Marett.

The ABC is recording the project for radio and parts of *Eliza* are being filmed for inclusion in a TV documentary.

In September, at the University of New England, at the National Conference of the Australian Musicological Society, Dr Marett will give a paper about *Eliza* and a group will perform excerpts from *Eliza*.

Mr Emmert will give a paper on recent Nō plays in English, including *Eliza*, at the annual Toyo Ongaku Gakkai (The Society for Research into Asiatic Music) in Japan in October.

The genre has become quite popular in recent years and a number of Nō plays in English have been written in the last eight years or so, says Dr Marett.

*Eliza* and the other Nō plays will be shown this week, 4, 5 and 6 September, in the Seymour Centre, to an invited audience of mostly students and staff.

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