

# Blue Moons : Transformations of an English Noh Play

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## Blue Moons: Transformations of an English Noh Play

Michael Watson

Theatre Nohgaku performed Deborah Brevoort's play *Blue Moon Over Memphis: an Elvis Presley noh* in Tokyo on May 23, 2015. There were two performances, both sold out well in advance thanks to word-of-mouth recommendations and to publicity through social media. A small stage was created in the "Art Sanctuary," the *nihonga* artist Allan West's atelier and gallery in a picturesque backstreet in the hills of Yanaka (Taitō Ward). One of the artist's large folding screens of a tree on a golden background was used at the back of the stage in place of the painting of a pine tree at the back of a traditional noh stage (*ka-gami-ita no matsu*). Chairs and benches for the audience were placed in front of the stage as well as in the narrow strips on both sides of the stage. I chose to sit in the strip on stage right, next to a short exit from the main stage area that functioned as a bridge (*hashi-gakari*) for the entrance of the main characters. Some members of the audience also sat on the floor. Two programs were prepared for the audience, one in English, with the cast and musician information in English followed by a complete English text of the play, and the other in Japanese, with the information in Japanese followed by a complete translation prepared by Kagaya Shinko 加賀谷真子 of the Asian Studies Department, Williams College.

Many aspects of the performance remain vivid to me some five months later, but unfortunately I did not take notes either at the time or immediately afterwards. Rather than rely on incomplete and possibly faulty recollections of a single performance, I have attempted to combine a discussion of the performance I saw with

the reading experience of the play as it appears in different written versions, including the music score kindly provided to me by Richard Emmert.

Theatre Nohgaku's version with music by Richard Emmert is the product of many years collaboration between Emmert and the playwright, Deborah Brevoort. It was originally called *Moon Over Graceland* and copyrighted in 1992 by Deborah B. Baley. The online library catalog of Brown University records that this play was one of two included in a thesis for the Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing (1993).<sup>1</sup> While this early version was not available to me, two other versions by Brevoort could be consulted, together with a complete handwritten musical score and the libretto as published in the program for the performance in May, 2015. As can be seen, the titles vary slightly, particularly in the subtitle.

(1) "Blue Moon Over Memphis—A Noh Drama about Elvis Presley." Text by Deborah Brevoort with facing page translation by Kagaya Shinko, introduced by Richard Emmert. *Nohgaku shiryō senta kiyō. Journal of the Noh Research Archives*, Musashino University, Tokyo. Number XV (2003), pp.1-86. (Cited below as Brevoort 2003.)

(2) *Blue Moon Over Memphis: A Noh Drama about Elvis Presley*. Text by Deborah Brevoort. In Glenn Young, ed., *The Best American Short Plays: 2003-2004* (New York: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2006), pp. 45-87. (Cited below as Brevoort 2006.)

(3) *Blue Moon Over Memphis*. Text by Deborah Brevoort, music by Richard Emmert. Unpublished musical score. Handwritten manuscript by Richard Emmert, completed 6 June, 2013.47 pp. (Cited as Brevoort/Emmert 2013.)

(4) *Blue Moon Over Memphis: an Elvis Presley noh*. Written by Deborah Brevoort, composed by Richard Emmert. Libretto printed in program for

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1 Thesis title "Blue moon over Graceland and into the fire"; thesis advisor: Vogel, Paula. <https://search.library.brown.edu/catalog/b2235490>.

Theatre Nohgaku performance on May 23, 2015, at “Art Sanctuary,” Tokyo.  
(Cited as Brevoort 2015.)

*The Best American Short Plays*, a series dating back to the eighties, is now published once every two years. *Blue Moon Over Memphis* is one of twelve plays included in the edition for 2003-2004. This edition was particularly valuable for its inclusion of notes by Brevoort: a preface, “A few notes about Noh Drama and Elvis Presley before reading *Blue Moon Over Memphis*” (pp. 49-50), a postscript, “Production notes about Noh Drama and Elvis Presley” (pp. 85-87), and a page concerning performances directed by the playwright herself and by other directors (p. 51).

In the preface, Brevoort describes many of the key features of noh: its stylized nature, its use of music, dance and gesture. Lacking dramatic conventions like plot or character development that Western audiences expect, it is instead “meditative theatre” (Brevoort 2006: 49). Overstating the case somewhat, she emphasizes how noh depends on the audience being familiar both with the identity of the phantom and with the lines of poetry that are quoted.<sup>2</sup> This led her to choose the figure from the world of popular music, Elvis Presley, and to draw on a shared culture, the common knowledge among American audiences both of the celebrity himself and of the lyrics and melodies sung by him:

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2 Of course, phantom noh (*mugen nō*) is not the only form of noh. Though dominant among second category “warrior plays” and well represented in the third category “wig plays,” *mugen nō* are absent in the first category “god plays.” Many plays in the fourth or fifth categories are *genzaimono*, showing living characters in “real time” action. Not all ghosts in noh were figures of history or literature well known to early audiences—one thinks of the hunter in *Utō* and the fisherman in *Akogi*, for example. As for the poetry quoted in plays, some lines will have been familiar to audiences (then and now) than others, depending on education and what sort of poem it is (*waka* or *kan-shi*). Members of the audiences today are likely to do no more than recognize that a poem is being alluded to.

Noh dramas are based on stories that are well known to the audience. There is the appearance of a ghost of a famous dead person in just about every Noh play. The text of a Noh drama is inspired by poetry that is also well known to the audience. Noh is often called the “theatre of reminiscence,” because there is a looking back in just about every play.

I decided to write a Noh play about Elvis Presley because I was searching for a way to bring this meditative form of drama into the American theatre. I kept asking myself what story did we have that everyone would know—and know so well that I wouldn’t have to tell it? What famous dead person would we want to see? What music, dance and poetry traditions did we have that would enable us to look back and remember.<sup>3</sup>

The answer to the final question, she suggests, is pop culture. As the “King” of pop culture, Elvis’ music continues to be played “on radio stations across the country” while the number of fans “continue to grow” long after his death, buying “Elvis paraphernalia” of him and reporting “sightings” of the singer long after his death in 1977 (Brevoort 2006: 49-50). This is, one might add, true still today when his performances can be heard and seen on the Internet and affordable fancy-dress replicas of his costumes can be purchased online. Graceland, his home in Memphis, Tennessee, is both a virtual pilgrimage site ([www.graceland.com](http://www.graceland.com)) and an actual destination for domestic and international visitors, who still total more than 600,000 annually.

In the second paragraph quoted above, Brevoort suggests that the choice of a figure well known to audiences will free the playwright from the necessity of telling his or her story: “that everyone would know—and know so well that I wouldn’t have to tell it.” (Brevoort 2006: 49).

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3 Brevoort 2003: 49 (“A few notes about Noh Drama and Elvis Presley before reading *Blue Moon Over Memphis*”).

This is the principle familiar in Western theatre going back to the two great Greek cycles: the Theban plays about Oedipus and his children, and the tragedies of the House of Atreus centering around the murder of Agememnon and its aftermath. Because the larger story was familiar to ancient audiences, it needed neither to be re-enacted nor retold in detail—and to a great extent this is true of many modern adaptations of the same material. Nonetheless, most Greek tragedies contain passages where key moments in the earlier story are remembered. In Sophocles' *Electra*, for example, the heroine recalls the murder of her father. Euripedes' *Electra* opens with a long speech by a peasant who, like an *ai-kyōgen* actor in noh, provides an overall summary of the back story.

Likewise in noh plays based on episodes or characters from the *Tale of Genji*, the *Tale of the Heike*, or other classical texts, dramatists could rely on audiences picking up hints of what the source story is and recalling enough of the broader context of the narrative to be able to follow the play with a minimum of explanation. The first hint is often in the title itself, which may contain the name of a key figure (e.g. *Ukifune, Tadanori*), a significant place (*Nonomiya, Ataka*), or a combination of the place and character name (*Suma Genji, Ikuta Atsumori*). The text itself usually provides more clues.

In *Tamakazura*, the shite recites a poem that some listeners might recognize as being from the *Tale of Genji*, but then goes on to make a clearer reference, a helpful reminder to those with some familiarity with the story:

This was the poem composed long ago when Tamakazura met Ukon on pilgrimage to Hatsuse” (これはいにしへ玉鬘の内侍、初瀬詣でに右近とかや見奉りて詠ぜし歌なり).<sup>4</sup>

In the case of *Nonomiya* (“The Shrine in the Field”), the additional clue is given before, rather than after, the recitation of a poem from the *Genji*. The shite tells the traveling priest :

This is the day when Genji the Shining One visited this place [...]. He

brought with him a twig of *sakaki* and pushed it through the sacred fence. Miyasudokoro at once composed the poem [...]. (光源氏この所に詣で給ひしは 長月七日の日今日に当れり その時いささか持ち給ひし榊の枝を斎垣の内に差し置き給へば 御息所とりあへず...).<sup>5</sup>

In the case of a narrative containing almost nine hundred poems, audiences needed an extra hint like this to help them recall the situation in which the original *waka* appeared.

Necessary information about the characters or story can be given to audiences in different ways. The *aikyōgen* in two-part noh plays still helps to fulfill this function, although theatres now sometimes arrange an introductory talk in addition to the printed plot summaries. More elaborate programs containing plot summaries and essays are on sale in opera houses and theatres world-wide.

It is worth reflecting on Brevoort's point about shared culture. When Kenneth Yasuda wrote *Martin Luther King, Jr.: A Noh Play* in the 1980, he made use of footnotes to explain to readers the intertextual borrowing from Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* in the opening *sashi* ("When April with its showers [...] sweet") as well as the lengthy quotation from Martin Luther King's most famous speech in the *ageha* section, beginning with the most memorable phrase in capital letters, "I HAVE A DREAM, I HAVE A DREAM TODAY."<sup>6</sup> When this play was subsequently performed in the United States, some in the audience may have

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4 Yokomichi and Omote 1963: 57; trans. Janet Goff, *Noh drama and The Tale of Genji* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 122. Another version of *Tamakazura* makes the reference to the *Tale of Genji* even clearer by adding the phrase *Hikaru Genji no* ("of the Shining Genji"): これは光源氏のいにしへ玉鬘の内侍この初瀬寺に詣で給ひしを 右近とかや見奉りて詠みし歌なり. Itō Masayoshi, *Yōkyokushū*, *jō*, 324.

5 Trans. H. Paul Varley in Donald Keene, *Twenty Plays of the Nō Theatre* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), p. 185. Itō Masayoshi, *Yōkyokushū*, *ge*, 69. The story of Genji and the "Miyasudokoro" (Lady Rokujō) is summarized in the following *kuri sashi* sections.

recognized the quotation from the medieval poet but nearly everyone, including those born long after Dr. King's assassination in 1968, would have known the much cited phrase from the speech, just as they will have known something about the life of the civil rights' leader.

The parallel-text version (Brevoort 2003) like the version published in *The Best American Short Plays : 2003-2004* (Brevoort 2006) represents the text of the play before substantial alterations were made by the playwright and Richard Emmert as he prepared a version for performance on a noh stage.

In the original version, the *waki* role of Judy, a forty-year old Elvis fan, was to be played by two actresses, "one who is silent and moves through the play, and one who sits on a bench and recites Judy's lines from the side or back of the stage" (Brevoort 2003: 4). In the version now performed by Theatre Nohgaku, there is a single *waki*. Jublith Moore performed this role in Tokyo in May, 2015. She wore an unusual hybrid costume, like a noh robe in form, but made from denim fabric, a point that Emmert discussed in the valuable Question and Answer session following the afternoon performance.

The original version also called for two different actors to play Elvis, The *mae-jite* was to be a "heavyset black man in his 40's, wearing a white 'Las Vegas Elvis'-style pantsuit" while the *nochi-jite* represented Elvis "as a young man, dressed in a gold lamay suit" (Brevoort 2003: 4). Only the second actor thus represents Elvis himself, although both styles of costumes are associated in the popular imagination with Elvis Presley at these two stages in his career. Almost forty years after his death in 1977, "Elvis" pantsuits and lamay suits are still sold online for people wanting to dress up as Elvis.

In the early version of *Blue Moon over Memphis*, an Afro-American is to be

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6 Kenneth Yasuda, *Masterworks of the Nō Theater* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), pp.504, 505. The play has subsequently been performed, for example in Pennsylvania University in September, 1996.



cast as the *mae-jite*. Called simply “the Man,” he seems both to be Elvis himself, a black Elvis, and simultaneously also to be the embodiment of the Afro-American musical traditions that inspired the young singer. Elvis was “the Mississippi white boy/who sang like a negro,” to quote a memorable passage found in all versions seen of the play (cf. Brevoort 2003: 34 ; Brevoort 2015: 3). In different versions, these words are spoken or sung by different actors. In early versions, the words are spoken by “Memphis Man 2,” one of Elvis’body guards. The three body guards and a group of three female fans share between them a long account of the transformations of Elvis from his childhood to his death of a drug overdose at the age of 42. Neither body guards nor fans appear in the currently performed noh version.

The verbally inventive retelling of Elvis’ life draws on images of Presley from popular culture, recorded in photographs and journalistic accounts of the time, the images that now form his legend in popular imagination. In the Noh Theatre version, the account is striking musically as well, sung by the *mae-jite* himself and the chorus (*ji*), and forming the *sashi* and *kuse* sections, a musical highlight of the first part of the play (Brevoort/Emmert 2013: 20-26).

“The Man” seems to be someone who is familiar not only with Elvis’music but “knew him as well as you can know anyone” (Brevoort 2003: 42). In the tradition of *mugen nō* (phantom plays), the *mae-jite* will often hint that s/he is none other than the very person s/he has been talking about. Here in the early version, the last words of the *mae-jite* before vanishing from the stage are more ambiguous :

THE MAN : He has not yet found his resting place.

MEMPHIS MAFIA 3 : The lonely never do.

THE MAN : The lonely never do.

JUDY : You knew him well then?

THE MAN : I knew him as well as you can know anyone.

JUDY : Tell me...who are you? What is your name?

[...]

THE MAN: The Man disappears. (Brevoort 2003: 42)

In the Theatre Noh version, the *mae-jite* is also named simply “The Man” but the costume gives no clue to his identity. In the performance in Tokyo, the *shite* (John Oglevee) appeared unmasked in the first part and wearing a noh robe. The libretto reveals only that he is “a man in his 40’s” (Brevoort 2015 : n.p. “Cast”). The passage corresponding to the one quoted above also has the *mae-jite* leaving the stage without answering Judy’s question (“Who are you? What is your name?”) but the identity of the *mae-jite* has already been revealed in the immediately preceding *rongi* (“Discussion”) section sung by the *mae-jite* and chorus. This concludes :

CHORUS : [...]

Press me for my name and I must reply

I am that Blue Moon boy restless and alone

Staring out the window without a love of my own.

(Brevoort 2015: 4 ; cf Brevoort/Emmert 2013: 29)

The expression “without a love of my own” is an intertextual allusion in the best tradition of noh theatre, albeit to a work of popular culture rather than to a canonical text of classical literature as in older noh plays. The phrase comes from the lyrics of the 1934 song “Blue Moon” composed by Lorenz Hart and Richard Rodgers :

Blue Moon

You saw me standing alone

without a dream in my heart

without a love of my own.<sup>7</sup>

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7 Lyrics quoted from the website *MetroLyrics*, Retrieved October 9, 2015, from <http://www.metrolyrics.com/blue-moon-lyrics-elvis-presley.html>.

In the second half of the play, the entire stanza above is to be sung by the *waki* Judy just as the *nochi-jite*, Elvis in a mask representing the face of the young Presley, makes his entrance. The song, which makes up the “EI-Poem” section,” takes not only the words of the 1934 song but also follows the rising-falling melodic pattern of the pop song in the musical form of the two lines “without a dream in my heart/without a love of my own” (Brevoort 2015: 5; cf. score in Brevoort/Emmert 2013: 33).

The song “Blue Moon” had been sung by many earlier singers, including two famous Afro-Americans, Billie Holiday and Ella Fitzgerald, before it was further popularized by Elvis Presley and included in his movie *King Creole* (1956).

Deborah Brevoort took the title of her play from the song title, “Blue Moon,” a phrase repeated four times in the song. The image of the moon is developed in the play. The events take place at the time of a full moon. The groundskeeper at Graceland, Oscar (*ai-kyōgen*) comments on the strange behavior of the fans who claim that Elvis is still “walkin’ about” though dead for fifteen years :

It must be the Blue Moon. Once in a Blue Moon the moon is blue. That must be it. Oh lordy, it’s going to be a long night.

(Brevoort 2015: 4, cf. Brevoort 2003: 52)

The expression *blue moon* is multivalent in English. Popularly thought to refer to a moon, generally full, that appears blue in colour, it more properly refers to the phenomenon wherein the full moon can be seen twice in the same season (an older definition) or, more recently, twice in the same calendar month (as occurred in August 2012 or July 2015).<sup>8</sup>

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8 An autobiographical work of short fiction a contemporary Japanese writer makes effective use of the appearance of a “blue” moon twice in one month. Kawakami Hiromi 川上弘美, “Blue Moon,” *Granta JAPAN* with Waseda Bungaku 早稲田文学 (Hayakawa shobō, 2014), pp. 108-115; “Blue Moon,” translated by Ludy North, *Granta* 127: *Japan* (2014), pp. 106-113.

The next reference in the play to the moon turns the expression about. In the *machiutai* (“waiting song”) of the second half, Judy admires the sight of the full moon, a passage that is identical in early and current forms of the play :

How pretty it is

The moon in the night sky

It makes everything blue. (Brevoort 2003: 56 ; Brevoort 2015: 5)

This is “blue moon” in one of the more usual senses but one that “makes everything blue” i.e. creates a sense of sadness or melancholy. This sight prompts Judy to sing “Blue Moon/You saw me standing alone/without a dream in my heart/without a love of my own,” lyrics identical to the 1934 song in the EI sung before the entrance of the *nochi-shite*, as mentioned above. Other themes important in the play relate to expressions here.

Firstly, there is the idea of the singer being “alone,” which recalls the frequently mentioned cognates (“lonely,” “lonesome” and “loneliness”) seen for example when the *mae-jite* reveals that the Elvis that Judy loves best—the “lonely Elvis,” the “Elvis who walked a lonely street” —is “not buried” in Graceland, but rather in the “hearts of lonely people”(Brevoort 2003: 38, 40).

Secondly, there is the depiction of Elvis as without a love of his own. In the long account of his life, Brevoort omits any direct mention of his love life or marriage. Instead, what is important here is his (existential) loneliness and sense of being without true love, while all the time being the object of worship and pilgrimage long after his death by loving fans. Before his death, he is described as being set upon by wild fans who “can’t help falling in love” with him, wanting to possess “everything he touched” —even “nails from his fence” and “rings off his fingers” (Brevoort 2015: 3).<sup>9</sup>

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9 The predatory aspect of fan worship is considerably stronger in the final version. Of the actions mentioned here, only the description of fans wanting to “steal his rings” is present in the early script (cf. Brevoort 2003: 36).

It would be wrong to close without saying a few words about the interlude (*ai-kyōgen*). In the Tokyo performance, the role was memorably played by Richart Emmert, who rose from his position in the chorus to act the part of Oscar with elements of broad comedy in language and gesture. This groundskeeper was the first person Judy met when she arrived at Graceland, answering her questions about the rules of the “Meditation Garden,” which is kept shut at night. In the currently performed noh play, the only other person met by Judy is “The Man” himself, in part one, and Elvis, in part two. This streamlining of the play, cutting the parts of fans and body guards, greatly improves the dramatic intensity of the drama as noh play—in the original production without noh music would have made a different effect through the interaction of Judy with others at Graceland.

A full study of the play would require repeated viewings of the work in performance. Much of the effect of the second half of the play came through the combination of musical elements and language. As often in noh, the latter half of the play is dominated by exchanges between the *nochi-jite* and the chorus, here through the sequence *ageuta*, *uta*, *ei*, and *noriji*. The musical setting was very effective, providing a rising sense of drama and tension, but there were also remarkably effective developments in verbal imagery, including still further plays on that most clichéd of images, the lonely moon, and that most familiar of popular tropes, the loveless sexual encounter. Elvis sings “lonely love songs/Outloud to the moon” while the moon itself is :

Like a one-night lover fleeing your bed

With the morning’s first light

A one-night lover

Who leaves no trace of warmth. (Brevoort 2015: 6).

Judy is too late in her final question : Elvis, there is something I always wanted to say to you.” He has already left the stage, disappearing with the coming of the

dawn and the morning mist : “Elvis is gone” (Brevoort 2015: 7).

Not many noh plays end with the waki making such a personal plea to the shite, but this was a memorable end to a memorable play.

### Primary Texts

Brevoort, Deborah (2003). “Blue Moon Over Memphis—A Noh Drama about Elvis Presley.” Text by Deborah Brevoort with facing page translation by Kagaya Shinko, introduced by Richard Emmert. *Nohgaku shiryō sentaa kiyō. Journal of the Noh Research Archives*, Musashino University, Tokyo. Number XV (2003), pp. 1-86

Brevoort, Deborah (2006) *Blue Moon Over Memphis: A Noh Drama about Elvis Presley*. in Glenn Young, ed., *The Best American Short Plays: 2003-2004* (New York : Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2006), pp. 45-87.

Brevoort, Deborah (2013) *Blue Moon Over Memphis*. Music by Richard Emmert. Unpublished musical score. Handwritten manuscript by Richard Emmert, completed 6 June, 2013. 47 pp.

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