

Background to Creating Blue Moon Over Memphis : The “Elvis” Noh

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—The “Elvis” Noh

Richard Emmert

A Brief Background to Noh in English

Noh plays in English have been performed now for over thirty years.¹ I composed music for my first English noh play in 1981 and have written and/or arranged music for ten more plays since. In addition, David Crandall, a founding member of Theatre Nohgaku, has written music for three noh plays in English and the Noh Shakespeare Group led by Ueda Munakata Kuniyoshi has also produced four English noh plays.²

As to be expected, there are still plenty of negative reactions to performances of noh plays in English. Before I ever composed any music for noh, I was told by a well-known Japanese noh scholar and critic that noh in English would be impossible. The reason, I was told, was that the music of noh developed from the Japanese language and therefore would not work with any other language. But by that time, I was already studying the drums of noh and their rhythms were becoming second nature to me. As a native English speaker, putting noh rhythms

1 For an attempt to define noh, see Emmert 1997: 19-35. In addition, in an entry written for Nishino-Hata 2011: 258-60, I posit that the first true English noh performance was NOHO's *At the Hawk's Well* in 1981.

2 Earlier discussions of Noh in English can be found in two Theatre Nohgaku tour programs: *Pine Barrens* 2006 and *Kiyotsune & Pagoda* 2009: 37-42. In Japanese, there is also Emmert 2010.

with English seemed to be a natural step. As time passed, I came to understand that for noh in English to be successful, one had to find the means to meld noh rhythms with English in a way which would make the former sound natural as noh and the latter sound both natural and poetic as English. One could not simply force English into the same way that Japanese text combines with noh music.

That is, then, what I have since tried to create in composing for noh in English. Of course, criticisms still remain, often suggesting that noh in English “hurts traditional noh,” or it “doesn’t sound natural in English.” But there seems to also be an increasing acceptance based on many of the opposite reactions which suggest noh in English “opens a great stage art form to English-speaking audiences,” that it “increases the exposure of traditional noh,” and/or that it is “understandable and effective” as contemporary English-language theater.

In 2000, I organized a week of rehearsals of my most experienced English-speaking students of noh who had attended my workshops in Japan and the United States, as well as several other colleagues who had already studied noh in Japan for many years. We gathered in Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania where we rehearsed W. B. Yeats’ *At the Hawk’s Well* for which I had first written noh music and which was performed in Japan in the 1980s. Out of this week of rehearsals grew Theatre Nohgaku, a company dedicated to performing noh in English. I became the first artistic director of the company whose mission statement crafted over the years sums up the beliefs of our members: “Our mission is to share noh’s beauty and power with English-speaking audiences and performers. We have found that this traditional form retains its dramatic effectiveness in languages other than Japanese. We believe noh techniques hold a powerful means of expression in the context of contemporary English language theatre.”³ Theatre Nohgaku now has 21 members

3 Theatre Nohgaku’s full mission statement as well as other information about the company can be found online at <http://www.theatrenohgaku.org/>.

located in Japan, United States, Canada and the United Kingdom.

Since our founding, Theatre Nohgaku has had its own productions of six English noh plays with some of our members performing in three other English noh.⁴ We have also been the central performers in five classical noh plays in Japanese.⁵ Most of our members have spent time varying from several months to several years in Japan studying noh. Though we live on three continents, gradually we are finding ways to not only get the word out about our company and our English noh activities, but also about noh in general.

Blue Moon Over Memphis—A Noh about Elvis Presley

When I first heard about a “noh” script written about Elvis Presley, I could not

4 Theatre Nohgaku has performed the following English language noh. The music for these were composed by myself unless otherwise noted: W.B. Yeats *At the Hawk's Well* (2002), Greg Giovanni's *Pine Barrens* (2006), David Crandall's *Crazy Jane* (2007 with music by David Crandall), Jannette Cheong's *Pagoda* (2009), Motomasa's classical noh *Sumidagawa* (2014, English arrangement by Emmert) and Deborah Brevoort's *Blue Moon Over Memphis* (2014). There have also been productions which one or more of our members have performed in including: Erik Ehn's *Crazy Horse/Moon of the Scarlett Plums* (2001, produced by Theatre of Yugen), Daphne Marlatt's *The Gull* (2006, produced by Pangaea Arts), and Allan Maret's *Oppenheimer* (2015). Also in production with Theatre Nohgaku is Carrie Preston's *Zahdi Dates and Poppies* (scheduled for performance in 2016 with music by David Crandall.)

5 Many Theatre Nohgaku members received much of their training in the annual summer Noh Training Project workshop held for three weeks every year from 1995~2014 in Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania. Founded by myself as Director and Elizabeth Dowd—an actor in the Bloomsburg Theater Ensemble—as Producing Director, Kita noh actors Matsui Akira and Oshima Kinue were frequent guest instructors as was the late semi-professional *hayashi* teacher, Kama Mitsuo. During the span of 20 summers, we produced five classical noh productions in Japanese with full costume and *hayashi* instrumentalists. These were: *Kurozuka* (2004), *Funabenkei* (2009), *Atsumori* (2011), and both *Takasago* and *Hagoromo* (2014).

help but laugh. There was something unnatural and perhaps uncomfortable about putting together the rock n'roll icon with Japan's classical theater. However, when I finally had a chance to read the play, I began to see it as an actual noh performance. First, it had overall a two-part classical noh structure and its images of loneliness took the "Elvis as rock n'roll icon" in a direction much more sensitive and, to me at least, appropriate for a noh presentational style. Later, I met with the playwright, Deborah Brevoort, and we discussed the possibility of Theatre Nohgaku performing her play as an English noh.

One thing that was clear from the beginning was the necessity to cut the play down in length. Ms. Brevoort had originally structured the play as a noh, but with the intent of it being performed by Western actors with Western musical and acting conventions. I instead wanted to create it as an English noh—putting noh music to the text and largely following noh conventions. It was clear that the text as originally written would be much too long to chant as noh. Any text chanted in noh style takes considerably more time than just reading it as dialogue. Furthermore, I could see that in the process of cutting it down, we could also make the text less dialogue-like and more poetic. Fortunately, Ms. Brevoort was more than willing to work with me on an adaptation of her original play.⁶

Over the course of several summers beginning in 2008, Ms. Brevoort and I would meet for a couple of days in New York City to discuss how to shorten the text. During this time, Ms. Brevoort rewrote some parts of the text, but in general, it was a process of condensing, which when taken to individual lines, inevitably made the text more poetic. We took our time, meeting over the next several years when I was in New York City for short periods. It wasn't until 2012 that I actually

6 Deborah Brevoort's original script for *Blue Moon Over Memphis* can be found with Japanese translation in the Journal of the Noh Research Archives (Nohgaku shiryō senta kyō) 2003, Musashino University.

began composing music for the piece and this was completed in 2013. In June 2013, Theatre Nohgaku had a residency at the Orchard Project in upper state New York where five of our members workshoped the piece.⁷ We also did a workshop production with the full Theatre Nohgaku company at our annual summer rehearsal week in Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania in July.

During the following year in Japan, fellow Theatre Nohgaku member John Oglevee and myself worked together to create the ideas for the costumes and masks. Already Theatre Nohgaku had relied several times on our affiliated artist, maskmaker Kitazawa Hideta, to make new masks for our plays and we again requested him to do so. Mr. Oglevee gathered a number of images of Elvis online



Theatre Nohgaku's John Oglevee performs with the Elvis mask in *Blue Moon Over Memphis*. Photo by Inoue Kazuhiro.

7 This first rehearsal at the Orchard Project was attended by Theatre Nohgaku members Elizabeth Dowd, Gary Mathews, Tom O'Connor and John Oglevee, in addition to myself. It was by working with this group that many of the ideas for the staging emerged.

and the three of us had several discussions about what type of mask would be appropriate. In the end we decided to have Mr. Kitazawa create a mask for the second-half *shite* which would be quite Elvis-like. If one sees Kitazawa's mask for the first time, one might not necessarily think Elvis, but once Elvis is mentioned, the similarity is quite striking.

For costumes, we decided to go with both noh and modified noh costumes. The main *shite* costumes were ordered from the Sasaki Noh Costume Factory in Kyoto. Then, our own member, Lluís Valls, made a denim kimono for the *waki* reflecting the "denim" era in which Elvis became popular.

During my original meetings with Ms. Brevoort and then in the workshop sessions with Theatre Nohgaku members, one issue that came up frequently was what type of mask to use for the *shite* actor in the first half of the play. Ms. Brevoort's original play makes clear that the *shite* in the second half is the ghost of Elvis. However, in her original script, the actor in the first half is to be played by a black actor reflecting the fact that Elvis appropriated many musical conventions used widely by black musicians at the time he rose to popularity in the 1950s. Given that Theatre Nohgaku follows noh conventions in our productions, our first instinct was to create a new mask of a black man for the *shite* in the first half. However, there was concern among company members about "political correctness," particularly in regards to having a white actor portray a black person. There is a long history of "black face" in the United States where white performers wore black makeup to portray black persons. In fact, such portrayals are usually offensive. Our concern was whether Theatre Nohgaku, not having an experienced black actor trained in noh techniques who could play such a role for us, might be perceived as performing in an offensive "black face" style.

From a noh perspective, a mask allows an actor to perform other people of other

racess as well as of the opposite sex. In my own performances of classical noh in Japan, I have portrayed both Japanese men and women, something which is taken for granted in the noh world. A mask, it is generally believed, should allow anyone of any race to perform anyone else of any other race or sex. My personal perspective would be that any of our Theatre Nohgaku actors, whether male or female, should be able to perform any role, whether black, Asian or white, male or female. And similarly, if we had an experienced noh-trained black actor, that person should also be able to perform any role. Noh, as a stylistic performance art, allows this type of freedom that usually does not exist in realistic theater.

In the end, we gave up the idea of having the first half *shite* portray a black person. In fact, we decided to have this role performed without mask. At least that is the way we did our first two performances of the play.⁸ Thus the main character of the first half is the race of the actor playing that role. However, there are still some of our members who think it would be best to face this issue head on. For that reason, we have recently commissioned a mask of a black person for the first half. In future productions, we will have the choice to perform with or without mask. And if we do use the black mask, we hope it will raise not only awareness about noh and its conventions, but also about race relations in the US.

Writing Music for Noh

It is clear to me as the composer of *Blue Moon Over Memphis* and a number of other English-language noh, that writing noh music for English text should not be

8 The first full staging of *Blue Moon Over Memphis* was a preview performance at the end of the Theatre Nohgaku rehearsal week in Bloomsburg, Pa in August 2014. Later we gave two small performances at Art Sanctuary in Yanaka, Tokyo in May 2015. For this, actors were only partially costumed. The space was quite small but the 60-seat house was filled for both performances.

about forcing English syllables into the noh rhythmic structures that classical Japanese so clearly fits. The characteristics of Japanese and those of English are different. Forcing them to act the same with noh rhythms is clearly problematic.

That said, I also believe that just because noh music developed out of the Japanese language, that does not mean that noh music and its rhythms cannot fit with languages other than Japanese. Language and music are different. Despite noh music and its rhythms growing out of Japanese, the resulting music has a life of its own, separate from language. Today, classical opera is sung in numerous languages besides Italian. Rock, blues or Western choral hymns are also sung in languages around the world. Music sung in those languages no doubt make adjustments to the characteristics of those languages, but under the guidance of an able composer, lyrics and music can come to sound interesting and natural in a language other than the one that gave it its birth.

With many years of studying the music of classical noh, I have developed a deep understanding of how the rhythms of noh work with the classical Japanese texts. And as a native English speaker who has sung many different types of English-language songs since childhood, I also have a good understanding of how English lyrics works with rhythm. Putting noh rhythms together with English text then is finding a means to maintain traditional noh musical characteristics with the characteristics of the English language. In my experience, I have already found that there are many interesting ways that the English language can work with noh rhythms. Furthermore, I believe that native speakers of other languages too, if they have a good understanding of how noh music works with Japanese classical texts, could also devise means of creating noh in other non-Japanese languages besides English.

Still, it is not a simple process. One could say that any text can be sung in any

style. But a composer must also create something artistic. For most of the noh plays that I have written music for, I have engaged in a rather long series of exchanges with the playwright, giving advice on and discussing how to create both large and small structures within the texts.⁹ This is the process described briefly above that I engaged in with Deborah Brevoort for *Blue Moon Over Memphis*.

Generally, in this process, the overall large structures of the play get created first. The smaller structures—including for example, the number of lines within a section of text, but also the use of words within those lines—are also discussed. My goal is usually to make the lines as tight as possible. By this, I mean that the choice of words need to be “meaty” with as few particles as possible; short words which have functional use but not independent meaning such as articles, prepositions and conjunctions, should be kept to a minimum. What I call “meaty” words are words that have independent meaning, that create an image in and of themselves. Creating lines in which such words predominate tends to make a line less dialogue-like and more poetic. It also clarifies a syllable count that fits more naturally with noh musical lines. This is not so important in sections of stylized speech or recitative-like unmatched song. It is however quite important in matched sung sections.¹⁰

9 The playwrights that I feel I have most successfully gone through this process are with Erik Ehn with *Crazy Horse* (2001), Daphne Marlatt with *The Gull* (2006), Greg Giovanni with *Pine Barrens* (2006), Jannette Cheong with *Pagoda* (2009), Deborah Brevoort with *Blue Moon Over Memphis* (2014) and Allan Marett with *Oppenheimer* (2015).

10 For a discussion of these larger sections (*dan* or “scenes”) which are then divided into *shōdan* “small sections,” as well as discussion of matched (*hyōshi au*) and unmatched (*hyōshi awazu*) rhythms, see a description in English in Hoff and Flindt 1983.

An example of how Ms. Brevoort's original text became more condensed can be seen in the creation of the *kuse* section in the noh version. The text of the original play was a part of a section that Ms. Brevoort called "The Dance of Many Elvises." Ms. Brevoort's original text read as follows :

Elvis...
whose voice flowed like thick syrup
on warm autumn days
whose voice was softer than velvet
softer than kisses
sweeter than soft bites
on the neck

This in turn became the beginning of the *kuse* in our noh version which was transformed to become as follows :

His voice flowing
Like thick syrup on warm autumn days
A voice so soft
Softer than velvet softer than a kiss
Sweeter than a lover's gentle caress

Perhaps one can tell that the text has been tightened and in the process become more poetic. This too divides the lines up in a way that makes it easier to sing in *kuse* style. Numerous other sections of text were also either cut or condensed in order to more closely match them to characteristic sections of noh.

One other musical aspect that can be mentioned is the attempt to employ parts of Elvis's songs in the play. These were quite obvious in Ms. Brevoort's staging of

her original play. In the noh, we attempted to maintain a noh feel to the entire play but still make quotations from or suggestions of his songs. This was done by the playwright several times in terms of text that quoted a song. For example, there is the following line also appearing in the *kuse* : “singing loving me tender loving me true, crooning can’t help falling in love with you.” This quotes two well-known Elvis songs, “Love Me Tender” and “Can’t Help Falling in Love,” although the melody of the noh chant at this point does not reflect either one.

On the other hand, one particular *uta* “song” section of the noh sang verbatim the text of the song *Unchained Melody* (“Oh my love, my darling...”) with the noh melody displaying a clear “noh-ification” of the melody—not near as melodically free as the original but still quite recognizable despite its noh quality.

And finally, there is also the “Dance of Loneliness” to flute and drum accompaniment in the climax of the second half. This was clearly more difficult to recognize by many listeners as it employed a very slow *chū-no-mai* beginning that switched mid-way to a noh flute rendition of the song “Blue Moon,” sung by Elvis as well as many other artists in the 1950s and 1960s. The very slow pace of the piece combined with the other-worldly quality of the noh flute gives the melody a surreal, abstract quality which makes it difficult to recognize by many listeners. For those who do recognize it, it creates another layer of emotional depth quite appropriate for this part of the play.

In the end, *Blue Moon Over Memphis* follows most of the typical conventions of noh as well as the slowly developing conventions of English noh. Granted, there are some performance aspects which likely will only work with this play, but I think one could say that that is true for any noh, classical or modern. Noh follows many conventions, but the way each play is constructed and the music it uses will always display aspects unique to that piece alone.

As a composer slowly attempting to build up a repertory of English-language noh plays, I hope to continue to write music for English text which will be both true to noh as a style of performance, and both interesting and natural as English.

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