No Business Like Noh Business

An artistic director learns how to just say noh

BY CHARLIE HENSLEY

FOR THE BUSY THEATRE PEOPLE OUT THERE who rarely have time to finish any article in the trades, here's all you need to know: Last summer I went to Pennsylvania to study a 600-year-old Japanese art form I knew nothing about, and I come before you now to say that I had an enervating, exhilarating, soul-challenging, callus-inducing, life-changing experience. Noh kidding.

The Noh Training Project offers a three-week intensive, performance-based training in the dance, chant, music and performance history of Japanese noh drama. Hosted by Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble, with support from the Toshiba International Foundation, NTP will convene its sixth annual session in July.

The training is led by Richard Emmert, an American who has studied, taught and performed classical noh in Japan since 1973 and is himself a certified noh instructor of the Kita school, one of the five Japanese performance companies sustaining the form. Emmert has studied all aspects of the form, with a special concentration in movement and music. For one week of the training each year, Emmert is joined by Akira Matsui, a master actor-teacher at the Kita school. Matsui began his studies at the age of seven, and by the time he was 12, became a "live-in apprentice" to Kita Minoru, the 15th-generation *iemoto* (or head) of the Kita school. Matsui has been active for more than 25 years in disseminating noh abroad, and has trained students in India, Australia, Germany and England as well as across the U.S. and Canada. (This summer he will appear in *Forgiveness*, a new piece staged by *Peony Pavilion* director Chen Shi-Zheng at the Lincoln Center Festival.)

For American students, this dynamic team is a perfect match. Emmert's open, gregarious personality, his limitless patience and his love of noh create the contract of trust so vital to any teaching relationship. His qualities compliment Matsui's easy, powerful precision in performance, life-long commitment to and mastery of noh, instinct for exploration, and dry sense of humor.

My own desire to dive into noh arose from work on *Climbing Tiger Mountain*, a new play by Laurence Carr. A Virginia Stage Company commission, the play centers on General Douglas MacArthur's life, from the Allied occupation of Japan through his confrontation with President Harry Truman over the Korean War. Since much of MacArthur's life was spent in the Pacific Theatre, Carr suggested I use Asian theatre techniques to conceptualize the staging—a fabulous idea complicated only by the fact that I knew nothing about Asian theatre beyond masks, fans and the odd foot stamp. The Noh Training Project seemed to be just what the doctor ordered.

I had a made-to-order project, but is noh training for everybody? Judging from the varied backgrounds of my colleagues at last year's NTP, I'd say the answer is a resounding "Yes!" From John Oglevee, an actor and rock musician from New York City, to performance artist Peter Mikulik, to Jubilith Moore, a San Francisco-based actress with a background in Asian-Western fusion theatre, to Greg Giovanni, a dynamic leader in alternative theatre in Philadelphia, to me—a balding, middle-aged actor and director who's been away from any kind of formal study for 20 years—all of us found the training to provide an excellent view into this difficult, mesmerizing art form.

"WE'RE ALL BEGINNERS," SAYS ELIZABETH DOWD, a member since 1978 of Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble and founder of the project. Having researched noh and bunraku as part of her work on some Japanese folk tales, she was awarded a Japan-U.S. Friendship Commission grant and decided to throw herself into something new. Emmert was recommended to her as a good teacher and, more importantly, as a fellow American. Dowd explains, "I knew that if I started under Japanese teachers in Kyoto, I'd spend a full six months just on *suriashi* (the stylized sliding walk)."

So while surveying courses in butoh and nihon buyo (a form of kabuki dance), she joined Emmert's Tokyo-based Noh Train-

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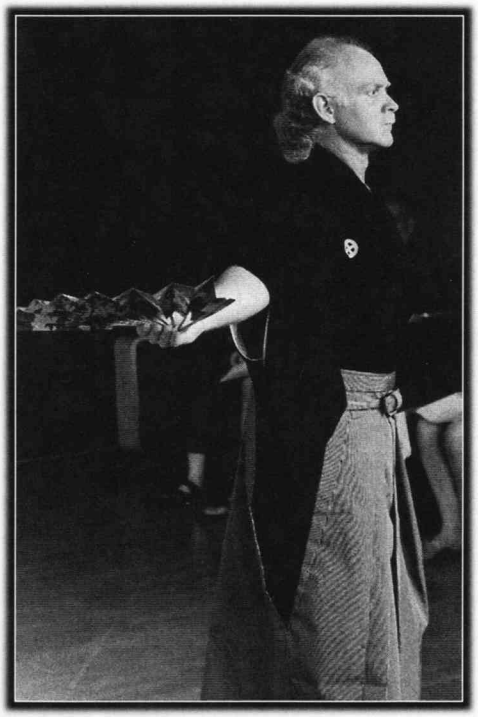
ing Project, which he developed to allow interested non-Japanese the chance to learn the basics. "I immediately loved noh," says Dowd, "and I was so grateful to be working with an English-speaking teacher who understood the American perspective I was bringing to the work." Dowd noted that her breath was affected by the work, and was surprised to find her singing voice was strengthened.

Like most Westerners exposed to Japanese theatre, she was most intrigued by the deeply held notions of stillness and *jo-ha-kyu*, which Matsui explains using the analogy of a garden hose. "Sometimes you need to change the pressure of the water coming out," he says, "depending on your purpose. So, too, you must control your own mental and physical energy on stage."

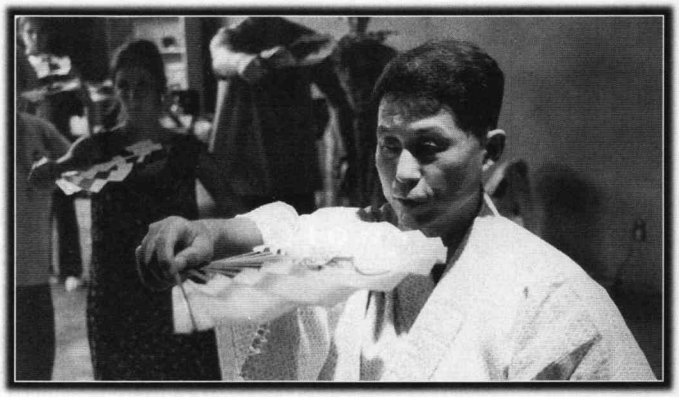
Dowd decided "to give something back" in acknowledgement of what she'd learned on her grant, and she talked to Emmert about teaching here with the support of Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble, who agreed to provide the space. So, with six or seven students that first year, and support along the way from the Japan Foundation and the Asian Cultural Council, the Noh Training Project was born in America.

Of course, we Americans love the notion of inventing new forms of expression. But some 600 years before Susan Stroman and John Weidman created their vibrant new musical *Contact* at New York's Lincoln Center and dubbed it a "dance-play," Kan'ami Kiyotsugu and his son, Zeami Motokiyo, created the art form of noh. Evolving during the late 1300s under the patronage of Japan's supreme ruler, the great Shogun Yoshimitsu, their work was descended from fertile traditions of folk and court dance, religious practice, mask and mime that themselves date from the eighth century and before. Every vintage of Japanese theatre, from bunraku to kabuki to Takarazuka to butoh to Suzuki, has flourished from noh rootstock.

The art form originally served as the entertainment of military rulers and Japan's wealthy aristocracy. Without the usual pressure to adapt to changing public tastes, noh artistry centered on perfecting its own elements, thus becoming more about the refinement of form through discipline than about reaching its audience through realistic storytelling. Though each of the five noh schools may present slightly differing variations in staging and subtext for a given play, they have miraculously managed to maintain these dance-dramas just as they were performed hundreds of years ago—a feat unequaled anywhere else in the world.



On the morning of our first class, I get to BTE's rehearsal studio and learn that street shoes must be removed and *tabi* (soft, white, bifurcated Japanese shoes) put on. Seems sort of quaint, like eating at Benihana. Over time, I learn to cherish this ritual that does honor to the space in which we work.



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Refinement through discipline: clockwise from top, Charlie Hensley performing movements known as *Yuya*; noh master Akira Matsui leading a class; project leader Richard Emmert (left) and Bloomsburg member Elizabeth Dowd rehearsing *takasago*; Emmert and Matsui; opposite page, Dowd (in mask) and Matsui.

A daring stillness: Charlie Hensley, second from right, performing the ceremony known as *gekkyuden*.

Months before, I had read in an NTP brochure that "noh combines dance, chant, music and mask in a powerful and stately performance experience requiring intense inner concentration and physical discipline." I discover that's a bit like saying "tap-dancing requires shoes." During that first session, I'm amazed that though we're each given thick notebooks which contain musical scores in Japanese notation, floor patterns and storylines, no time is spent on an introduction or syllabus. Within minutes, I'm standing in front of a mirror with a fan in my hand.

In noh, there are fewer than 50 *kata*, or elements of movement, which are reordered and changed slightly to tell different stories. The *kamae* position, with neutral face, weight slightly forward, rounded arms, left thumb tucked into index finger, and right hand grasping the fan, is the base from which all movement starts. As we begin our *suriashi*, I find it impossible to walk and stay in *kamae* at the same time. Indeed, in those first few days, many of us learning our four or five *shimai* (short dances) can't tell our *sashi* from our *mawashi*. Getting these basic moves into my body is frustrating, and I'm humiliated by my ineptitude. I hover in the back of the studio, which doesn't help because I can't see Emmert. The second- and third-year students are obviously ready to move on to more difficult dances. I alternate between hating them and thinking how good I'll be during my second year.

Second year? This is my second *day*—have I lost my mind?

Finally, around the day three, I realize that I didn't learn to do Shakespeare in two days either, and Emmert emphasizes that, like any training, what we learn is really up to us. Our abilities, our approaches, our discipline are all different. Do what you can. And keep asking questions.

We begin learning the ancient chants that accompany the *shimai*. The Japanese notation uses sesame seed-shaped figures to denote how long to hold a note, and where it is on the scale. The chorus always sits in *seiza* position, essentially sitting on their heels, so we try this, too, at least during music rehearsals. The pain is excruciating after a few minutes, since our ankles carry most of our weight directly to the floor. Jackie Romeo, a scholar in Asian studies from Boston, tries rolling a towel to absorb some of the pain, but she's still wincing as she chants. With practice, I'm grateful to find my legs fall asleep, so there's really no pain—until I try to stand. Over time, calluses build up on my ankles and I can spend more time each day in *seiza*. The first time I see Emmert's ankles and Matsui's knees, I'm shocked: They look like gauze pads thinly covered by leathery skin.

One day, we're introduced to the two noh drums and try our first tentative sounds on the flute. Barry Jordan, an ethnomusicologist studying at Occidental College in Los Angeles, is finally reveling in his element, which is not dance. And so our days progress, until it seems we're working 24 hours a day on noh. There are new dances, new chants, lots of homework. And then Matsui arrives.

SINCE THE SHORT, COMPACT, IMPISH 53-YEAR-OLD SPEAKS little English, he and Emmert become one teacher, one voice in simultaneous translation. Speaking rapidly, grabbing this arm and that fan, commenting on one student's *suriashi* ("He looks like a princess. Not good"), Matsui shows us the moves on his own body and the effect is astonishing. It's effortless. Precise. Powerful. Focused. Though far from severe, Matsui's work with us is at first unnerving when compared to Emmert's warm encouragement.

One morning, after working with Matsui on *Yuya* (my recital choice), and surviving the experience, I'm feeling pretty cocky. He asks for volunteers to learn a new dance and I jump up with Jubilith and Bloomsburg actor Justin Vann. As we approach the mirror, he turns to us and says (through Emmert), "Oh yes. You should learn this well, because you will be teaching the rest of the class." I find myself picking up the moves more quickly than usual. It's a brilliant technique; as with taking a car to a new place, I learn more from driving than from riding shotgun.

Matsui and Emmert also bring traditional noh costumes with them. Each of us will wear a simple black kimono with more colorful *hakama* (huge pleated pants) for our recital, so we learn the complicated folds that allow all ties and fastenings to be hidden by beautiful knots and cloth overlays. We also learn how to maintain and store these costumes, as do the professional actors in Tokyo.

I'm lucky to have several chances to discuss noh with Emmert and Matsui over drinks, and I'm amazed at how much we have in common in our beliefs about art. I notice that Matsui gestures with tensionless hands—until he decides to make a point. Then the energy seems to shoot through his fingers. For his part, Emmert often talks of his own frustration as he continues his training. "I relearn things all the time. I see our work as being similar to that of the conductor of a symphony, someone who

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Looking for Lecoq

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resident ensemble in American theatre. This kind of journeying on seems to be what the master called for. The legacy of Lecoq will continue to permeate the American theatre and beyond precisely because Lecoq taught his students to go beyond him.

Jennie Gilrain remembers Lecoq often asking: "What do you want to say?" When their time at his Paris school had ended, he would send them off with a teacher's benediction: "Now it's yours. It's the time that *you* live in. You decide what you want to say." **AT**

Sara Brady is managing editor of The Drama Review *and a Ph.D. candidate in performance studies at New York University. A website (*www.lecoq.com*) designed for the Lecoq memorial in April 1999 still offers the following invitation: "The Ecole Jacques Lecoq is open to all future forms of theatre."*

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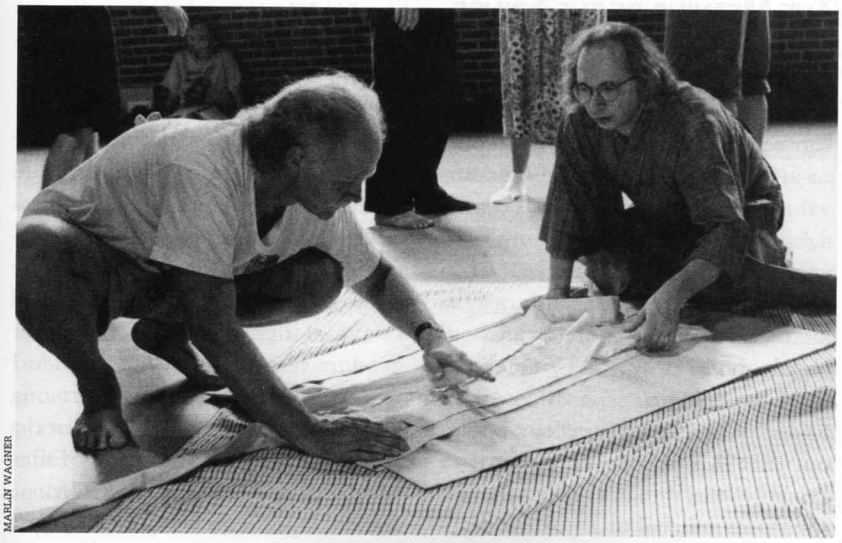
communicates that stillness. That sense of time and space. People are working in so many rich, daring ways now. You can imitate a teacher, learn from someone, but ultimately learning what resonates for you is the most important."

The imitation factor is a difficult one for Matsui, who has taken flak from the Kita school for doing so many international performances which mix Eastern and Western performance traditions. "They trained me, of course, and expect me to carry on our traditions, which I honor. But I want to create my own ways of expression and, to do that, I must do something beyond imitation."

It took all of my energy to try learning the basics leading up to our recital. Several of us, though, created pieces that fused our personal Western aesthetics with the Eastern techniques learned in Bloomsburg. And they were as varied as snowflakes. Some were simply traditional *shimai* danced to contemporary music. Others told their own delightful stories of love, loss and even comedy. Lindsey Snyder, a RADA graduate, created a memorable piece called "I Got Noh Rhythm," which was a be-bop piece inspired by a poem read by Austin Powers' Mike Myers. I took reams of notes on physical staging for the MacArthur piece, and started developing ideas for pairing a silly, war-time American view of Japan like the song "Japanese Sandman" with the elegance and studied beauty of a noh dance. What better way to reveal our innate cultural prejudices?

Our future use of specific theatrical elements aside, I know we will also keep within us the discoveries we made about the hearts of the Japanese people. Looking back, I've come to believe that study of another country's art forms may be the finest, truest way to glimpse that country's soul and our commonality.

The images and emotions from those three weeks continue to percolate about in my head. Watching Scott Strode, a theatre professor from Indiana's Manchester College, trying to perfect the drunken servant in *Shojo*. Lindsey teaching me a hip- ▶



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Learning by example: Charlie Hensley, left, and Richard Emmert fold costumes.

hop rap to help me remember the basic moves in *Yuya* (this really defies description but is fusion at its best). We heard Jane Chen's operatic soprano fill the night as she rehearsed Jubilith's new piece with Nina Czitrom and Hamilton Armstrong as disconnected lovers. My memories seem so romanticized now considering how difficult it actually was to try and understand—much less master—this exquisitely slow and focused form. As Matsui says, "People look at noh and think, 'What's so difficult about doing things so slowly?' Then they learn."

I MUST CONFESS THAT I'VE always had an aversion to training. I've always been suspicious of teachers who wanted me to "be a table, be a sports car, an ice cream cone...." Most seemed sure that theirs was the definitive "method." In one university directing class, the professor had us pushing aspirin tablets around groundplans while he expounded that he'd "never read Neil Simon" and never intended to. It was my first real taste of artistic snobbery, though far from my last.

I mention this now because I think most Americans limit themselves too much. Partly to shield ourselves from the fear and self-doubt that both drive and halt our very personal work, we concentrate on our singular viewpoints, often to the exclusion of all else. But there is a powerful joy to be derived from throwing one's self into new training, a very different joy from the kind found when scaling the heights of an individual play. I loved being released from my usual role as "the resident theatre expert." I was a baby learning to crawl. It felt good.

Elizabeth Dowd was right—we really are beginners, no matter how much we learn. "There is something so moving in watching the rawness of students singing or dancing in front of others for the first time," she says. "We get up there and to a person are vulnerable to the same degree."

Our creativity is bound to the freedom that vulnerability allows. And I know that, though Tokyo is safe from my imminent debut, I will use the elements of this training for the rest of my life.

Now what is this butoh stuff...? **AT**

Charlie Hensley is the artistic director of Virginia Stage Company.