

Kyogen's hero is Everyman

By Donald Richie JUNE 14, 2000 THE JAPAN TIMES

KYOGEN COMPANION, by Don Kenny, with a brief history by Kazuo Toguchi. Tokyo: National Noh Theater, 1999. 308 pp. with b/w plates. 1,800 yen.

Kyogen are short comic plays sometimes a part of, but more often sandwiched between, the longer and often tragic noh dramas. They are spoken in the vernacular rather than intoned in literary language, and their brevity, their wit and their humor make them a perfect foil for the sublime and inevitable boredom of the noh itself.

The last god or spirit or high dignitary slowly slides away as the noh concludes. Then ordinary-looking people march on, just as filled with human frailty as we are. And just as imperfect. They, too, can't tell a fan from an umbrella, are also a bit too fond of sake, get into misunderstandings and celebrate their own foolishness. The kyogen has begun.

Since these folk are not sublime, they need not wear that ideal face, the mask. Nor need they intone; they chatter. And since they are only us, they need no stately brocades, just the checks and stripes of the common kitchen. Clean, neat, starched and everyday, the kyogen actor is always ready to slip, to slide, to fall down.

Densely stupid, transparently sly, eternally innocent, the kyogen character is gloriously funny. As in all great comedy, the actor holds up the mirror and we gaze into

it, enthralled. Kyogen are perhaps not all that much fun to read — but then neither is the text of a Labiche farce, the script of a Keaton film, or even a Moliere play. One may perhaps cry over a tragic page, but a comedy must be experienced.

The fact that so many of us have come to experience the kyogen and to understand why we are laughing is due to Don Kenny, certainly the scholar who has done most for the practical enjoyment of the form. His work is well-known. Not only has he studied and performed with kyogen professionals on the traditional stage, he has long had his own troupe for performing the plays in English. And he has a secure body of written work.

“The Kyogen Book,” an anthology of 30 kyogen plays, was published in 1989 by The Japan Times. A collection of six plays, plus excerpts from others, was published by Dramabooks in 1986 under the title “The Book of Kyogen in English.” Kenny’s work also appears in Karen Brazell’s play anthology, “Traditional Japanese Theater,” which was published by Columbia University Press in 1998.

The volume of his that most of us know best is “A Guide to Kyogen,” published by Hinoki Shoten in 1968. This is a collection of detailed precis of most of the 257 plays in the common repertoire and has long proved a necessary companion in enjoying the kyogen.

“Kyogen Companion” is both a new edition of that earlier volume and a substantial updating of it. It includes the plots of all the plays in the official repertoire and also those that the National Theater and affiliated kyogen

troupes have revived — some 185 precis in all. And, instead of line drawings, photos taken during performances are included (when available) for each play.

Armed with this book, the potential playgoer will understand, cherish and learn to love the kyogen. The plays themselves are performed at sites other than the National Theater as well, and the week's noh and kyogen listing is usually given on the entertainment page of Saturday's Japan Times.

This book itself may be purchased at the National Noh Theater bookshop or it may be ordered. Order by mail from National Noh Theater, Sendagaya 4, 18-1, Shibuya-ku, Tokyo 151-0051, or by fax from (03) 3423-6833. For information, call (03) 3423-1331. Postal charges are not included in the price.