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Embodied Performance: Warriors, Dancers, and the Origins of Nō Theater.

By **Matsuoka Shinpei**. Translated by **Janet Goff**. New York: Columbia University Press, 2024, 296 pp. $35.

Reviewed by
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Embodied Performance by Matsuoka Shinpei, and his translator the late Janet Goff, an accomplished *nō* scholar in her own right, is the English version of the original Japanese, *Utage No Shintai: Basara Kara Zeami E* (The Body of the Feast: From Excess to Zeami, 1991, 2004). It is a unique addition to the growing body of scholarship on *nō* theater in English, most recently, the publication of *A Companion to Nō and Kyōgen* edited by Reiko Yamanaka et al. (Brill, 2025), an impressive and comprehensive collection of essays by both Japanese and non-Japanese scholars of *nō* theater. Matsuoka's work, which first came out in Japan over thirty years ago, offers a unique and creative reading of medieval documents by someone entirely at ease with them and who is deft with a good anecdote. For example, in chapter eight, *Zeami's Vision of the Actor's Body as a Medium*, we come across the following description of Zeami Motokiyo in a fifteenth century commentary by the Zen monk Tōgen Zuisen, "Zeami was short in stature. When he stood up off the floor, he moved with agile steps. It was a natural outgrowth of long training. He was always laughing and talking in the presence of their teacher Funi and introduced Zen inspired talk that made everybody laugh." (191) This is Zeami at about fifty years of age, relaxing and joking around with friends.

The book opens with an introduction by the translator, Janet Goff, who provides a succinct summary of each of the nine chapters. This proves to be an important guide as the chapters are not organized chronologically but rather, thematically. Some of the events and people reappear from one chapter to the next as the discussion moves freely from topic to topic. The first four chapters cover the newly emerging popular culture of the

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medieval period, while the last five are focused on Zeami Motokiyo and the *nō* theater. Chapter six provides a transition from the historical treatment of medieval arts to a discussion of the transformation of the esthetics of *renga* and other arts to the *nō* stage and to the body of the actor. Matsuoka treats the *chigo* (literally child, but here, the term used for young boys selected at temples to serve the priests until they reached maturity) as central to the *yūgen* esthetic, introduced first in poetry and, later, honed by Zeami in his later treatises.

Matsuoka's story begins with a 1096 account in the *Rakuyō dengaku ki* by Ōe no Masafusa (1041-1111) of a festival of *dengaku,* a popular dance form that seems to have exploded upon the scene in the capital, engulfing all classes of society.

> "In the summer of the first year of the Eichō era, *dengaku* broke out all around the capital. Where it began is unknown. It first surfaced among villagers and then spread to the nobility. Day and night, there was no end to the tall stilts, single stilts, *koshi-tsuzumi* drums, small rattle drums (*furi-tzutsumi*), cymbals, *binzasara* rattles, and singing and dancing of the sort performed by rice-planting and rice-hulling maidens. The din was astonishing. Bureau employees, government officials, and warriors formed groups and visited temples and filled the streets." (1)

The official tone in the missive is one of disgust. Matsuoka cites this well-known passage as an early example of the extreme volatility and physicality of the new *dengaku* craze that erupted on the scene less than a decade following the end of the Genpei Wars. Matsuoka contends that Zeami would harness this untamed energy in the stylized forms and masks of the *nō* several centuries later.

By the early decades of the thirteenth century, another phenomenon of equal intensity arose among the populace in the person of the holy man Ippen (1239-1289), who is regarded as the founder of the Jishū sect, a branch of Pure Land Buddhism that centered on the invocation of the name of Amida Buddha. Ippen became known for *odori-nenbutsu,* a circle dance that whipped his followers into an ecstatic frenzy, not unlike that of the *dengaku* dancers above. Matsuoka points to the *Tengu Sōshi* picture scrolls (c.1296) for the first example of the pulsing energy of *odori-nenbutsu* ecstatic dancing.

> "They wear short horse cloths when they perform the dance. The way they shake their heads and rock their shoulders as they dance resembles wild horses. The racket they make is no different from monkeys living in the

> mountains. The men and women expose their private parts and eat with their hands. Their fondness for outrageous behavior will surely result in rebirth in the realm of beasts." (3)

For a largely illiterate population exhausted by hunger and living in constant fear of attack by bandits roaming the land, not to mention the numerous natural disasters enumerated in the *Hōjōki* (Kamo no Chōmei), the attraction of an immediate spiritual release must have been irresistible. Matsuoka tracks Ippen to the probable location of the first performance of *nenbutsu* dance in the village of Odagiri in Shinano Province. The dance as depicted in the *Ippen hijiri—e* scroll (1299) affords a suggestive detail, a burial mound, possibly that of Ippen's own uncle. From this, scholars surmise that *nenbutsu* dance began as prayers for the dead. Indeed, by the fourteenth century *nenbutsu* dance had become ubiquitous at services for the dead, especially in and around the old capital in Kyoto at designated temples, shrines, markets, and cross-roads, where they would have encountered *dengaku* performers, *biwa hōshi,* and other itinerant performers.

The *nenbutsu* dance*,* begun as an itinerant activity, could not have sustained the passionate following that it did without a dedicated space in a central location. Matsuoka identifies *The Training Center of the Fourth Ward* in Kyoto, founded in 1331, as the center of Jishū activity. "The Training Center covered an area along Shijō-dōri street slightly west of the bridge over the Kamo River that led to the Gion shrine, an area around today's Daimaru Department Store – what, in terms of location and function, could be called Kyoto's gut." (6) Matsuoka identifies three names associated with Jishū in the fourteenth century: Taa (Ippen's disciple and head of the main branch of Jishū in Fujisawa), Taa's disciple, Jōa (the founder of the Training Center of the Fourth Ward in 1311), and Jōa II (the second head of the Training Center from 1341). The *nenbutsu* dance performed at the Center reportedly attracted both courtiers and commoners, as well as members of the warrior class. Evident as well are the gatherings of linked verse poets. This is not surprising, as linked verse parties under the weeping cherry trees in spring in commemoration of the dead were common in the period (*hana no moto renga*), often attended by monks chanting the *nenbutsu* (*nenbutsu hijiri*). Matsuoka comments, "The rapport exemplified on a physical level by *nenbutsu* dances—a world that led to collective religious exaltation during the physical and psychological interaction of the members with each other—lay behind waka and renga gatherings." (11) Jōa whose *renga* poetry is featured in the *Tsukubashū* collection of *renga* (1356), is regarded by Matsuoka as "the catalyst in taking the Center's latent nature as a world characterized by physical rapport or spectacle and turning it into reality as a venue for the performing arts." (7)

For a dedicated space for cultural activities to flourish required the support of wealthy patrons. Most of the members were, after all, members of the commoner class. They found support in the daimyō Sasaki Dōyo, a flamboyant warrior in the *basara* style of the times, who donated land for the Center on the former grounds of the Gidarinji temple dedicated to Jizō. The *basara* daimyō ran afoul of the military government under the *Kemmu Code* (1336) which condemned the excesses and extravagance of the *basara* style and its prevalence among rebel bands of warriors. They were unable to quell the *basara* craze, however, which continued throughout the subsequent Northern/Southern Court period (1336-1392).

The *Kemmu Code* was in large part a reaction to the profligate ways of the last of the Hōjō regents, Hōjō Takatoki. As Matsuoka observes, the *Taiheiki* describes Takatoki as "so besotted with *dengaku* that he assigned a *dengaku* performer to each of the leading daimyō and had them dress the players in gorgeous attire…." (22) The *Kemmu Code* was disseminated to the public in Kyoto by means of the *Nijō-gawara* lampoons, graffiti posted on the riverbanks of the Nijō River in 1335, which listed *renga, dengaku*, tea, and incense among popular entertainments in Kyoto. The popularity of *dengaku* in the subsequent period continued unabated and culminated in the 1349 account of the collapse of the stands.

Matsuoka compares the energy of the newly forming *renga* groups to the kinetic energy of *dengaku* which was characterized by abrupt and surprising changes in rhythm. He refers to the *Taiheiki* account of the 1349 performance of a young boy that brought down the stands.

> "An eight- or nine-year old boy wearing a monkey mask emerged from the *Shinza* dressing room holding up a wand with white paper streamers (*gohei*). He wore an outer robe (*uchikake*) over a gold brocade robe with a red background and had on tiger-skin shoes. To a quick tempo, he crossed the arched red and green bridge at an angle and jumped up onto the railing. He circled to the left and then to the right, jumped off and onto the railing. He did not seem like a creature from this world…. The spectators filling the one hundred or so sections of the stands could not contain themselves…. Suddenly, the scaffolding erected with five- or six-inch -thick beams tilted and before anybody could say a word, roughly 450 meters of the upper and lower stands collapsed like dominoes." (31)

The *Nijō-gawara* lampoons, which criticized the *dengaku* craze, dismissed the popular *renga* circles attached to the sect as pseudo-*renga* in which actual poets from Kyoto and Kamakura mingled with commoners and where anyone could serve as judge. The completion of the *Tsukubashū* (1356) awarded *renga* a recognition denied it until then. The *Tsukubashū* collection features a total of eighty-one verses of the *basara* daimyō Sasaki Dōyo, the aforementioned benefactor of the Training Center. Matsuoka points out that many of the *renga* participants were members of the *Ikki* (leagues of roving warriors/bandits) who came incognito in large *kasa* (straw hats) that hid their faces. These events were known as *kasagi renga.*

The unusual mingling of the classes (nobility, warriors, commoners, priests) as contributors to the *renga* circles, as well as the freedom allowed in composing the links in a poem, generated excitement and creative energy. Poetry no longer belonged to the courtiers; it belonged to everyone. The Training Center of the Fourth Ward had become an important hub for *renga* and the head of the Center, a Jishū priest, often served as the judge. The mediator between members of the elite classes and the Training Center was the *basara* daimyō Sasaki Dōyo.

Matsuoka discusses another form of performance art, *sarugaku*, which appeared around the same time as *dengaku.* The *sarugaku* performers can be distinguished by their focus on simple dramatic skits, often as an opener to a sermon at a religious ceremony, although they later absorbed the arts of dance and chant as well. Many of the stories that appear in early *sarugaku* plays, and later in *nō* find their origin in folktales which were carried across Japan by itinerant monks and nuns, offering a path to salvation. The two-part structure of many of the tales is like that of Zeami's dream plays (*mugen nō*). The stories frequently depict a travelling priest who meets the spirit of one who has died and fallen into hell because of bad deeds. The spirit asks the priest to pray for their release. Later, the spirit reappears to express their gratitude, having been saved from hell by the priest's prayers. The graphic depiction of hell and the charging energy of the demons were clearly a draw for the audience. Plays featuring a demon in hell, for which Zeami's father Kan'ami was known, have their counterpart in temple plays (*shūshi sarugaku*), featuring demons.

A change took place in the early fourteenth century when performers began raising money for the rebuilding of temples and shrines (*kanjin sarugaku*). Their purpose was no longer as a sideshow for a religious sermon, but entertainment for the paying public which would attend (or not) depending upon their interest in the plays. The increasing numbers of the elite in the audience made demands upon the actors as well. At first, the performers were largely *dengaku* players who attempted to incorporate *sarugaku* skits to satisfy public demand. However, as Matsuoka emphasizes, the skits and the masks were really the property of the *sarugaku* troupe and their prominence rose over time. Matsuoka tells us, "In the late thirteenth century, *sarugaku* centered on performances of *Okina* (the old man) ...The custom of referring to *Okina* as *shūshi-bashiri* at torchlight *sarugaku* performances at Kōfukuji temple in Nara reflects the play's roots as a ritual conducted with rapid movements (*hashiri-bashiri*) by *shūshi* players to dispel evil spirits. The *sarugaku* of Kan'ami and Zeami, who made *Okina* the centerpiece of their art, is a descendant of *shūshi sarugaku."* (97)

The stories that inform the *nō* plays are essential to understanding Zeami's esthetic treatises. Zeami was not simply interested in role types, but in the characters and their stories. But there is one other medieval phenomenon on which, in Matsuoka's estimate, Zeami's *nō* treatises hinge and that is the role, or figure, of the *chigo* (child, young boy) and the significance of the *chigo* for the monastic culture, the court, and for the cultural circles of elite warriors like Ashikaga Yoshimitsu who became the patron for the child, Zeami. 'Chigo' takes on a multiplicity of meanings in this period. There is the intimate connection with the young emperor at court who ascends the throne only after having undergone a ritual ceremony, apparently like the one undergone by the *chigo* in the monastic setting. (Matsuoka suggests that in the monastery the *chigo* was meant to fulfill a sexual role as well). In linked verse poetry, the *chigo* is associated with poetic terms like *yūgen* (graceful beauty and refinement) and *shiore* (moist, gentle charm as of a flower). Nijō Yoshimoto waxes eloquent about the child Zeami in exactly such terms.

> "If Fujiwaka has time, please bring him again. It was a wonderful day. I was completely swept off my feet… Court poetry and linked verse are judged to be good when they create an interesting effect and display *yūgen.* The way in which this boy moves his hands, stamps his feet, and waves his sleeves when he dances seems more supple and graceful than a young willow in the Second Month swaying in the breeze…." (145)

The image of the *chigo* as a pure, yet enticing, almost intoxicating, child was clearly an obsession in the court circles, to the extent that posthumous portraits of Prince Shōtoku, and others, as adult figures, were later substituted with their depictions as children.

Zeami, whom Matsuoka convincingly argues had been a temple *chigo* himself, creates the embodiment of the esthetic terms associated with the *chigo* in the physical presence of the young woman role on stage, the epitome of *yūgen* and *shiore* as the terms were employed by Nijō Yoshimoto in his description of Zeami as a child. Matsuoka suggests that Zeami's esthetic theories underwent a change in his later treatises, *Shikado* and *Nikyoku Santai*, in part due to the advances made in *nō* masks and the demands they made on the actor. The constraint of the mask led to an internal focus on the part of the actor which altered the way in which the story was presented. Matsuoka emphasizes that according to Zeami, the young boy actor should perform maskless because he is already in a role, the role of a *chigo,* complete with white make-up and plucked and painted brows and the discipline of the *chigo* training. It is this figure that forms the basis for Zeami's three roles in *Nikyoku santai*. "A model for maskless figures was reawakened inside Zeami in the process of formulating the concept of a motionless body that wears a mask and focuses inwardly: namely, the figure of a *chigo,* a state experienced by Zeami himself as a child." (207) Because the *chigo* figure is "the foundation of *yūgen,*" the figure from which a graceful type of beauty arises, "Zeami stresses that mastering singing and dancing during childhood will enable an actor to become an outstanding artist who will always perform easily and at a high level." (208)

Matsuoka's willingness to engage with Zeami's treatises makes accessible the abstract terms Zeami uses in his effort to translate the esthetics of linked verse to the stage. Matsuoka argues that Zeami's turn toward an interior acting was not a turning away from the character, but rather a subtle merging with the character within his/her story. This is enhanced by the hidden tension produced by the mask which violates the person of the actor, just as the creation of the *chigo* violates the person of the young boy. The violence and chaotic nature of this violation, not unlike the violence of the twelfth century which erupted in *dengaku* performance and *nenbutsu* dance*,* is held in check in *nō* by the inner concentration of the actor, by the mask itself, and by the stylized beauty of the dance and singing.

Embodied Performance covers much historical ground as well as uses an interdisciplinary approach to the source material. This has allowed Matsuoka to interpret the source material anew and to offer fresh interpretations of the arts of this period. For the reader, too, there is implicit permission to dive in, question, and explore.