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FORUM



## Voice, Body, and Performance for the Noh Actor: A Keynote Conversation with Master Akira Matsui

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In this interview, Akira Matsui reflects on his life and training in Noh, the lessons he's learned as a master Noh performer, his cross-cultural collaborations, and the theme of the 2024 VASTA Virtual Symposium.

### Introduction

This interview took place August 7 2024 as part of the Voice and Speech Trainers Association's (VASTA) 2024 Virtual Symposium: In/corporate Voice. The conditions of this interview were created by the efforts of Richard Emmert and John Ogelvee of Theatre Nohgaku,<sup>1</sup> Jonah Salz of Traditional Theatre Training,<sup>2</sup> and the Oshima Noh Theatre in Fukuyama, Japan. The following has been edited for clarity and readability.

### Interview

**Elizabeth C. Parks/Jonah Salz translating (EP/JS):** It is a highlight of my career to be speaking with both of you today. You have had such esteemed careers; it is thrilling to bring your work to the world and to VASTA. Matsui Sensei, my first question is what started your journey in Noh?

**Akira Matsui/Jonah Salz translating (AM/JS):** I'm not a Noh performer by birth. I was born with a weak body and my doctor told my parents that in order to build up my strength, at the age of four or five years old, I should study Noh chant. Although sports would have been good to build up my body, I was too weak to exercise with others. But my voice was strong, so the doctor said, "At least you can practice singing." Not knowing at all what I was doing, I entered the singing world. That was the beginning. It's quite unusual for someone outside the tradition, from a normal family, to enter into the Noh professional tradition.

When I was six years old, the doctor sent me to Osaka to study with a professional Noh performer. He was a really famous teacher, but his voice had polyps and was no longer very good, so, he said, "You can't be a 6-year-old child trying to imitate my

old and sickly voice,”<sup>3</sup> so he introduced me to a different teacher. When I was young, I thought, “Boy that teacher has a funny voice. It’s really deep and has some strange qualities to it.” But as I’ve gotten older, I’ve realized that’s not so unusual in Noh, and just because someone has a “bad voice” by regular standards doesn’t mean they’re a bad Noh performer.

Then, when I was around 11 years they said, “You show promise and therefore, why don’t you go and study with the head of the school in Tokyo?” So, in Tokyo, I’m the only one, again, in this new world that doesn’t come from a family of Noh professionals. I was living in the dormitory attached to the master’s main Noh theatre and getting to know all the other young Noh actors. I was learning my own lessons, learning by watching, and doing all sorts of pleasant and unpleasant activities with costumes and cleaning that go with apprenticeship.

At the age of 23, I was deemed ready and returned to my home in Wakayama. Although 23 seems like a young age to be considered a professional, the other apprentices that I was studying alongside were all called back by their parents, their fathers, much earlier. To be there until 23 is quite a late age. And that’s because I had no family, and no studio, and no students back in Wakayama. I had to start everything from scratch. So, I studied longer and was finally considered confident and able to go back to Wakayama to start my new practice.

**EP/JS:** Let’s lean into the training of Noh chant. This is a two-part question. Part one, what are the most important qualities or characteristics that one is seeking in Noh chant?

**AM/JS:** It’s a theatre genre, so of course the beauty of the voice is important. But those who are not blessed with beautiful voices from the start can still become fine Noh professionals. Where do they put their energies? Instead of overpowering or astonishing audiences with the beauty of their singing, they put their energies into the beauty of their forms, the beauty of their dance. And that’s how they make their way in the professional world.

When I was young and even now, I’m considered to have quite a good voice. However, there wasn’t much time spent on training of the voice. It was mostly the body, the form, and I was told, “Don’t create a voice. Don’t try to interpret the character through your voice. Just use your own voice.”

**EP/JS:** Part two of my question: Were there any particular vocal challenges that you faced? If so, were there any special breathing techniques that supported you moving through those challenges.

**AM/JS:** When I was in Tokyo, it was always the whole group singing together, following the *lemoto*.<sup>4</sup> There were about seven in my age group, and we were all in singing practice together. We were either born into Noh families or had trained before going to study with this master. So, it was assumed that we could all sing.

Whenever we made a mistake, the Iemoto would get angry. When we sang it correctly, he wouldn't say anything. And when I felt like I was doing really well and really nailed it, he never said anything. And I always wondered, did I do it well or not? My teacher was not one to flatter students. That was a challenge, but it was a good stimulus. Often, he would say, "You're not going to become a Noh professional if you continue this way, go back to your hometown." I think that was a good thing. He wouldn't have said, "Go home" to someone that was terrible. He said it to me because he knew that I would stay, that it would strengthen my desire to stay and succeed.

Because I had almost no work with my main teacher, it was my seniors, studying alongside me that helped. They gave me advice like, "You don't have enough 'ma,'" a Japanese term for space or timing between lines. Listening to their singing and their advice and watching how they performed was the way I gradually learned how to sing.

**JS:** I've now asked him the question about special breathing techniques.

**AM/JS:** You're not using a microphone, it's your own voice, and how you can extend one breath when you're short of breath. And when you wear a Noh mask, it's even harder to breathe. So, there are ways to not show the audience that you're having troubles, and I thought a lot about that. As far as formal training, formal instruction of how to breathe, I didn't get any. But I got to the point where people were complimenting me on how long I could hold a breath. Hold a note. And the things that I was scolded for was my vibrato. There shouldn't be any vibrato in the voice in Noh singing.

**EP/JS:** I'm curious about the voice-body connection. If we zoom in now and look at what's happening inside the actor when they're performing, how are the voice and body connected for you in training and performance?

**AM/JS:** It's important that you don't do something that looks artificial. You're using your natural voice and you're using your body, but everything is created on stage. So, when you're playing an old man, you don't bend over and show something not very pleasant to look at on stage. Everything is beautiful, so you have a very nice posture. You have an old man's mask, and you have a voice that's strong and speaking with the feeling of an old man. But with the voice, you don't try to create an old man's voice. It should come naturally out of the actor. It's the idea, at the end, of "mu," or the Zen idea of nothingness.

The good thing about Noh is I've been a professional from the age of sixteen till eighty and I can always perform even when my voice has changed and even when I have a very "bad" voice, like my voice is hoarse now, but I could play a young woman on stage because that's not part of the aesthetics of performance. The natural voice of the actor and the feeling that is expressed, not just with the voice, but with the whole body. The choice of costume, the choice of mask is all part of the expression.

**EP/JS:** In a codified form such as Noh, what sort of freedom does the actor have? Is there an example of putting your own unique stamp on a performance?

**AM/JS:** Sometimes, when going to America, where there are so many different types of performances and such freedom within those performances, it doesn't feel free to me. On the other hand, Noh, with all its rules and regulations and everything specified as to how you can do it, there is room for freedom. You know exactly where you can make the changes that will make something new.

It's mostly about timing. Waiting before saying a certain line, changing the angle of my hand, those sorts of small things which I don't prepare in advance. We don't rehearse.<sup>5</sup> If I do rehearse it, they might say something critical. So, if in the spur of the moment, whether it's an improvisation or something you've prepared secretly and not told other people; once you've performed it, it's done.<sup>6</sup> People are not going to say, "You should have done this, you should have done that." It's over; you're not going to be performing it again. It doesn't matter what they say, and so those sorts of changes I can make in the moment.

**JS:** I'm asking now for an example.

**AM/JS:** In the play Hanago, at one point, the lover turns to the fan that is their keepsake of their romance many years ago. And when she receives the fan, she can hold it out or she can grasp it to her chest. Those are both permitted kata,<sup>7</sup> but the feeling is quite different depending on which one you do. The more traditional form is holding the fan out and thinking about the lover. [If you do grab it to your heart,] it's not interesting if you do this more than once. You cannot use that form in any other performance, or in any other time within that performance. The important thing is that's a very special form to grab it to your heart in that one play that will make it very visible and powerful.

**EP/JS:** Matsui-sensei, one of the things that is so special about you is your international and intercultural collaboration. You have famously worked all over the world. How do these cultural exchanges change or challenge your practice of Noh?

**AM/JS:** When I'm in those performances, I do forms that are outside the Noh tradition. I often take the forms from other traditions. For example, I'll take a ballet movement and I'll "Noh-ify" it and make it in a slightly Noh style. I often went to musicals and dance performances when I was overseas. I saw Martha Graham and I thought "She's very Noh-like." And I saw Merce Cunningham, and I learned a lot from that. And so, I'm always easily taking parts of what they do into my new work.

**JS:** An anecdote that I have is Eugenio Barba was directing Matsui in *Ur Hamlet* and every day he would watch him and then he would comment and say, “Was that from Noh?” And when Matsui said, “No.” Barba would say, “Don’t use that. I want you to be the traditional one.” And the next day Matsui would create something else. And this time he would lie and say, “Yes, yes, it came from Noh.” And so, it was allowed.

Matsui also shared with me that he’s performing in London in September to celebrate amity between Britain and Japan for 150 years. One of his productions is going to be *Rockaby* by Samuel Beckett, which he is directing, performed in English. Also, for the celebration, he is developing a new play where he sings *Kazuraki*, about a woman whose face is scarred and so she hides herself in the mountains. He’s using Laura, from *The Glass Menagerie*, as an image to perform it. When I asked him, “How is the audience going to know that?” He said, “Well, it’ll be written in the program notes, but there’s nothing in my performance that says, ‘Laura.’ I’m not going to limp and I’m not going to call out ‘Amanda.’ But there’s room for that sort of internal feeling in the way I chant and the way the chorus is chanting for me.” He told the chorus, “This is the image that I have of a shy girl, not one who’s particularly angry or resentful about her ugliness, but rather shy and her family that’s supporting her.”

**EP/JS:** Let’s turn to the theme of the symposium, “In/corporate Voice”. What is your interpretation of that term regarding Noh? Where or how does incorporation happen in Noh? Or is there a different term you would use?

**AM/JS:** For Noh, you need an entire group. I think about the corporate level as a meta commentary on my profession. There’s the overall Noh association with all the schools and thousands of actors.<sup>8</sup> Then there’s five different schools, I am a member of the Kita school which is the smallest. And within the Kita school, there are groups of families such as the Oshimas, Elizabeth, that you have met.

And when the Oshima family perform, they call me. They’re on good terms with me and they bring me in and pay my travel and my expenses.<sup>9</sup> And so I can work as a professional because I’m a member of various groups that are ongoing within the larger frame. And for one person to try something new means starting from scratch to assemble all of those musicians and Kyogen actors and the costumes and the masks. So, it’s a very difficult process.

## Conclusion

With over 60 years as a professional Noh performer, an honorary doctorate, and a designation from the government of Japan as an Intangible Cultural Asset, Matsui-sensei shared with us what still excites him about Noh.

**AM/JS:** Having performed with other genres, I see them warming up backstage and laughing and loosening up their voices and doing all sorts of training before they go on stage. But we Noh actors keep it all inside. We go on stage tense. We have all the tension

that we're saving up in our bodies before we go on stage. But gradually, as the play develops over one hour, it'll become more beautiful. And the audience, the connoisseurs, know about that. And so, as the play progresses, the audience gets more excited. They also become more involved. They start out more nervous, but as the play progresses, they get more into it. So, you could say it's an art of tension, both for the audience and for the player. I think that's the interesting part. They're not used to it. It's like a one-on-one battle between you and the audience. Also, we never meet the musicians that we're performing with until the day of the show. So, that also creates another level of tension. We're not sure if they're going to hit it on this beat or the one that we've been practicing with, and we'll find out in the performance. So for me, that's one of the most interesting things about Noh is the fact that you can never get used to it because you're never performing with the same players, nor with the same musicians or chorus. Each performance happens only once for only one time.

## Notes

1. Theatre Nohgaku is a professional theatre company led by Artistic Director Richard Emmert. They perform classic and newly developed Noh plays around the world. One component of their company is The Noh Training Project, a three-week intensive course in Noh chant, dance, and instrumentation. This takes place in both the United States and Japan.
2. Traditional Theatre Training is a three-week summer intensive that introduces Japan's traditional performing arts.
3. In Noh training it is customary for the teacher to sing and for the student to imitate and repeat.
4. The *lemoto* is the head of the school of training for Noh actors. There are five schools that train main actors, the *shite*. *Matsui-sensei* is a part of the *Kita* school of Noh actors. The other schools include *Kanze*, *Kosho*, *Kongo*, and *Konparu*.
5. Professional Noh performers and musicians, who have already spent decades in apprenticeship, typically do not rehearse a play before it is performed. They rehearse on their own, in their studios. Occasionally, one rehearsal (*moushiawase*) may occur.
6. Noh performances follow the Japanese idiom "*ichi-go-ichi-e*," meaning one opportunity, one encounter. Each Noh performance is a unique mix of musicians and performers that come together for that one occasion.
7. *Kata* are the dance steps and forms that an actor makes. These are prescribed for each particular dance.
8. The main actors (*shite*) have five schools and the *kyogen* actors have two schools. *Kyogen* are comedic Noh plays and/or the comic interludes within a Noh performance. The players of the four musical instruments have three to five schools for each instrument.
9. The pay structure of Noh requires that whoever is the main performer (*shite*) will pay everyone else's salary and expenses for the production. When *shite* actors aren't in a main role they will sing in the chorus. When I saw *Matsui-sensei* in *Fukuyama* he was singing in the chorus for the *Oshima's* production of *Kakitsubata*.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributors



**Elizabeth Parks** (she/her/hers) is a Margolis Method Certified Educator and a Lessac Kinesensics Certified Trainer. She is Assistant Professor of Acting/Stage Movement at Appalachian State University where her creative practice/research focus on the integration of Eastern and Western training practices to create socially engaged devised and pre-scripted works. She recently helped to coordinate the 2024 VASTA Virtual Symposium. She is currently devising *Beautiful, Useful, True*, an ecofeminist story centered on Eunice Newton Foote and the women of App State. She is currently co-editing the first book on the scope and applications of Margolis Method for 21<sup>st</sup> century artists and educators.



**Jonah Salz** (he/him/his) is a founding member of the Faculty of International Studies at Ryukoku University, Kyoto. Publications include translations of Japanese kyogen and Super-kyogen and plays by Issey Ogata and Mishima Yukio. He edited the kyogen special issue of *Asian Theatre Journal* and was chief editor of *A History of Japanese Theatre*. Jonah co-founded the Noho Theatre Group in 1981, directing Matsui Akira in Beckett's *Rockaby*, Yeats' *At the Hawk's Well*, and an original *Ophelia*. He is Program Director for Traditional Theatre Training, a summer intensive introducing traditional forms to primarily non-Japanese artists and scholars, which recently celebrated its 40<sup>th</sup> year.



**Akira Matsui** (he/him/his) is a master actor/teacher of the Kita School of Classical Noh. He taught and performed for over fifty years in over twenty-five countries, collaborating with artists on new Noh, interpretations of Beckett and Yates, and Noh fusion. Among his honors and awards, he is designated an Important Intangible Cultural Asset by the Japanese government and was awarded an Honorary Doctorate from Royal Holloway, University of London. Recently, he helped develop and performed in two new Noh plays, *Blue Moon Over Memphis* and one on the "Japanese Schindler," Chiune Sugiura. He continues to train his son and perform Noh in Japan.

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