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THROUGH PAIN TO RELEASE:
JAPANESE AND CANADIAN ARTISTS
COLLABORATE ON A BRITISH
COLUMBIAN GHOST
NOH DRAMA

by Susan Knutson

The Steveston Noh Project: The Gull, an original English-language Noh play written by Daphne Marlatt and produced by Pangaea Arts, has won the 2008 Uchimura Prize. This prize is awarded to important contributions to Japanese theatre culture outside Japan by the International Theatre Institute in collaboration with its Japanese Centre. Sold-out crowds attended the play's premiere in May 2006, in a tent sheltering a Noh stage on the grounds at Richmond City Hall. Addressing the injustice and suffering that still surrounds the Japanese Canadian internment during World War II, *The Steveston Noh Project: The Gull* tells a story of Steveston (now part of Richmond) at the mouth of the Fraser River, and of the families who settled there to build boats and fish in the years before the war. The performances and the educational, creative, and political activities surrounding them have furthered—on both sides of the Pacific—collective recovery from the damage done to those families.

The project was created in the context of a civic collaboration begun years before to honour the history linking Steveston to Mio, the fishing village on the Wakayama coast that was once home to many of Steveston's families. The intercultural creative team that produced the play brought together years of training in classical Japanese Noh and in a range of Western theatrical and literary traditions. Intense collaboration among Japanese, Canadian, and American artists, the *savoir faire* of two production companies, and the material and political support of numerous government and cultural institutions were all necessary for the project's success.¹ The artistic intention to bring strictly traditional Noh forms into a British Columbian context was, from the beginning, twinned with the political intention to share histories of particular importance to families traumatized by the internment of WWII and its aftermath. *The Steveston Noh Project: The Gull* both grew out of and responded to the historical, political, and cultural realities of the lower mainland communities of Canada's west coast, and the community connection was ultimately affirmed by peoples' responses to the play.

Heidi Specht, artistic director of Vancouver-based Pangaea Arts and co-producer (with Lenard Stanga) of *The Gull*, is the one who first dreamed of collaborating with Noh professionals to produce a new play about contemporary issues with historical and emotional resonance for Canadians. Her idea was perfect for Pangaea Arts, an interdisciplinary world arts theatre with a mandate to promote cross-cultural interaction and the exchange of ideas between diverse communities and artists. Pangaea also aims to introduce Canadian audiences to performance traditions from around the world. Specht had long

been interested in the Noh performance tradition, which she had studied in Kyoto with Kita Noh master Takabayashi Shinji and with Richard Emmert at the English-language Noh Training Project in Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania.² She had also been deeply moved by the archaeological exhibit "Unearthing the Silence," showcasing artefacts from the Japanese Canadian fishing communities at the mouth of the Fraser River prior to WWII.

In 2001, she approached Emmert with the idea of a Ghost Noh based on Steveston, requesting the participation of Akira Matsui, with whom Emmert has often collaborated. Happily, it turned out that Matsui had visited Richmond as a representative of Noh thirty-five years earlier, on his first trip abroad, in the context of the Sister Cities Program twinning Richmond and Wakayama City. Emmert took on the project and Matsui accepted the invitation to direct and choreograph *The Gull* in addition to playing the principal role or *Shite* (pronounced [*sh'tay*]), the ghost whose pain and eventual release structure the chant and the dance at the heart of the drama.

With thousand-year-old roots in Japanese Shinto and Zen Buddhism, Noh has rigorous requirements with respect to acting, music, chant, movement, dance, and the use of the masks, as well as to story, costume, stage construction, and set design. Remarkably, these were set down in their present form by masters Kannami and Zeami in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Akira Matsui's lifelong training in Noh began when he was a young child, and at the age of twelve he became a live-in apprentice to Kita Minoru, the fifteenth generation head of the Kita School. Now, as master actor-teacher of the Kita School of Japanese classical Noh Theatre, Matsui teaches and performs in Japan and around the world, bringing Noh into creative contact with contemporary European and North American theatre arts. Richard Emmert, who would ultimately collaborate on many levels on behalf of *The Gull*, is an American who has studied, taught, and performed Noh drama in Japan since 1973. A certified Kita

Both Matsui and Emmert are preserving and promoting the strict traditions of classical Noh at the same time that they are moving them forward and engaging Noh with new possibilities of expression.

school Noh instructor, he has studied all aspects of Noh performance with a special concentration in movement and music, and today he is a professor at Musashino University in Tokyo where he teaches Asian theatre and music. Emmert wrote and directed all the music for *The Gull*, and he led and performed in the chorus.

Both Matsui and Emmert are preserving and promoting the strict traditions of classical Noh at the same time they are moving them forward and engaging Noh with new possibilities of expression. In Kyoto, Matsui has performed in Noh Theatre Group productions of Shakespeare, W.B. Yeats, and Beckett; his creative interculturality also includes Noh choreography fused to jazz and to poetry by T.S. Eliot. He has taught Noh in India, Australia, Germany, England, the US, and Canada. In Tokyo, Emmert directs an ongoing Noh Training project for English speakers, and in addition to teaching every summer in Pennsylvania, he is the artistic director of Theatre Nohgaku, a company of English-speaking Noh Performers, which he formed in 2000. The lifeworks of both Noh masters were complemented by Specht's initiative in bringing together professional artists from different performance, artistic, and cultural traditions.

For *The Gull*, this meant a development cycle that included 2005 workshops in Noh performance and music (offered by Emmert who travelled from Japan to lead them) and a workshop process for the play with critical audience feedback from two public readings, one at the Gulf of Georgia Cannery National Historic Site and one at the National Nikkei Museum & Heritage Centre. In 2006, Matsui and Emmert travelled again to Canada to teach Noh technique to Western-trained actors and members of the production team. Simon Hayama and Alvin Catacutan played the *Waki* and the *Wakitsure*, supporting characters who interact with the ghost and elicit its story; they learned how to speak, chant, and move as Noh performers. Members of the chorus, Ari Solomon, Michael Robinson, Minoru Yamamoto and Kerry Vander Griend, trained in chant and in the rigorous physical discipline that was required of them. David Fujino, the *ai-Kyogen*, or leading character in the *Kyogen* or comic interlude, learned *Kyogen* techniques that were adapted for this performance. Hakuzan Kubo, a Wakayama Noh Mask designer and head representative of the Noh Mask Cultural Association, also travelled from Japan to work on the play. In conjunction with the 2006 premiere, he offered workshops on the art of Noh mask making and partnered with the Richmond Museum to create a Noh Mask Exhibit. He created two original masks for the production to be worn by the *Shite*, representing her in youth and in middle age. The instrumental music—played on the Noh flute (*nohkan*) and

drums (*Taiko*, *Otsuzumi*, and *Kotsuzimi*)—was performed by four professional Noh musicians, Mitsuo Kama, Hitoshi Sakurai, Naoko Takahashi, and Narumi Takizawa, who also travelled to Canada to participate.

Author Daphne Marlatt also crossed the Pacific. She travelled to Japan in 2005 to research Noh, to visit Mio on the Kii peninsula, and to work closely with Richard Emmert on the intricate rhythmic requirements of Noh text and chant, in relation to the patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables that are intrinsic to English. Probably best known as one of Canada's foremost feminist authors, Marlatt is not primarily a theatre practitioner but a poet, novelist, editor, and theorist whose work speaks eloquently to issues of social justice. Specht explains in the program that when she first looked for someone to write the script, she approached Joy Kogawa, whose 1981 novel *Obasan* made such an extraordinary contribution to the struggle for Japanese-Canadian redress in the 1980s (7). Kogawa felt, however, that Marlatt would be a better choice because of her previous work on *Steveston*: her well-known 1974 cycle of poems, *Steveston*, with photographs by Robert Minden; an oral history, *Steveston Recollected: a Japanese-Canadian History*, with interviews by Maya Koizumi and photographs by Robert Minden and Rex Weyler; and a radio play, *Steveston*, directed by radio producer John Reeves, which aired on CBC in 1976 and 1977.

The play has two acts in Noh style—*Maeba* (Act I) and *Nochiba* (Act II)—and the *Shite* appears differently in each: the *Maejite* or *Shite* of Act I is a young Issei woman/gull wearing grey rain cape over light-coloured kimono and the mask of a young woman; the *Nochijite* or *Shite* of Act II is an older Issei woman wearing traditional Wakayama kimono and the mask of a middle-aged woman (*The Gull*). In between, the *Kyogen Interlude* introduces the comic performance tradition of *Kyogen*. In the program, Marlatt explains her adaptations of Noh conventions:

The Gull maintains the musical structure of a classical Noh play, but because it is written for a Western audience, I have taken some liberties with the conventions. The supporting roles of the *Waki* and *Wakitsure* have more fully developed characters than convention requires. The *Shite* (the main character) first appears as a bird-woman, rather than as an ordinary human, again a departure. And the prose interlude between the acts is both longer and more conversational than usual. It borrows from the separate tradition of *Kyogen*, short plays with humour bordering on slapstick, often presented between the much more lyrical and tragic plays of the Noh repertoire. (5)

The Gull is a Ghost Noh, a story structured around an encounter with a *Shite*, which is a ghost unable to leave the Earth until, finally heard by the living, it is able to achieve and express in dance a release from fear, anger, and grief. The unresolved pain of the ghost in *The Gull* flows directly out of the person's cruel internment and separation from her family during the war, but it is also tightly wound together with the female roles she played in her life: in Japan as a girl and dutiful daughter of a priest; as a picture bride coming to Canada; as mother and helpmate to her husband in poverty and hardship; and, finally, as an abandoned, dying woman and forgotten mother in a TB Sanatorium in New Denver, far from Mio, far from home. In this play, it is she who bears the full brunt of history's assault; it is she who is "gulled" in the sense of being duped or deceived. And she knows it: "*fury scalds my wings remembering,*" she cries into the wind (1.4). [All text in *script* indicates spoken in Japanese].

The play begins. The year is 1950, and restrictions on Japanese Canadian travel have been lifted. Two young men, dressed in 1950s Canadian West Coast fishing costume, enter the bridgeway slowly with strongly stylized movement. One carries a lantern and the other a net slung over his shoulder and a gaff. The flute and the drums play *Shidai* entrance music, and at the centre of the stage the men turn slowly and chant, alternating with *Ji* [chorus]:

Waki/Wakitsure: in late spring's drenching sea-mist we return at last
(now on stage, face front) in late spring's drenching sea-mist we return at last
 to fish the grounds our father knew, this wild spray

Ji: in late spring's drenching sea-mist we return at last
 to fish the grounds our father knew, this wild spray—

(Waki and Wakitsure now on stage, face front)

Waki: We are Nikkei fishermen heading up the coast from Steveston. Five years after the war ended, eight years after we were exiled from this coast where we were born, we have finally been allowed back to fish. We brothers are fishing for a Steveston cannery, although we no longer have our father's boat. Our parents died in the mountains where we were interned after everything we had was seized and sold. Now we have come back. On a rented boat we are heading up the coast for the Skeena run. (1.1)

These opening lines of poetry are written in an English approximation of a traditional Japanese metre, a seven syllable followed by five syllable line. They are followed by a prose passage in which the brothers, the *Waki* and the *Wakitsure*, identify themselves. The stage on which they stand is a wharf with a dock—the wooden bridgeway, a requirement of a Noh stage—entering from stage left. The *Shite* will come down it in Scene 2, and she will exit off it, flying off-stage, at the close of the first act. Phillip Tidd's stage adapts Noh building specifications, while his set, with lighting by Bill Davey and scene painting by Elizabeth Hazlette, innovates by representing a Pacific Coast wharf rather than the traditional pine tree. The chorus sits on the side and the musicians sit at the back of the stage.

The subtle action of the Noh drama is centred on the transformation story of the *Shite*—the word literally means "doer" (Marlatt)—which begins to unfold as the brothers explain why they have taken refuge at Klemtu, known as China Hat.

Waki (facing front): We have reached China Hat. Its rocky shape offers refuge from a building storm. We will tie up here beside other boats from Steveston and ride out the night. Like homing salmon we have returned to this small bay. (1.1)



The cycle of pain and release extends to the audience members, who participate in breaking apart denial and exposing the damage and waste of human life that flows from war.

Introducing their touchstone imagery of refuge, companionability, and salmon, they articulate their powerful sense of coming home. Like the other Japanese Canadian fishermen, they are glad to be back; the *Waki* compares himself and his younger brother to the salmon they are fishing: uncanny homing animals that will die in order to reach their spawning grounds.

In Scene II, the *Shite* enters the bridgeway and the visual beauty intensifies as attention focuses on the extraordinarily controlled movement/dance of Akira Matsui, enhanced by Margaret McKea's rich costume and Hakuzan Kubo's mask. The younger brother sees and hears only a gull: "Strange bird. Tucking its head under a wing"; but to the older son, she appears as a woman: "Can't you see she's a woman? She's hiding her face in the fold of her sleeve. Perhaps we startled her" (1.3). She speaks:

*lost bird caught in history's torrent
having no home to call my own, no refuge in
the battering waves that come and come. (1.3)*

The mother's words, in English and Japanese, develop a conceit not of fishes but of birds: "lost bird caught in history's torrent," "hapless gull," "blown off course," "[a]lone I ride the waves of this coast." Her images of a solitary bird without refuge contradict those used moments before by her sons. Conflict unfolds as the mother tries to convince her sons that they too are birds and that Mio is home:

Shite (*turning back to them*): *Ah, poor Mio birds, splashing along
an alien shore.*

Waki: *You, a young woman newly arrived from Wakayama, how
did you come to this faraway inlet, this Indian village?*

Shite: *I, in my turn
put you the question, Miyako birds—³
anguished words from an old play you would not understand.
Poor Mio birds, you know nothing of home.*

Waki: Home, you say? This salmon-coast is our home. And we fishermen are glad to be free now to return.

Shite: Mio birds—Mio "bahdo"—blown far off-course. Can you not see what happens here? (1.3)

The ghost tries to warn her sons away from a place which to her has been very destructive. A mother, she wishes to protect her sons.

Act II opens with the brothers dozing on the deck of the boat, waiting for their mother's spirit to return. When she appears, they recognize her:

Waki (*rising*): She is here on our deck, dim in the moon's light barred by clouds.

Wakitsure (*also rises*): So quickly the cloud-bars shift. I see a form glimmering there. Can that be you, Mother?

Shite: My sons, *do you recognize this lost one?*

Waki (*to Wakitsure*): She is not in a form we can touch,

Shite: *On the dark side of the sea ...*

Wakitsure: Are you really here, Mother? (2.3)

Their identities established, the dialogue explodes as the mother questions her sons: "my sons, born from me / can you not see what / matters most?—home, the

nesting ground" (2.4). When they respond with something like detached compassion—"Mother, your distress / saddens us, for where on earth / is there a place unchanged / by the shifting winds of time?" (2.4)—she becomes angry and confronts them with the part they played in creating her pain:

(Musical passage as Shite comes onstage and circles it, coming to a stop in front of her sons, whom she accuses.)

Shite: you let me die —
Ji: you let me die
 locked away in a mountain hospital
 no breath left, no sea-wind
 to lift me home. (2.4)

The boys ask forgiveness and the *Waki* is again able to articulate clearly their truth: that for them the B.C. salmon coast is home.

Shite: home—you must go!
Waki: what was home to you
 Mother, was not home to us.(2.4)

This confrontation leads to resolution expressed in the *Shite's* dance and in the poetry of release.

The release at the close of the play has two important dimensions. In part, it means that the ghost is finally able to cut the ties that bind her to the world, which occurs after the chorus chants the Buddhist Nembutsu, "Namu Amida Butsu who guides / the lost through stormy waves to his Western / Paradise, Amida who alone can cut / the cord of attachment" (2.5). The cord of attachment is imaged positively as the bell pull at her father's temple in Mio: "I pulled the bell-rope / in my father's temple, chanting / ... o to pull / that bell again, o the ache / of this pull back to Mio" (2.3). But it is later seen in a negative sense as a tangling cord reminiscent of the nylon ropes that litter our oceans bringing death to sea creatures:

Shite (*turning away again*): O this cord tangling my feet,
Ji: this bitterness still—
 so tightly it binds my
 wandering spirit. (2.4)

Illumination comes at last as another ocean image: "ocean joining here and there / one current circles through" (2.5). With the joining of the British Columbian and the Wakayama coasts, the spell is broken and there is peace.

Poetry and close attention to it are essential components of Noh performance, both in terms of the richly layered sounds and in terms of the intertextual references heard by the trained or prepared ear—references that enlarge the network of meanings thrown out by the drama. Commenting in the program, Marlatt writes, "Traditional Noh texts feel contemporary in their use of word play and regularly allude to classical poetry and other Noh plays. *The Gull* is built on a tragic pun and uses word play in some of its lines. It quotes from the classical Noh play *Sumidagawa*, and from contemporary poems by Canadian poets Joy Kogawa, Roy Miki, and Roy Kiyooka." One of these intertexts is key to the final movement of release at the close of Act II: Roy Kiyooka's line "nothing but a mouthful of syllables to posit an ocean's breath" transforming into "ocean



singing ocean's breath / a living tide of syllables / to wash out the line that divides / shore from shore in her / anguished mind—" (2.5). The ringing of the temple bell, the Buddhist Namu Amida Butsu, the line from Kiyooka, and the image of the tangled sea bird all unite in the final poetic image of release:

Amida Butsu
ringing China Hat and Hinomisaki
Namu Amida Butsu, Amida Butsu
in one breath, one precious
human breath to join their
emptiness, her understanding
quick as a bird, her
release— (2.5)

The spiritual dimension of the play does not obscure the layer of political and social meaning, and of course there is a relationship between the two as the play articulates the struggle to break free from the pain of oppression. In the genre of ghost Noh, freedom is achieved in part through the medium of witnesses who hear the ghost's story. In this play, the witnesses are the woman's two sons, who are not permitted to forget her but who, on the contrary, are made to hear her story and see her as a young and beautiful woman with her "future shining just ahead" (1.4). In Act II, the mother confronts her sons with the pain of her abandonment, and they ask her forgiveness.

Waki: Mother, we failed to understand
how deeply you felt
abandoned there—

Waki and Wakitsure: forgive our blindness. (2.4)

The *Kyogen Interlude*—mixing in the aesthetically critical texture of the farcical and familiar (at which Fujino is fabulous)—contributes as well to the deepest and most political layers of meaning. The older fisherman had known the boys' parents before the internment and he was fond of their mother; he tells them how hard she had worked and how brave and beautiful she had been. He also tells them that their father had sent a younger photo of himself to Mio, so that his bride, some fifteen years younger than he, had in a sense been gulled by her husband, too:

She had some education, she was good-looking—no doubt she could have made a better marriage. But she had an adventurous spirit, she wanted to see the world. Steveston wasn't at all what she expected. Such a wild river, she would say whenever it flooded. Fires and floods, cannery shacks on pilings, one little tap at the end of the boardwalk. She complained but she worked hard, raised you kids, did her time in the cannery like so many wives. You could tell she'd imagined some other life for herself. Your dad once told me that he'd agreed to go back to Wakayama once he made enough money. But he liked it here. So of course the money went into a boat, and then into their own house, and then into a new boat. Fishing got tougher and tougher. And then the war...

The *Ai-Kyogen* grieves to hear of her lonely death, and suggests that the ghost—which has been rocking the boat violently as they talk—might in fact be their mother's troubled spirit. He also acknowledges the dilemma of the young men: "It's difficult for your generation. Not Japanese—not Canadian." In this way, he is their witness as they are their mother's.

Importantly of course, because this is theatre, the audiences (and readers) are witnesses too. Members of the Japanese Canadian community who attended the premiere did not hesitate to claim its meanings as their own. Tamaka Fisher

I had taken my mother to see the play, as her father—my grandfather—was a fisherman, born in Steveston. My mother and I were both crying minutes into the production, as it was so beautiful, and the connection to the brothers and fishing so strong. (np)

of the *Steveston Village Gallery* wrote,

The cycle of pain and release extends to the audience members, who participate in breaking apart denial and exposing the damage and waste of human life that flows from war. The intertextuality of the play is also integral to this cycle as Marlatt references writers—Miki, Kogawa, Kiyooka—who worked for many years to express and heal the collective trauma through art and through political struggle for redress. She speaks of this in an interview published with a review article

I would like to think that my and our initial work in Steveston contributed to [a] process of healing. And, I do think that *The Gull* sounds some of the deeper emotional layers of that trauma. But these have been sounded already in work by Japanese Canadian writers, both known voices, and little known voices. Healing from violent assault on one's civil rights is, I would think, a very long and complicated process. (4)

by

Jean Miyaki Downey in the *Kyoto Journal*:

The intertextuality of the script is a kind of community witnessing through art.



Akira Matsui as the Shite © Hakuzan Kubo

Narumi Takizawa playing the Noh Flute © Michael Ford

The chorus: Ari Solomon, Kerry Vander Griend, Richard Emmert, Minoru Yamamoto and Michael Robinson © Michael Ford



In spite of the longstanding Western interest in Noh Drama—think of Ezra Pound, Ernest Fenollosa, W.B. Yeats—*The Gull* was neglected by the mainstream media, with the notable exception of Sheryl Mackay of CBC Radio's North by Northwest. On the other hand, thoughtful reviews in the *Steveston iVillage* and the *Kyoto Journal* responded on profound levels to the performances. Jean Miyake Downey in particular explores *The Gull* in relation to

historical fear, shame, and grief that still haunts Canada's Pacific coast and reaches back into Japanese Canadian diasporan family connections in Japan. [...] Denial and minimizing the extent of what happened kept this racist chapter of Canada's history hidden. This is not the face of multiculturalism that the Canadian government has projected to the rest of the world (2).

The Gull contributes to a context for moving forward; as a counter-discursive material theatre practice with a long list of government and corporate sponsors, the play is a hopeful sign for a better future.

NOTES

- ¹ Richmond's Gateway Theatre supported Pangaea Arts by offering in-kind donations and administrative advice (Specht).
- ² Specht also studied in Norway, at Studio 58 at Vancouver's Langara College, and in Paris with Monika Pagneux, in the tradition of Jacques Lecoq (Specht).
- ³ Refers to lines from the *Sumidagawa*, a traditional *kyōjo-mono* or 'mad-woman' piece written by Zeami's son, Motomasa. See *The Noh Drama*, 145; *Japanese Nō Dramas*, 251.

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