

Don Kenny's Quest for Total Performance

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(kyogen-in english.com editor's note – this article was stitched together from an old copy, we apologize for the poor quality, will try to get a better rendition up in the future.)

American adapts French play for kyogen stage

BY BILL CLIFFORD
Staff writer

Tapping out a few bars on the Roland keyboard amid a clutter of books, photos and old record albums in his cramped Tokyo studio, Don Kenny admires the sound produced by individual speakers for each key.

"The technology achieves beautiful notes, but it wouldn't have been right for the *kyogen* the other night," says Kenny, the leading foreign performer and scholar of Japan's classic comic drama.

"That clunker of a piano at the Franco-Japanese Institute worked out OK in the end, didn't it? When we started rehearsing, the thing seemed full of moisture, sounded awful. But I think I managed to breathe some life into it by the time we performed."

In more ways than one. While the other players pranced beneath a suspended red chair in acting out a master-servant farce, Kenny sat at the piano in a black robe and tall, crested lacquer hat, looking every bit the courtly noble — except for the monkey mask worn at the side of his head perpetually smiling at the audience.

Voilà! Avant-garde composer Erik Satie's absurdist play "*Le Piège de Méduse*" ("Medusa's Trap") presented à la *kyogen*.

"It's possible that we went a little overboard, but it was our first time performing in French," laughs Kenny, who with actor Shichiro Ogawa and company has popularized traditional *kyogen* plays in Japan and abroad since 1975 through performances in English.

Comic theater

Kyogen can be translated as "word crazy." It is a theater of comedies that has evolved from the 14th century as the complement of the tragic *noh* dramas.

The Kenny and Ogawa Kyogen Players staged afternoon and evening shows Feb. 19 at the Franco-Japanese Institute in Tokyo's Ichigaya district. In addition to featuring the Satie adaptation, the program included the classics "*Busu*" ("The Delicious Poison") and "*Shibiri*" ("The Inherited Cramp"). The latter was performed twice, in French and Japanese.

Born in 1936 in the small Kansas cow town of Manhattan, Kenny started play-

ing the piano at 4 and was taking voice lessons by junior high school. Music teachers along the way would urge him to devote himself entirely to a single performing art. Yet on entering Oklahoma's Phillips University at 16, he chose to do the opposite, practicing modern dance and ballet as well as majoring in piano and voice.

"My father had different reasons for not wanting me to dance," says Kenny, eyes sparkling and lips curling into an impish grin. "He was a Bible Belt preacher who saw dancing as the devil's work. And there I was, wanting to use my voice as an opera singer while using my body like a modern ballet dancer. The question was, how?"

Then, in 1959, as a junior officer in the Navy who had never had an idea of going anywhere outside the U.S., Kenny was suddenly shipped to Japan, where he has lived since. The longest he's spent away from the country for any one time was a 10-week tour as stage manager with the Japan Folklore Dance Ensemble for the U.S. bicentennial celebration in 1976.

It wasn't long after arriving in Japan that Kenny let his piano lapse. He'd discovered *kyogen*. For the last three decades he has been studying under

Mansaku Nomura, Japan's most noted *kyogen* actor.

Kenny has also published a volume of 30 *kyogen* translations and is immersed in translating 40 other plays. Of the 257 *kyogen*, the Kenny and Ogawa company has a repertoire of about 30 traditional plays as well as a handful of non-Japanese adaptations. The troupe has performed in Europe, Australia and North America.

"Even dad enjoys my theater work now," he says, describing a U.S. tour when his parents became "roadies" and transported the group in their house trailer from show to show.

Cascading cadences

"For me, *kyogen* represents the performer's ideal, total challenge," he says. "Spare sets, no dramatic lighting, no elaborate make-up, a few props maybe — a fan or a mask. It practically kicks you out on stage naked. You've got voice and movement to excite and convince your audience that in taking a few steps to stage right, say, you've walked to Kyoto."

Voice is the most striking element. A stream of words in climbing and cascading cadences resonates in the actor's

throat and mouth. The words sound swallowed rather than projected. This technique can be carried over into French and English, but syllables are syncopated differently than in Japanese to give impact to certain words.

In the popular Taro Kaja *kyogen*, the eponymous servant-hero wears a simple hemp vest over a broad-sleeved *happi* coat. The master he mocks and tries to outfox is dressed in a long *hakama*, a divided skirt with trailing pant legs. The pointed-shoulder kimono of the players accentuate their stylized movements.

accentuate their stylized movements. All three plays performed at the Franco-Japanese Institute were of the master-servant genre. In "*The Delicious Poison*," the lord orders Taro Kaja and Jiro Kaja to watch over his house while he's gone and take special care of a barrel containing *busu*, a deadly poison. Children in the audience exploded in laughter when the servants discover the actual contents to be black sugar and grab the barrel from each others' hands to gobble up the delicious sweet.

The servants contrive a hilarious crying jag to appease the lord upon his return. In tears, they explain to him that they broke his treasured tea bowl and tore his favorite hanging scroll while wrestling and, knowing he would kill them for it, ate the *busu* hoping to die. The lord, irate, chases them off the stage.

As Kenny says, "There is a basic human quality to *kyogen* that transcends nationalities, revealing that Japan is like all the rest of us." The humor of the plays, whether innocent or ribald, also makes them perhaps more open to Western audiences than *noh* dramas, which sometimes border on the impenetrable.

With native speakers of French joining the troupe in the last few years, Kenny began studying French in earnest. Finding the play by Satie, a turn-of-the-century French composer known for his flippant, minimalist style, cinched Kenny's plan to perform in the language.

"It's amazing how *kyogen*-like 'Medusa's Trap' is, from its verbal atmosphere to its stereotypical characters," he says. The play draws heavily on the master-servant relationship as well as another favorite theme, the social foibles of bridegrooms.

The trap set by the readily intimidated Baron Medusa for his daughter's fiancé, Astolfo, lies in the question: "Do you know how to dance on one eye?" Astolfo's honest "no" wins the Baron's approval. The exchange was Satie's way of spoofing the pretentious search by intellectuals of his day for deeper meaning. The rest of the play is pure wacky entertainment.