



A Kyōgen Companion by Don Kenny

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A KYŌGEN COMPANION. By Don Kenny. Tokyo: National *Nō* Theatre, 1999. 1,800 yen. (Available from National *Nō* Theatre, Sendagaya 4-18-1, Shibuya-ku, Tokyo 151-0051.)

As theatre lovers in a foreign country, confronted with unfamiliar forms in incomprehensible tongues, don't we all wish we had an avuncular host to guide us through the intricacies of plot and illuminate obscure conventions? Ideally this native connoisseur would purchase the best seats and shuttle us to the theatre, sit beside us, prepare us with a straightforward plot summary in advance, then whisper unobtrusive comments during the performance to aid our appreciation. When in Japan, attending classical *kyōgen* comedy, if you cannot find such a wise and generous shepherd you would do well to purchase Don Kenny's *A Kyōgen Companion*.

This book is published by the National *Nō* Theatre in Tokyo, which should be doubly congratulated. For in addition to producing rare plays and interesting combinations of actors and plays on all-*kyōgen* programs, it also sponsors revivals of forgotten plays and new plays. These all-*kyōgen* programs in Tokyo and elsewhere have fed the *kyōgen* blaze of popularity in the past decade. *Kyōgen* fans no longer need sit through a long *nō* program to see their favorite performers in challenging roles: today there are over one hundred all-*kyōgen* programs per year. And now this *Companion* has been published to make the *kyōgen* boom accessible to non-Japanese-speakers.

This is a significant update and refinement of Kenny's 1968 book (still available) *A Guide to Kyōgen*, the companion volume to P. G. O'Neill's *Guide to Nō* (1954). Comparative shoppers will note the differences: the *Guide* includes a few line drawings; the *Companion* has hundreds of photographs of recent performances. The *Guide* notes divisions of roles according to Japanese terms, as in *shite*, *ado*, *koado*; the *Companion* wisely lists the casts in order of importance in the play. But the *Guide* designates whether a play is performed in the Izumi or Okura schools and indeed provides both versions; the *Companion* sometimes refers to school differences, but more often it merely notes alternative versions, providing no clue as to which school performs the play. The *Guide*'s summaries vary in length; the *Companion* is strictly one summary per page. This arbitrary uniformity is unfortunate: why maintain a play-per-page format when a one-joke *Iroha* (Learning the Alphabet) or once-a-decade rarity gets as much space as the convoluted, hourlong *Tsurigitsune* (Fox Trapping) or the popular *Busu* (The Delicious Fatal Poison)? Given more space, Kenny could certainly illuminate much more about the staging and significance of many of these plays.

In addition to the 257 plays of the standard repertoire included in the *Guide*, the *Companion* provides plot summaries for 29 new and revived plays. Revived plays include those discarded from the repertoire because of their sexual or political critiques. Some texts have survived intact; others survive only

as summaries or fragments that needed substantial revisions, making them a fascinating amalgam of traditional and contemporary sensibilities. *Konoe Dono no Moshijo* (Petitioning Lord Kono) concerns a rare peasant claim against a daimyo. *Mimeyoshi* (A Man Called Handsome) is a reversal of the usual sexism as a father tries to marry off an ugly son; *Negawari* (Bedding by Proxy) includes a lecherous priest groping a young widow while praying for her husband's soul. *Hitori Matsutake* (Gathering Mushrooms Alone) is a rare monodrama.

There are original plays, as well, many of which have been written and produced by the Shigeyama and Nomura families in the past twenty years. *Koremori* (The Heike Warrior Koremori) is an ode to peace. *Myoon Henohenon Monogatari* (Tale of the Mellifluous Flatulence) depicts a master of the art of the fart, a sly parody of the Japanese custom of apprenticeship for virtually any human activity. Even if one cannot see these rarely performed plays, reading the plots reveals contemporary *kyōgen*'s subversive edge. Other welcome additions are summaries of the auspicious opening rituals *Furyū*, *Sanbasō* from the “*nō* that is not *nō*” *Okina-Sanbasō*, and the narrative tour-de-force *Nasu no Yoichi Katari* (The Tale of Yoichi of Nasu). Although not actual *kyōgen* plays, these are now performed independent of *nō* in all-*kyōgen* programs and therefore deserve coverage.

It seems almost boorish to criticize such a friendly *Companion*, but my tiny cavils have to do with inconsistencies that reflect the origin of this book as a compilation of the synopses in the programs at the National *Nō* Theatre. An editorial eye to consistency and typographical errors is essential. Occasionally Kenny notes the similarities between plots of different plays, but at other times he inexplicably does not (*Keimyō* and *Ushinusubito*; *Akubo* and *Akutarō*). Kenny's vast knowledge of *kyōgen* is sometimes evidenced in notes on conventions or the special features of plays, but often it is sorely lacking: the *Kanaoka* summary notes the play as one of the most difficult in the repertoire, but no such mention is made in the others (*Tsurigitsune*, *Hanago* [Visiting Hanago], or *Tanuki no Haratsuzumi* [The Badger's Belly Drum]). More background to the new plays (often omitted in Japanese-language sources as well) would be useful: *Susugigawa* (Rinse River) is based on the French farce *Le Cuvier*; *Shinigami* (The Death God) is based on a *rakugo* story in turn based on two Grimm tales. Some may find Kenny's interpretive translations of the titles intrusive. *Buaku* (a man's name) becomes *Buaku the Brave*; *Akubo* becomes *Akubo Mends His Ways*; *Shimizu* (a place) becomes *A Demon for Better Working Conditions*. Although a more literal translation would better reflect *kyōgen*'s directness, I find the English titles charming and helpful guides to the otherwise obscure content.

While the plot summaries themselves are sterling, other sections could be reconsidered. “A Brief History of *Kyōgen*” by Kazuo Taguchi is really a history of the texts and actors, not particularly suitable for general or foreign readers. The *Guide*'s introduction to *kyōgen* by the inimitable Donald Richie is a classic of eloquent enthusiasm; history and conventions are best summarized in Shio Sakanishi's excellent if dated *The Ink-Smeared Lady and Other Japanese Folk-Tales* (1960). A general list of types of plays (servant, daimyo, *yamabushi*,

and so on) and floor plan of the *nō* stage would be useful. All in all, however, this unobtrusive and measured book lives up to its title: an easygoing and easy-to-use companion to *kyōgen* old and new. If you're going to a *kyōgen* performance, don't leave home without it.

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HALF A CENTURY OF JAPANESE THEATER: THE 1990s, PART 2.
Edited by Japan Playwrights Association. Tokyo: Kinokuniya, 2000. ix + 421 pp.
4,000 yen. (Distributed by University of Hawai'i Press, \$40.)

Anthologies are a tricky business, especially when dealing with translated works that are virtually unknown to the target audience. How does the editor decide what to include, what postwar Japanese plays to eliminate? The appearance of a second volume of a planned series forces the question: why devote the first two volumes to the 1990s? The choice to publish in reverse chronological order is both intriguing and somewhat disturbing. It suggests a “presentist” (or antihistorical) perspective that may bewilder readers unfamiliar with postwar Japanese drama and history. One wonders if inclusion in these two volumes was a perk offered to members of the Japan Playwrights Association, the corporate editor.

Moreover, not every decade will have two volumes. The editors currently plan to devote only a single volume to the 1970s and 1950s. Are these 1990s plays really superior to (or more interesting than) previous work? Neither the scripts nor the explanatory essays convince me of this. These plays, while often culturally revealing and occasionally theatrically arresting, are simply not universally brilliant nor, in most cases, innovative. Several playwrights seem to be seeking a style or focus while exhibiting rampant disdain for what they term “professionalism.” Nevertheless, most have been awarded prestigious prizes. What, then, distinguishes them from “professionals?” Without the context of the previous fifty years, the reader is given no reference points to indicate what the playwrights are reacting against—or why one might consider them either derivative or innovative.

Careful editing could have avoided the awkward or confusing phrases that occasionally mar the introductions. The quality of translation is uneven. Not all translators are skillful at writing playable English dialogue. Moreover, some use British idiom, some use American. Some represent local Japanese dialects by notes in the stage directions; others use various American or British dialects—not always felicitously. Similarly, some retain common Japanese words for foods, relationships, and so on, while others choose English equivalents.