

Breaking the Rules



Diego Pellecchia

Ludic Inversion in Ran Noh

Abstract: Japanese noh is conventionally understood as a solemn, highly formalised art grounded in religious sacrality, aesthetic austerity, and strict role specialisation. This article examines ran noh (chaos noh), an unusual yet culturally significant performance practice in which performers deliberately transgress these norms by acting outside their customary roles and introducing parody and humour. Focusing on the case study in Kyoto, the paper argues that ran noh functions as a form of ritualised, conservative transgression. Rather than undermining noh's authority, such performances depend on deep communal knowledge, reinforcing social bonds and reaffirming the technical, spiritual, and hierarchical foundations of nōgaku through moments of carefully circumscribed play.

Keywords: Noh theatre, Carnavalesque, Anti-structure, Parody

Noh, Japan's traditional masked dance-drama, is famously characterised by a pervasive sense of sacrality and an aesthetic of austerity.¹ In its plays, deities, spirits, or ghosts, populate narratives that are deeply influenced by the Shintō and Buddhist religious traditions. Noh is generally understood as a 'serious' art, one that excludes laughter and play, elements that are instead present in its comic counterpart, kyōgen. This seriousness is further emphasised by noh's highly formalised performance. The bare wooden stage, the otherworldly sounds of flute and drums, and the ritualised movements of performers wearing hieratic masks contribute to the creation of a contemplative, ritualistic atmosphere.

Noh emerged in the 14th century and has been transmitted until today without interruption. Training is rigorous and lifelong: it typically begins in early childhood and continues for as long as performers remain physically capable. Since the 17th century, noh practitioners have been organised into highly specialised professional lineages, with each performer devoting themselves exclusively to a particular role category. *Shite-kata* perform the *shite* (pronounced 'sh'tay', the main character) and *tsure* (accompanying roles) and also participate in the *jiutai* (chorus); *waki-kata* specialise in the *waki* (secondary character) and *waki-tsure*; *hayashi-kata* focus on a single instrument - flute, shoulder drum, hip drum, or stick drum; and *kyōgen-kata* perform only kyōgen roles. Operating within a largely esoteric, lineage-based system, noh performers are not just



17

¹ This paper was completed with the support of the Kyoto Sangyo University Research Grant System. A longer version of this paper is included in a forthcoming issue of the *Journal of Religion in Japan*.

artists but also custodians of a living tradition, entrusted with the preservation and transmission of techniques, repertoires, and embodied knowledge.²

Among Japanese traditional performing arts, *noh* also carries distinct social and political significance. When Japan opened to the Western world in the late 19th century, *noh* was among the forms of entertainment presented to foreign diplomats and distinguished visitors. *Nōgaku* - the collective term for *noh* and *kyōgen* - was designated an Important Intangible Cultural Property by the Japanese government in 1957 and later received international recognition when *Nōgaku Theatre* was inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2008, following its initial proclamation in 2001.

Perhaps it is because of its inherent *gravitas* that *noh* developed a 'release valve': a space where rules and boundaries are temporarily overturned, allowing the community not just to revere, but also to 'play' with their shared culture. This function is fulfilled by a distinctive performance practice known as *ran noh* (literally, 'chaos *noh*'). In *ran noh* events, cast members perform outside their usual areas of specialisation, for example musicians may enact *shite* roles, while *shite* actors take on comic *kyōgen* roles. Within this framework, spontaneous humour and deliberate ruptures of the established order temporarily destabilise the seriousness that ordinarily governs *noh*. *Ran noh* performances are well documented from the early 20th century onward and appear to have enjoyed considerable popularity, although their frequency has declined in recent decades.

Originally, *ran noh* likely served an important pedagogical function. Because performers traditionally train in isolation and there is no collective rehearsal period, *ran noh* functioned as a venue in which cross-disciplinary knowledge, including music, dance, and chant, could be exercised and tested. Such knowledge is essential for maintaining the mutual awareness and cohesion required in a performance that unfolds without a director or conductor.

Toward the beginning of the 20th century, however, as the relationship between professional performers and the amateur practitioners who became their main patrons deepened, and opportunities increased for the audience to observe professionals in a wider range of performance formats, *ran noh* began to be appreciated for various reasons.³ On the one hand, professionals could use such events to publicly demonstrate their breadth of knowledge and technical competence, even in roles outside their area of specialisation. On the other hand, performing off role also introduced the possibility of accidental failure or moments of awkwardness on stage, resulting in a comical effect that was greatly appreciated by both cast and audience.

Regular theatre-goers and amateur students who maintained close relationships with professional performers particularly enjoyed this effect when established and highly respected actors faltered on stage as a result of performing outside their traditional roles. Actors might have forgotten lines, moved awkwardly, or displayed visible hesitation, types of behaviour normally associated with amateur performance, and at times even laughed in response to their own mistakes. Building on this reception, performers

2 For *noh* theatre training, see Pellecchia and Yamanaka 2024.

3 For more information on the relationship between patrons and performers at the beginning of the 20th century, see Grossman and Miyamoto 2024.

gradually began to introduce jokes deliberately, thereby modifying the original plays in order to heighten their comic effect. Contemporary *ran noh* is the product of the evolution of such events and incorporates all of these elements.

The Shukuga Ran Noh performance staged in Kyoto in 2009 serves as a fitting example. The event was organised to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Kyoto Takigi (torchlit) Noh. Held at the Kongō Noh Theatre, it drew a large audience of supporters and aficionados and played to a full house. Among the various 'subverted' versions staged, the adaptation of *Ema* (The Votive Tablets) was especially striking.

Originally, the play is set at the end of the year and opens with a group of imperial envoys travelling to the Ise Grand Shrine with offerings from the emperor. They learn of a New Year's Eve ritual in which votive tablets (*ema*) are hung on the shrine doors. An elderly couple appears and quarrels over which *ema* should be displayed, one depicting a white horse that predicts fair weather and the other a black horse that predicts rain. They ultimately decide to hang both in the hope of a balanced climate for the coming year. Before departing, they reveal themselves to be deities of the Ise Grand Shrine and promise to return at dawn. In the interlude, *oni* (demons) from Mount Hōrai appear to offer New Year blessings and present treasures for the emperor. In the second act, narratively detached from the first act, the Sun Goddess Amaterasu appears together with Ame no Uzume and Tajikaraō, and the play concludes with a reenactment of the myth of the Heavenly Rock Cave, in which Amaterasu is drawn out of hiding and light is restored to the world.

However, in the 2009 *ran noh* performance the stage property representing the shrine was transformed into a public bathhouse, and the shrine's votive tablets - originally symbols of divine weather prophecy - were repurposed as 'men's' and 'women's' curtains. This conversion of a sacred site associated with the imperial lineage into a space of physical, and potentially promiscuous, communal bathing constituted a striking ludic inversion. Another gag, in which the imperial envoys peer into the 'women's bath', further collapsed the distance between 'high' and 'low'. While the envoys (originally hip-drum performers) could scarcely restrain their laughter, the audience responded with open amusement.

Soon after, the interlude section, usually performed by a *kyōgen* actor specialising in comic roles and featuring *oni* from Mount Hōrai, introduced additional layers of humour. Most of the *oni* were portrayed by unmasked senior *shite* actors wearing large, fuzzy red wigs. One gag centred on one of the *oni* 'forgetting' his line and being prompted by another, who produced a visible 'cheat sheet', an allusion to poor, or amateurish performance in which stage assistants need to intervene to cover such mishap. In the final act, the drum players portraying the three deities stood on the *hashigakari* bridgeway and unrolled name scrolls bearing their own names. The joke, of course, was that because the deities perform in masks, it would otherwise be impossible to tell who was who (unless one read the programme). Additional gags followed, many of them playful parodies of the choreography, others exploiting the difficulty of performing in a mask and the exaggerated care required in walking on stage.

The play was very well received and concluded with warm applause. It should be apparent, however, that this form of humour is intelligible, and therefore enjoyable,

only to spectators who are familiar both with the original plays and with the performers themselves. Such familiarity allows audiences to recognise the sacrality of *noh* performance while also appreciating the deliberate misplacements on which *ran noh* depends. This was not a problem in the present case, since many *noh* theatregoers in general, and those attending events of this kind in particular, possess a deep knowledge of the art.

By stepping outside their usual specialisation and employing gags that momentarily blur the boundary between stage and audience, actors in *ran noh* suspend another layer: their public persona as venerable *noh* masters. In doing so, they expose themselves to public laughter within a carefully controlled space. Indeed, much of the pleasure derived from such performances lies in seeing one's own teacher, or another well-known performer, appear in such highly unusual context. Yet, because the audience consists largely of knowledgeable aficionados, performers are not ridiculed for moments of apparent awkwardness; spectators understand and accept the conventions governing this carnivalesque experience.

It may be said that *ran noh* functions as a kind of 'anti-structure' (Turner 2017), that is, an inversion of the rigid hierarchies that define its world. However, this subversion is ultimately conservative. The ability to parody the ritual requires a profound, shared mastery of the underlying 'structure', and thus serves not as a critique of the tradition, but as an affirmation of the interconnected nature of *nōgaku*'s various disciplines, as well as of the two main social groups of which it is constituted: professionals (producers) and audience members (consumers).

By mocking the ritual, performers demonstrate that their authority is so secure it can withstand, and even be revitalised by, a moment of 'disorder'. Rather than undermining authority, *ran noh* ultimately reinforces it. By demonstrating that their mastery extends beyond strict specialisation, actors assert an ownership of the form that allows them to play with it.

As Johan Huizinga famously posited in *Homo Ludens* (1998), play serves a purpose beyond mere recreation, often reinforcing the very structures it appears to subvert. In the context of *ran noh*, this 'serious play' fulfils a vital sociological function by fostering communal bonds and mutual awareness. By stepping outside their rigid specialisations, performers gain a holistic understanding of the troupe's collective mechanics, while the resulting laughter generates a unique empathy between the stage and the audience.

It is interesting to note that, given the uniqueness of its staging, *ran noh* is typically performed on festive occasions such as that of the Kyoto Takigi Noh 60th anniversary. In these occasions even the most formal pieces of the repertory, infused with religious meaning, are subjected to subversion. Because these plays center on divine blessings and protection, their integration into a festive, 'disordered' context highlights the intersection of the sacred with the ludic. In the case of *Ema*, where a sacred shrine is turned into a public bath and imperial envoys are transformed into peeping toms, the play illustrates the Bakhtinian concept of 'profanation', whereby sacred symbols are debased through proximity to the mundane (Bakhtin 2013).

Therefore, *ran noh* may be better understood not as an eccentric or peripheral performance practice, but as a constitutive mechanism through which *noh* periodically

reaffirms its sacral authority. By staging a controlled inversion of role specialisation, hierarchy, and technical mastery, it produces a form of ritualised transgression that strengthens rather than undermines the tradition's spiritual and social foundations.

Despite its popularity, after the Second World War, *ran noh* performances became less frequent. This may be attributed to several institutional and economic factors. After enduring the hardships of the war, *noh* underwent a process of institutional and ideological redefinition of its public image. Stabilised under new professional and state frameworks, such as the constitution of the Nōgaku Performers' Association in 1945 and its designation as an Important Intangible Cultural Property in 1957, the art was reframed in terms of cultural value. New trends of professionals and scholars sought not to insulate *noh* within a narrow preservationist logic, but to reposition it as a form of world theatre, open to dialogue with other practitioners, aesthetics, and critical frameworks. This outward-looking reorientation expanded *noh*'s cultural horizon and reinforced its intellectual and artistic seriousness but also heightened its gravity and formality.

The establishment of formal cross-art training systems in which *noh* trainees can study the various *noh* arts has largely subsumed the pedagogical function of cross-role training into a structured curriculum. The economic contraction following the 1990s asset-price bubble may also have reduced the financial incentive for such elaborate, non-commercial commemorative events. Perhaps most significantly, the 'informal' facet of *noh* once offered by *ran noh* has been replaced by numerous attempts to popularise *noh* through introductory workshops and lectures, but also by creating content now streamed through social media. Online social platforms like Instagram and YouTube now allow performers to show private aspects of their lives and also interact directly with audiences.

While the frequency of live *ran noh* performances may have diminished, the underlying 'chaotic principle', that is, the impulse to disrupt and play with established norms, remains a fundamental component of the art's resilience. As younger generations of performers navigate a changing cultural landscape, this ludic spirit is likely to find new avenues for expression, whether through digital reinterpretations or cross-media collaborations. The survival of the *ran nō* spirit ensures that *noh* remains a living tradition, capable of reaffirming its sacred foundations through the very act of momentary, ritualised subversion.

Bibliography

- Bakhtin, Mikhail. 2013. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Huizinga, Johan. 1998. *Homo Ludens*. London: Routledge.
- Grossmann, Eike, and Miyamoto Keizō. 2024. "Nō from World War I to the 1980s." In *A Companion to Noh and Kyōgen Theatre*, eds. Yamanaka Reiko, Monica Bethe, Eike Grossman, Tom Hare, Diego Pellecchia, and Michael Watson, Vol. 1. Leiden: Brill, 121-33.
- Pellecchia, Diego, and Yamanaka Reiko. 2024. "Training." In *A Companion to Noh and Kyōgen Theatre*, eds. Yamanaka Reiko, Monica Bethe, Eike Grossman, Tom Hare, Diego Pellecchia, and Michael Watson, Vol. 1. Leiden: Brill, 324-33.
- Turner, Victor. 2017. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. London, New York: Routledge.