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Innovation in Nō: Matsui Akira Continues a Tradition of Change

Mariko Anno and Judy Halebsky

Within the practice of Japanese nō theatre, there are tensions between preserving the art and allowing change. However, innovation through performance has been central to nō throughout its long history, from the variant nō of the Edo era (1603–1868) to the more recent emergence of revival nō and new nō. The long career of nō master Matsui Akira (1946–) offers an individual perspective on the history of change in the tradition of nō. Based on a series of interviews with Matsui and research conducted at the Kita School of Nō and the Hōsei Nō Research Institute, this article examines Matsui’s innovations, his unusual path toward becoming a professional, and his transnational collaborations.

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Matsui Akira is a shokubun (full-ranked performer) in the Kita nō school. In 1998, the Japanese National Department of Cultural Affairs named him a Mukei Bunkazai Sōgō Shitei (General Designation, Intangible Cultural Property Holder). He actively performs nō throughout Japan and has trained numerous students. Matsui also enjoys a celebrated international career and performs and collaborates frequently in Asia, America, and Europe. His work includes traditional nō, vari-
Innovation in Nō, revival Nō, newly created Nō, and English Nō. This article, which is based on interviews and personal conversations from May 2009 to March 2013, seeks to reflect Matsui’s viewpoint as accurately as possible and to provide a context for his work within the history, development, and contemporary practice of Nō. In interviews, Matsui explained his unusual background, his involvement in revival Nō and new Nō, and his rejection of the video and print reproduction of Nō materials. He demonstrates his commitment to the forces of change within Nō. As a professional Nō actor who works with influences from outside of Nō, uses improvisation and personal interpretation, cultivates tsuchigusasa (“smell of the earth,” or a raw and unrefined style), incorporates “new movements,” and works internationally, Matsui embodies the tradition of change through performance that is central to the history of Nō. He defines Nō as residing in the Nō actor’s trained body, and he supports this definition with his own performances. Matsui’s approach to Nō allows him to innovate in the form and collaborate across disciplines and thereby expand the boundaries of Nō.

Leading Nō scholar Yamanaka Reiko defines Nō through its clearly established performance techniques that have been sustained historically. Kata are prescribed movements that function as individual units in Nō dance. There are also established musical structures and vocal techniques. For the Nōkan (Nō flute), for example, there are prescribed melodic patterns. Yamanaka argues that in order for a performance to be called Nō, it needs to be constructed exclusively from these preexisting units of both movement and musical structure: “To be called Nō, a performance needs to be constructed of traditional well-known, preexisting units. With few exceptions . . . wearing Nō-style costumes and masks or adopting the concentrated posture and distinctive movements of the Nō actor is not sufficient to make a Nō play out of a performance that employs newly composed music or movement that are not based on traditional kinetic units [kata]” (Yamanaka 2008: 79).

This definition does not necessarily limit Nō to the existing repertoire of Nō plays. Nō plays that have fallen out of the active repertoire can be revived. These plays are called fukkyoku Nō (revival Nō). There are also new pieces being created, shinsaku Nō (new Nō). In both cases, these Nō plays are created and staged using the existing structures and movements of Nō. The arrangement might be new, but the units used are drawn from the surviving tradition. Defining Nō by the use of the traditional performance patterns reflects a commitment to the aesthetic power of Nō as it is traditionally practiced. The propagation of Nō as defined by its preexisting units is grounded in a belief that traditional Nō works artistically and can be rewarding for a contemporary audience.
However, there is a fundamental limitation to this stringent definition of nō as various combinations of preexisting units, since it does not account for the importance of innovation within the tradition, seen in the live stage performance of nō throughout its long history. Nō scholar Yokomichi Mario (1916–2012) considers this tradition of change through performance to be the reason why nō is still being performed today.

Nō has been transmitted from one generation to the next for hundreds of years and is a traditional performance art. An image exists of nō as a rigid form that cannot be altered, in even the minutest ways. However, nō can be changed in multiple and various ways to the performer’s creative disposition. With this freedom, the performer is able to imbue the performance with their individuality and emotionally connect with the audience. As a result nō has been able to survive for hundreds of years. Because of the freedom within the performance of nō, it continues even today to draw in audiences and speak to their hearts. (Yokomichi 2007: 30)

Yokomichi may be referring only to individual expression that takes place within nō that meets Yamanaka’s preexisting units. But if creative expression is central to the tradition of nō, then a definition of nō should allow for the possibility that the preexisting units may themselves be changed by performers.

In the history of nō, various mechanisms have attempted to limit change. However, there is extensive evidence that professional nō actors saw change in nō as desirable and wanted to perform nō for their own time and sensibility. Even during the Edo period (1603–1868), when the government censored and controlled the techniques, chants, and structures of nō, actors found ways to imbue the form with their personal innovations despite resistances. During this period, nō became part of the shikigaku (ceremonial performance) of the shōgun (military commander) and bakufu (military government), who were protectors and controllers of the art. This government demanded strict training, as well as accurate transmission, and these demands impacted the performance length and style in ways that are still evident in today’s performances. Furthermore, the government did not allow the shite-kata (main actor) to openly include his interpretation and creativity within the play, as had been possible during the Muromachi period (1337–1553). Instead, the shōgun instilled the mentality of “preserving the art” rather than “developing the art” (Omote 1978: 73).

“Preserving the art” also meant that new nō could not be produced. By preventing the creation of new nō, the shōgun was undermining creativity and change. But under these strict conditions develop-
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Innovation in the art was still seen, particularly during the second half of the Edo period in the work of Kanze Motoakira (1722–1774), the fifteenth head of the Kanze school. Motoakira modified existing nō plays to create what are known as kōgaki (special performances)—variant performances of existing nō plays that still allowed creative change within the limits of the Edo era’s strict controls (Omote 1978: 75).

As Yamanaka states in Nō wo Omoshiroku Miseru Kufū (Methods to Increase the Visual Impact of Nō), there are more than two hundred of these variant plays written by Motoakira (Yokomichi, Yamanaka, and Matsumoto 2009: 71). Some of these plays reflect Motoakira’s scholarly interests in literature; others are shorter in length than the original nō plays. Within these variant plays, Motoakira imprinted his personal interpretation on particular plays by changing the storyline, characters, costumes, props, entrance and exit of characters, dance, lead actor’s movements, music, and so on (p. 71). If the preexisting units that are required by Yamanaka’s definition of nō were subject to change in Motoakira’s time, then it is difficult to argue that they must remain static in the present. Innovation through performance has always been part of nō.

It is in the context of this debate that Matsui Akira’s contributions can best be understood. Matsui strongly aligns himself with the tradition of innovation through the performance of nō that can be traced back to the creation of variant nō. His work includes performing the variant versions of nō plays developed during the Edo era, but he is more interested in the ongoing possibility for change always present in the live performance of nō. Matsui defines nō not through the use of preexisting structures and kata, but through the idea of the trained nō actor’s body. This encompasses the external techniques of nō song and dance as well as the inner concentration that is key to nō. For him any performance of a nō actor can be an example of nō. Even when Matsui performs in productions (discussed below) with tango dancers in Burning Passion (2008) or on the grass in front of a historic Denmark castle in Eugenio Barba’s Ur-Hamlet (2006), he is performing nō. Matsui’s external performance is shaped by nō movements, such as straight-line physical actions and a low-grounded stance. This external performance is paired with an internal tension, sense of time, and quality of concentration cultivated through years of nō training. While other performance forms (e.g., ballet, modern dance) have informed him, his movements are mostly nō kata. In the interdisciplinary collaborations discussed below, his performance stands in obvious contrast to the other performance traditions on stage. Matsui believes that through his embodied mastery of the art, he performs nō regardless of the particular context of a production. Matsui’s contribution is nō.
Matsui’s perspective may be related to his unusual route to nō. Matsui (1946–) was raised in Wakayama Prefecture, a rural area of southern Japan. Because he was sickly, the doctor recommended that he take up nō singing to improve his health. At the age of six he began training with Wajima Tomitarō of the Kita school. It is auspicious for a student to begin training, as he did, on the sixth day of the sixth month (6 June) of his sixth year. Matsui quickly took to nō; it improved his health, and he eagerly learned the chant and dance.

Matsui’s career has been shaped by the fact that he was not born into a nō family and lacked a father within the nō world to train him and advocate for his professional development. Training in nō happens one on one, teacher to student. This is based on a family relationship of training father to son. For example, the Kanze school family performed a variant of Shakkyō Ōjishi (Stone Bridge, Big Chinese Lion) on 23 May 2009 at the Yokohama Nō Theatre. The standard version of Shakkyō features a red lion and a white lion, but in this variant there were three lions. Three generations of the Sekine family performed together: grandfather, father, and son. Both the father and son are first-born sons (Fig. 1). This is the ideal of nō lineage. The father passes on the nō tradition to his firstborn son, who goes on to have a professional career and lead his firstborn son to nō. This ideal, however, is often unfulfilled. When a biological son is not available, a substitute is sought. Wajima was Matsui’s link to the nō world. When Wajima’s own son decided not to pursue a career in nō, it created an opening for Matsui to be the main student of Wajima’s. Even though Matsui was not from a nō family, he had the opportunity to be in Wajima’s succession line. As a result, Wajima invested more of his time and energy in Matsui’s nō aspirations (Matsui 2009).

When Matsui was thirteen, he went to Tokyo to train full time as an uchi-deshi (live-in student) at the Kita Nō Theatre in the Meguro neighborhood. He became the student of the head of the school, and Wajima was no longer his main teacher. Live-in students learn all aspects of nō performance, support the work of the troupe, and clean the theatre. They work through a learning hierarchy that goes from basic performance-related tasks, such as dressing actors, to the highly trained skills of performing the chants and dances. As students move through this learning hierarchy, they also move through the ranks toward professionalization. Matsui spent almost seventeen years at the Kita stage as a live-in student—considerably longer than many of his peers. His progress was hindered because he lacked a father in the nō world who could advocate for him. Kita Minoru (1900–1986), the fifteenth iemoto (head of the school) of the Kita school, did not favor Matsui, which further limited his advancement toward professional status.
Figure 1. Flyer for *Shakkyō Ōjishi* (Stone Bridge, Big Chinese Lion) at the Yokohama Nō Theatre (2009). Three generations of the Sekine family in the Kanze school performed this variant version of the *nō* Shakkyō. On the right is the reverse side of the flyer, which shows portraits of the three generations of the Sekine family that performed on stage together.
The extended delay was a career hurdle that Matsui needed to overcome. In 1972, at age twenty-six, Matsui traveled to North America to perform in California and British Columbia. While still officially a student of nō, he took the initiative to tour internationally and perform nō in a professional context. This annoyed Minoru and led to further difficulties for Matsui in becoming a professional nō actor. This travel was, however, one of the actions that marked his independence as an actor and began to conclude the training phase of his career. In the period that followed Matsui’s return from this first trip abroad, he was given the title of *jun-shokubun* (junior professional), a designation that created specifically for Matsui (Matsui 2009). His live-in peers were becoming *shokubun* (full professionals) at the same time. It acknowledged his accomplishments in nō, but also signaled a fear of handing the power of nō lineage to an actor who had shown himself to be less than strictly traditional.

At the age of thirty, Matsui returned to Wakayama and began building a group of students and an audience for nō. He also continued to find international performance opportunities. In 1986 the fifteenth *iemoto* of the Kita school passed away. The same year, at the age of forty, Matsui danced *Shōjō Midare* (The Disorderly Tipster Sprite). This Kita school performance signaled an end to Matsui’s lingering apprenticeship and the beginning of his professional career in the nō world. Favor by the new head of the Kita school, the sixteenth *iemoto*, Kita Roppeita (1924–), Matsui became a *shokubun*. With the support of the *iemoto*, Matsui was recognized as a holder of Important Intangible Cultural Property at the unusually young age of fifty-two; this event stood in contrast to Matsui’s long struggle to become a professional.

Matsui’s difficulties with the traditional nō establishment may have been related to his willingness to explore the boundaries of nō. Since becoming a professional, he has continued this exploration by performing a number of nō plays that fall outside the active repertoire. The active repertoire of nō’s five schools consists of 180 to 250 plays, mostly written during the Muromachi period, with three-fifths of this repertoire credited to Kan’ami and Zeami (Emmert 1997: 21). The repertoire is defined by those plays that are currently in the living knowledge of professional nō actors. The staging of a nō play requires actors and musicians with a living knowledge of that specific play. There are many nō plays that have some extant written record but are not in current practice, because with nō—an art that combines text with acting, movement, costume, and musical structures—a surviving script of the chants is not enough information to bring the nō back into the active repertoire. A nō is considered part of the repertoire when it is actively performed by at least one of the five nō schools. According to their
extensive research, Yokomichi, Nishino, and Hata estimate that from
the beginning of the Muromachi period in 1338 until the end of the
Meiji period in 1912 there were between 2,500 and 3,000 plays created
(Yokomichi, Nishino, and Hata 1987: 301). It is evident that the major-
ity of nō plays have fallen out of the repertoire. But a chosen few, par-
ticularly the plays associated with the renowned nō founder Kan’ami
and his son Zeami, remain in the repertoire and continue to define nō.

A recent development in nō performance has been the joint
efforts of nō actors and nō scholars to revive plays, some of which have
not been performed for the last 400–550 years. When such a play is
brought back to the stage, it is called fukkyoku nō (revival nō). The play
is redeveloped through extensive research that connects extant docu-
mentation of the play with surviving nō techniques. Matsui points out
that many of these plays fell out of the repertoire because they were
not popular. He aims to revive these plays in ways that will engage con-
temporary audiences through dynamic performance techniques and,
if possible, themes that are relevant to contemporary issues.

Revival nō is not a new practice. Shogun Tokugawa Tsunayoshi
(1646–1709) initiated these revivals during the Edo era. Both during
and after the Meiji period (1868–1912), the heads of schools and other
actors revived plays according to their own interpretations. The practice
has continued; for example, in 1982 the Hōsei Nō Theatre Research
Institute revived Unrin’in1 (Nishino and Hata 2011: 316). The attention
garnered by this performance became a catalyst, and since then there
has been a marked increase in revival nō. Some performances have
been sparked when professional nō actors found old utaibon (chant
books) of nō plays. In the past, only professional nō actors were involved
in the revival of these plays, but recently, in an exciting shift, profes-
ional nō actors have included nō scholars, engendering a rich recipro-
cal relationship to revive and interpret past performances found in old
writings (Murakami 2009: 6), resulting in successful performances.

Multiple difficulties arise in the revivals. The primary hurdle is
the lack of comprehensive documentation in the chant book. Surviv-
ing chant books often lack important elements such as (1) kata-tsuke
(movement notation of the actors), (2) fushi (musical notation indi-
cating pitches, movements, and rhythms of the chant), (3) hayashi
(instrumental ensemble) patterns, or (4) instructions on appropriate
costumes or masks to be used. Furthermore, some sections of surviving
chant books may have deteriorated over the years to the point where
writing and notation are no longer legible. In a careful process of work-
ing from extant sources of a particular nō and then integrating edu-
cated guesses from other extant resources and living nō plays, a revival
nō is created.
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The 2011 edition of the Nō/Kyōgen Encyclopedia details three general approaches for reviving plays (Nishino and Hata 2011: 316): historicity, contemporaneity, and creative adaption. One approach is to stage the nō as similarly as possible to the way it would have been performed in the past, using historic if dated performance practices. One example of this method is the 2002 production of Hideyoshi ga mita Sotoba Komachi (The Komachi on the Stupa that Hideyoshi Saw), which used scholarship to recreate this play as it might have been presented for the military commander Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536–1598) in the Momoyama period (1568–1600). Another approach is to bring the nō into contemporary practice, as though it had not fallen out of the repertoire. The chant books and other extant sources are interpreted through current nō performance practices, staging the play in a way that accounts for the changes in form and style that have taken place over time, based on both contemporary traditional nō models and historical nō scholarship. This koten nō (traditional nō as currently performed) is by far the most popular way of reviving nō.

The third approach is not limited to tradition and takes creative liberties in composing new structure and materials, comparable to a shinsaku nō (newly created nō). While it draws on established kata and melodic patterns and revives an extant chant book, it also claims the creative space to depart from these structures.

For actors, part of the appeal of revival nō is imagining how nō has changed over time and drawing from the existing possibilities in making decisions about movements, music, costumes, masks, and other aspects of the performance. It is important to note that these three approaches to reviving nō often are not clearly delineated in productions and performances. A particular production of a revived nō may include aspects from all three of these approaches.²

Yet another area of innovation in nō is another kind of shinsaku nō that pairs a new story text with existing units of movement and music, such as the productions discussed in the following paragraph. Both revival nō and shinsaku nō with a new text aim to intentionally combine aspects of the surviving practice of nō with material that is either not currently in the active repertoire or new. Newly created plays allow the repertoire to reflect our time and potentially grow.

A newly created nō considers how a nō should be adapted according to contemporary issues of style, aesthetics, performance technique, and audience. For example, some shinsaku nō have been designed to appeal to younger audiences. Umewaka Genshō (1948–), a Kanze school shite-kata (main actor), created a shinsaku nō based on a popular shōjo manga (girls’ comic book) by Miuchi Suzue titled Garasu no Kamen (Glass Mask). The resulting nō play, Kurenai-tennyo (The Crim-
son Maiden), was performed in 2006 with multiple sold-out shows in Tokyo (two runs) and Osaka at both nōgakudō (nō theatres) and non-nōgakudō venues. This show appealed to the young female audience, who grew up reading the comic books. Many shinsaku nō attempt to address contemporary life: child abuse, the bombing of Hiroshima, Albert Einstein, Saint Paul, the Buddhist monk Kūkai (774–835), the Christian convert Hosokawa Garasha (1563–1600), and other subjects.

Scholars Nishino Haruo and Hata Hisashi point out that reviving plays illuminate the history and development of nō, not only in terms of the plays that are revived but also in terms of their relationship to the active repertoire and to contemporary issues (Nishino and Hata 2011: 316–317). Matsui has participated in a number of revival nō plays. Generally, nō schools have 240 plays within their active repertoire and consider revival nō to be a separate category. For example, many of the schools use the word fukkyoku (revival) or haikyoku (pieces that are no longer performed), generally recognizing they were dropped because they were not popular with audiences. However, Matsui’s Kita school handles revival nō plays differently: plays are called sankōkyoku (referenced nō) and can be rehearsed occasionally by the school.

In the Kita school, 200 plays are in the active repertoire and fifty are referenced nō, although the numbers can vary according to the preferences of the head of the school. It is easier to revive these referenced nō because, while performed infrequently, living members of the school have some familiarity with specific kata and melodic patterns.

In the Kita school, referenced nō may be placed within the active repertoire and/or performed at the monthly Kita-kai, which is also called jishu-kōen (independent performance). At these monthly presentations, professional Kita performers gather to perform and help as part of their duty to the school. The professional nō actors themselves are responsible for selecting the monthly plays, rather than the iemoto. If sankōkyoku are performed at the Kita-kai, utaibon (chant books) are created so the audience may follow the story with the performance; published by the school, these works are sold alongside other chant books at Kita school performances. By creating a chant book, the professional nō actors are then able to teach the movements and chants to their amateur and professional-track students (Matsui 2011). Despite the many other nō plays in the repertoire, there are students keen to learn these rare sankōkyoku. Thus, one incentive for staging a sankōkyoku is that the professional nō actor can generate potential income by connecting with students seeking lessons that introduce them to these more obscure works.

For example, Raiden (The God of Thunder and Lightning) is one of the more popular referenced revival nō plays that Matsui has
performed. It was staged on 20 November 2011 at the Ōshima Nō Theatre in Fukuyama City, Hiroshima Prefecture. *Raiden* is a fifth-category nō play based on the story of Sugawara no Michizane (845–903). Michizane, a scholar and poet, is celebrated as the god of literature, and students pray to him for success on their exams.

*Raiden* exists in four out of the five nō schools and is performed occasionally. However, as Matsui stated in his interview on 17 December 2011, it is important to remember that many of these revival nō plays have fallen out of the repertoire because they were not popular with audiences at the time or because their performance was prohibited by the government. Their unpopularity may have been due to uninteresting *kata*, a lack of engaging emotion, or other issues in the performance. Therefore, Matsui argues that it is vital for contemporary professional nō actors to supplement the performative aspects of these plays in order to interest contemporary audiences. Altered elements may include new *kata*, music, or interpretation—all performed with today’s audience in mind. Matsui’s dedication to contemporary audiences and his ambition to appeal to contemporary tastes demonstrate that nō lives within the performers and with performer creativity can change from generation to generation.

For Matsui, reviving a nō play is more than bringing it back to the stage the way it was performed hundreds of years ago. Not only have nō performance techniques changed, but culture has also altered the way actors communicate emotions. Matsui offers the example of how the expression of love between a husband and wife differs today from the Edo period. A more demonstrative expression of love in contemporary society affects performances of romantic love on today’s stage. Matsui also discusses the fact that modern professional nō actors are able to express their emotional feelings more on stage than nō actors in the Edo period. He attributes this to the improved technique of today’s professional nō actors and increased access to the material goods needed to perform the plays. The shift also reflects cultural changes over time that allow contemporary actors to connect to internal and external expressions of emotion, which gives them the means to create a performance that Matsui finds more interesting.

While the active repertoire of nō plays may be limited to fewer than 250 plays, there are thousands of plays that have fallen out of the repertoire. Professional nō actors, in searching for nō to revive, consider not only how a particular nō might enhance understandings of existing plays in the repertoire but also how the themes of the play to be revived might connect with current societal concerns. This is in keeping with the decision-making process for choosing the nō plays from the repertoire that will be performed at a given event. On 18 February 2011, the
Kita school staged the fourth-category (miscellaneous-type play) revival *Take no yuki* (Snow on the Bamboos) at the National Nō Theatre. In the story, while the father is away, the stepmother locks a boy outside and forces him to remove snow from the bamboo (Nishino and Hata 2011: 98–99). As child abuse has become an issue of concern in Japan, this revival nō has gained attention. For Matsui, the potential connection with contemporary issues is one of the rewards of revivals, and he savors the challenge of creating performances that will resonate with current audiences (Matsui 2009). Revival nō is evidence of the innovations and changes that have taken place in the tradition of nō. By connecting nō actors with nō scholars, revival nō creates a rich and complex conversation about the history of nō performance techniques and how the form has changed over time.

Newly created nō plays offer creative opportunities, but also professional challenges, for Matsui and other nō actors. Since the Meiji period (1868–1912), many new nō have been written. This trend in particular has gained momentum since the 1980s. However, most of these new nō plays are performed only once or twice and do not become part of the active repertoire. In addition to newly created nō plays performed in Japanese, new nō plays have recently been created in other languages (especially in English). In 2004, Hōsei University hosted the Nō Theatre Seminar, which included Nishino Haruo’s presentation “Shinsaku nō wo kangaeru” (Considering Newly Composed Nō Plays). Nishino produced a list of plays created from the Meiji period until the present day, in Japanese and other languages. Shinsaku nō plays have not yet garnered much scholarly notice, but this 2004 seminar might indicate that nō scholars are beginning to shift some of their attention toward new nō.

To create and stage new nō requires a great investment of time and creative energy for nō actors, particularly considering the limited performances these new plays generally receive. An actor must create new chants and movements for a newly created nō and teach them to his performers. Thus far, learning these new roles has not generally led to expanded performance opportunities for professional actors. In contrast, when a nō actor is known to be skilled and capable at performing a familiar nō play, that actor may have numerous lucrative and prestigious opportunities to perform that particular nō over the years. Established structures of the nō world, such as the Nōgaku Performers Association and a ready audience for traditional nō, reinforce the ongoing performance of existing nō plays and performance styles. But for creative reasons, Matsui chooses to work on new nō plays as well as many forms of interdisciplinary and transnational performance. When asked if he prefers to perform new nō plays or plays from the nō rep-
ertoire, Matsui responded, “It’s more interesting to do new things and to start at zero. If you don’t have any time or money, you end up doing traditional nō” (Matsui 2009). Matsui is an example of a nō actor who enjoys newly created nō as a creative opportunity and pairs it with the performance of traditional nō as a means to gain both income and respect within the nō world.

While Matsui sees revival nō and new nō as creative opportunities, he sees the technological reproduction of nō materials very differently. He sees video recordings of nō performances and the widely available print reproductions of written instructions on the performance techniques of nō as forces counter to innovation and change in nō. The written record of treatises on the art of nō gained authority in the twentieth century as a helpful way to define the art and influence the performance. Forces that shape the performance qualities of nō include the Nōgaku Kyōkai (Nōgaku Performers Association), interpretation of performance techniques within the nō houses, and the body-to-body transmission of nō. In addition to these forces, written treatises on the performance aspects of nō also influence the art. Written works on the performance aspects of nō are held in secret by nō schools and passed down through schools over generations. The most revered teachings are the treatises recorded by Zeami. He recorded his secrets on the art of nō when he feared he would not have a creative heir to carry on his lineage. Zeami’s treatises, including Fūshikaden (Teachings on the Flower), were published and became available to the public for the first time in 1907 (Pinnington 2006: 5). The publication provided wide access to an extensive written record on the performance practices and aesthetics of nō. Suddenly, the organic body practice that breathed in contemporary air and culture and interpreted nō for new environments and situations had a written record. Not only was this a written documentation of the art of nō, but it also contains the words and performance techniques prescribed by the most celebrated nō actor and playwright of all time.

In the 1950s it became popular for performers to read Zeami’s treatises on nō. Kanze Hisao (1925–1978), a lead actor of the Kanze nō school, helped found a study group for performers that based its activities on Zeami’s writings. This group was called the Zeami Densho Kenkyūkai (Research Group on Zeami’s Treatises). Performers in this group engaged themselves in the theories and philosophies of Zeami’s written treatises with the goal of applying them to the living practice of nō (Rath 2004: 236). This helps to explain the importance of Zeami in contemporary investigations of the living practice of nō theatre: he is revered not only for his historical role in the creation of nō, but also for the more recent influence of his writing on contemporary practi-
tioners. For Matsui, however, there is a conflict between the embodied practice of nō and the written record provided by Zeami’s treatises.

Matsui sees the publication of these treatises as having a negative impact on nō and particularly on the improvisational qualities of nō.

Will the performance actually be appropriate for this audience? An actor needs to include that kind of information. He’ll look around and ask: What are the needs of the current audience? Like Zeami, when he thought that something was necessary, he changed it for the audience. He put more time and effort into making it good. In the Meiji period the voices of the critics infringed upon nō actors. Before that time, there was more freedom. In the past, even for Izutsu [a play in the nō repertoire that is often cited as an ideal example of the beauty of nō], they could change the performance . . . In the Meiji period Teachings on the Flower came out and the form hardened, it become more rigid. Now we’re just tied down by Teachings on the Flower. (Matsui 2009)

Matsui implies that Teachings on the Flower establishes particular ways of performing nō as correct, thereby inhibiting nō actors from creating innovation in nō. This is in some ways a surprising critique, because Teachings on the Flower does not contain specific instructions on how to perform individual plays. However, it does provide extensive guidance on how to train a student in the art of nō, how to entertain particular audiences, and how to perform monomane (dramatic imitation) (Hare 2008: 26–37). Matsui is suggesting that the written record disrupts the power of a living art held in the body. Without the wide availability of these treatises, the actors and their interpretations of nō could define the art. The written record, and perhaps even the idea of a widely available written record, creates a baseline against which performances can be measured in degrees of correctness. For Matsui, the embrace of a written record of Zeami’s art hinders new conceptions for the possibilities of nō.

Matsui’s unique relationship to the art of nō is demonstrated by his unusual path to becoming a professional nō actor, his deep involvement in both revival nō and new nō, and his renunciation of the written treatises on nō. In each of these cases, he has rejected those forces that work toward capturing and preserving nō in a particular state, and embraced those forces that allow nō to evolve through performance. This dedication to change and innovation that we have examined in Matsui’s relationship to the body of art called nō is perhaps even more striking in his relationship to performing nō as an actor. His definition of nō is any performance made with the nō actor’s body and is elucidated by his personal approach to the performance of nō.

Matsui’s study of nō began in early childhood, and nō is his pri-
mary performance mode. But his performance technique and philosophy are also influenced by other traditional Japanese art forms such as kabuki, bunraku, and gagaku, as well as modern dance, classical ballet, and music composition. In particular, he cites the work of Martha Graham and Vaslav Nijinsky as key influences on his understanding of performance. John Oglevee, a Tokyo-based actor and founding member of Theatre Nohgaku, describes the result of Matsui’s diverse influences: “Because of his many experiences in work outside of nō, his approach to performance more closely resembles that of a contemporary theatre artist than most other no-gakushi reaching beyond the nō butai (stage). He has an insatiable appetite for all kinds of theatre and rather than being limited by the minimalistic movement of nō, he uses his knowledge and experience to enhance his experimentation with other forms” (email communication with authors, 14 March 2013). These influences inform Matsui’s willingness to innovate nō and collaborate with artists internationally. “I’ve always liked performances more than nō, because I was never supposed to be a nō-gakushi (professional nō actor). I went to kabuki theatre and classical ballet. Because of that, I’m able to do my current activities” (Matsui 2009). His distinctive work reflects a synergy of transnational and interdisciplinary influences interpreted and performed through the nō actor’s body.

Wherever he performs, Matsui strives to make each show distinctive by performing with a unique tuchigusasa (“smell of the earth”). This concept—unpolished or unrefined qualities specific to a certain place—emerged during the Edo period when feudal lords had their own nō troupes and the lord’s preferences in style and movement encouraged differences among the troupes, even when they were performing the same nō play. Matsui points out that this “smell of the earth” has now largely disappeared. He attributes this to DVDs and visual aids that unify movements and styles within the schools, resulting in a lack of variation. This is compounded by the reading of written treatises discussed earlier. The vitality of Matsui’s performance is due in part to his commitment to keep this “smell of the earth” alive by tailoring it to specific audiences.

One part of Matsui’s “smell of the earth” in his English nō performances is to make what he calls “new movements.” These new movements are an interpretation of movements from ballet and other performance forms through his nō-cultivated performance technique. Due to the codified kata, it is relatively straightforward to distinguish nō movements from non-nō movements. In September 2002, Matsui performed in an English nō version of William Butler Yeats’s At the Hawk’s Well with the English nō troupe Theatre Nohgaku. When Matsui performed the hawk in this production, he incorporated ballet move-
ments, such as a plié with the legs while the hands are above the head. He also included horizontal movements across the stage, with his body facing the audience, which is never seen in nō. Other non-nō movements included crossing his right leg in front of his left leg and tilting his body toward the left with his arms raised.

Matsui argues that even when he includes ballet movement and other non-nō movement in his performance, he is still performing nō. Because he does not have training in ballet, he would never be able to successfully imitate a ballet dancer. His performance is nō because of the way he uses his body—his hip movements and center of gravity, for example—and because of the internal aspects of his performance. “I did perform [At the Hawk’s Well] interestingly [by moving sideways], but my movements are still nō-like. I don’t carry the same kind of weight that ballet dancers carry, nor do I perform the hip movements of ballet... The difference is in how I bring forth the movement, how I reveal and communicate [the art with the audience]” (Matsui 2009). Matsui is a bearer of the form of nō both internally and externally. Even when he adapts some ballet movements, he is performing with the artistry of a professional nō actor, and this makes the performance nō.

Matsui creates and employs these “new movements” to grab the attention of the audience and is interpreting non-nō movements through his nō-cultivated body and aesthetic sensibility. Matsui employs kata that he thinks are appropriate, carefully chosen and specific to different productions; Matsui points out that while he employed “new movements” shaped by ballet in At the Hawk’s Well, he expressly avoided ballet influenced movements in the newly created nō about noted author Murasaki Shikibu (978–1014?). However, only those aware of these varying dance forms are able to identify the lineage of movements. Matsui points out that in these works he is in a liminal space of balancing nō aesthetics with non-nō movements. For Matsui, these non-nō movements are interpreted through his nō-cultivated body, which brings the performance into the category of nō.

One example Matsui gives of this liminal space between nō and non-nō movements is his recent performance of Samuel Beckett’s Rockabye on 18 July 2011 (Fig. 2). This performance celebrated the thirtieth anniversary of Jonah Salz and Shigeyama Akira’s NOHO Theatre Group. In Rockabye, which Matsui performs on an ongoing basis, Matsui wears a nō mask and costumes to play the old lady in the rocking chair. On stage with him is a woman narrator in black, reading the text in Japanese. When Matsui performs this work abroad, the narrator recites the story in the local language. In this way, the hurdle of connecting with an audience that does not speak Japanese is overcome. In Rockabye, Matsui incorporates a number of non-nō movements, such as sit-
ting in a rocking chair and dropping his head to represent his character’s death. He also includes kabuki hand movements according to the position and shape of the hands on the legs while sitting seiza (on his knees). Again, for Matsui, when he incorporates these new movements from outside of nō, they are brought within the realm of nō (Matsui 2011). Yet they challenge the boundaries of nō, bringing a dynamic tension to the performance. The “smell of the earth” or distinctive quality that Matsui brings to these performances is created in part by embracing multiple performance traditions.

But even when Matsui is performing traditional nō, he approaches his work on stage with a similar spirit. He points out that although new variant performances like Motoakira’s are rarely created these days, there are modifications, additions, and surprises within the
Innovation in Nō plays, which are planned by the lead actor in advance. Matsui describes the audience of traditional nō as a sophisticated audience, the majority of whom are amateur students of nō. This audience is familiar with both the song and the dance of the plays. Matsui makes alterations to the prescribed movement patterns of a nō in order to surprise the audience and bring his subtle changes to the form of nō. He both devises these changes himself and draws from changes other nō actors have made.

Matsui’s approach is well demonstrated by the following examples. He often retells the story of a performance from twenty years ago at a shimin nō (community nō performance) in Wakayama Prefecture, where he danced as the shite (main role) of the nō play Semimaru (Matsui 2013). An iguse (where the body is still while the thought or chanting continues) requires the lead actor to hold a seated position during a kuse (central narration portion of a nō). During the iguse of Semimaru, Matsui suddenly got up from his seated seiza position and danced. He had previously seen his teacher Kita Minoru dance during the iguse of the same nō, and by watching he had memorized the kata. While he did not devise the dance pattern, he had learned the dance and was able to decide on the spur of the moment to get up from his seated position and perform it. Matsui tells this story with the punch line that he made the on-the-spot decision to get up and dance because his feet, sitting seiza, started to hurt.

At the monthly Kita school performance on 24 May 2009, Matsui performed the shite (main role) in Nue (Monkey-Headed Monster) and surprised the audience with an unexpected movement sequence. Just before exiting the stage, near the agemaku (curtain), Matsui jumped, turned, and landed on the hashigakari (bridgeway) with his legs crossed over one another. Kita school performer and Living National Treasure Tomoe Akiyo (1940–) popularized this sequence of movements and performed them in a different nō. Matsui knew Tomoe’s movement sequence and decided to apply it to Nue. In this way, Matsui shows support for the innovations other shite actors bring to nō and demonstrates that the form is flexible.

When asked whether it is possible to do new things within traditional nō, Matsui replied, “You can. It’s only about the issue of the heart. When I perform traditional nō there are times when I think about the opposite, I playfully taunt the audience.” Since professional nō actors sell tickets to their students, the audience has a high level of familiarity with nō. So, I put some work into it and think of these things before the performance, but I also improvise on the spot” (Matsui 2009). Through both planning and improvisation, Matsui brings creative change even to the performance of traditional nō, tailoring each performance to its audience.
In addition to performing traditional nō, variant nō, revival nō, newly created nō, and English nō, Matsui also engages in interdisciplinary collaborations and transnational performances. With interdisciplinary works staged in Japan, Matsui navigates the internal politics of the nō world at the same time as he explores the creative challenges of working across disciplines. On 10 October 2008, Matsui performed in Burning Passion, a Tale of Genji-based show in which Matsui performed nō-based movements on stage with dancers doing tango movements at Yūport Hall in Gotanda, Tokyo. Posters advertising this event showed Matsui’s picture, but the alias Suda Fūsetsu was used in the place of his name (Fig. 3). This was to avoid censure from the Nōgaku Performers Association, which wishes to exercise some degree of control over the venues, types of performance, and activities of professional nō actors. Performing under an alias successfully avoids criticism from the nō world, but it also comes at a cost. Matsui is a respected and admired performer whose name can sell seats in a theatre. Performing under an alias detracts from ticket sales. It also diminishes the professional opportunities, such as additional performances, positive reviews, and greater recognition that a well-received performance might engender.

The use of an alias in promotions for the Burning Passion is evidence of the careful balance between Matsui’s work as an independent artist and his professional nō career. His eagerness to collaborate internationally is due in part to an interest in finding opportunities for greater creative freedom. Nō actors performing abroad can collaborate, collage, and stage excerpts of nō in ways that would attract criticism in Tokyo. While not being from a nō family was a hurdle for Matsui in the early phases of his career, it can also be seen as an opportunity for creative freedom; Matsui is not pressured to uphold a family name or reputation. Oglevee explains:

Beneficial to his relative freedom within the nō world, is the fact that he does not come from a prominent nō family. Therefore, beyond the typical expectation of performing at an acceptable level for a professional nōgakushi, he has never had to live up to his father’s expectations. To compound this, when he left Tokyo to return to Wakayama in the 1970’s he was no longer under the constant scrutiny of his peers. If we look at many of his contemporaries who have ventured into contemporary performance, most have the burden of representing both the reputation of the form and the name of their family. (email communication with authors, 14 March 2013)

In 2011 Matsui performed in another innovative collaboration that joined nō units of technique with flamenco dance. The advertisement for this production used Matsui’s real name and noted his nō
This performance, based on the Tale of Genji, incorporated both tango and nō. This flyer uses two images of Matsui, one in the center in a nō mask and the second image in the right-hand row of portrait shots. The flyer uses the alias Suda Fūsetsu to refer to Matsui.
affiliation (Plate 5). However, this performance was in Wakayama, far from the watchful eyes of the nō establishment.

Matsui understands that just as the limits of acceptability in nō begin to shift outside of Tokyo, the definition of nō begins to shift outside of Japan. For example, the term nō is employed and understood differently in North America than it is in Japan. Theatre communities and artists in North America employ the term nō broadly. Works that connect with the tradition of nō or that employ the nō kata in radically different contexts and situations are sometimes referred to as nō, “nō-inspired,” or “nō-influenced.” Theatre of Yugen in San Francisco, founded by Yuriko Doi and now run by Jubilith Moore, offers lessons and training in nō and kyōgen. Their recent production of Eric Ehn’s Cordelia retold Shakespeare’s King Lear by focusing on the third daughter’s perspective. Moore has extensive training in nō and played the lead role. Her movement, acting, and vocal style reflected units of nō with some changes. There were significant departures from nō in the lack of a waki (supporting actor) and in the use of Western musical instrumentation. A description on the company website names the production a “modern nō” and states that “Cordelia continues the tradition of nō as much as it transforms it” (Theatre of Yugen 2011). Another recent Theatre of Yugen production, Minor Cycle: Five Little Plays in One Starry Night by Greg Giovanni, employs aspects of multiple Japanese performance forms to tell children’s stories and poems from Western European traditions. In Theatre of Yugen: 25 Years, a Retrospective (Ehn 2004), the company describes its work as “nō-influenced.” Contemporary poet Leslie Scalapino was part of a 2004 collaboration with Kita school nō actor Uchida Anshin (1936–). She later wrote a three-voice poem that she describes as “a noh” (Scalapino and Grinnell 2008). However, the poem shows only the most tenuous connections to nō. To varying degrees, the term nō in these cases is used to differentiate other kinds of performance from Western spoken drama. It is used to indicate otherness and difference from Western theatre traditions, without a strict concern for how closely (or distantly) the work adheres to the tradition of nō in Japan. However, in Japan, scholars and members of the nō establishment do not consider theatre that employs only certain aspects of nō to fall within the tradition of nō. Rather than being constrained by these differences, Matsui uses them as an opportunity to explore the boundary between nō and non-nō. He performs nō outside of Japan and performs in collaborations that are not strictly nō inside of Japan, all the time feeling that, for him, whatever he performs on stage is nō.

Matsui’s ability to push the edges of nō allows him to adjust his acting according to the rhythm and movements of other genres. When
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collaborating with other genres such as tango, flamenco, kathakali, and Balinese dancing, he is able to help other dancers move by dancing to their rhythm. For many of the international dance genres, dancers need a specific rhythm (tempo) to dance, which makes it a challenge for them to feel and understand the internal sense of time and space informed by the Japanese aesthetic called ma (space). Furthermore, dancers in most of these genres are unable to dance to the rhythm of nō, which can be too slow for them. In these collaborations Matsui’s versatility can be profoundly displayed. “To me, the movement of nō is flexible and able to adjust to different genres, which I realized as I began to collaborate with performers in other genres” (Matsui 2011). These collaborations also changed how Matsui views nō. “I used to think nō was a boring form that didn’t move much, but by working with other genres, I have learned about nō’s flexibility and potential” (Matsui 2011). Moore, the artistic director of Theatre of Yugen, states that Matsui “recognizes nō’s inaccessibility for a Western audience” (telephone conversation with authors, 13 March 2013). Matsui draws on his understanding of the flexibility of nō to make a connection.

Matsui’s embrace of the dynamic potentials of nō within collaboration makes him a rare find for international directors. Theatre director Eugenio Barba (1936–) is well known for contemporary productions that combine multiple performance traditions from various world cultures. Matsui collaborated with Eugenio Barba in Ur-Hamlet. The project was developed through Barba’s International School of Theatre Anthropology (ISTA) and staged in 2006 at the Elsinore (Kornberg) castle in Denmark (Schino 2013). Matsui performed with a cast of ninety international performers that included a large gambu group from Batuan, Bali, organized by Cristina Wistari Formaggia (1945–2008) as well as performers from Switzerland, the Netherlands, Brazil, Turkey, Mexico, Colombia, Denmark, and so on. Barba’s Ur-Hamlet was based on Vita Amlethi (Life of Hamlet, ca. 1200) by Saxo Grammaticus, which is thought to be a source for Shakespeare’s Hamlet. In this case the Ur marks the story as a precursor to Hamlet and also evokes Barba’s concept of intercultural performance that unearths a basic and preexisting shared emotional language (Barba 2009).

Matsui performed aspects of nō in Ur-Hamlet in his roles as both the Queen of Rats (see Plate 6) and Hamlet’s foster brother (Fig. 4). The performance took place outdoors on grass, which precluded one of the most central and basic movements of nō, the suriashi (walking step where the foot slides on the wooden floor). Matsui did, however, use movements of nō such as the basic kamae (nō stance). The internal energy and subtle movement of nō gain intensity through eliciting the focused attention of its audience. This attention is customarily chan-
neled in part by a sparse set and a contained stage area limited by a roof and side pillars of a traditional stage. But here, performing nō outside, without this contained stage, generally limits the ability of the actor working with the stage space to control the energy of the performance. However, the multiple performance forms, particularly the more ornate and externally energetic costumes and movements of the gambuh group from Batuan, Bali, contrasted with Matsui’s nō in a way that created a different kind of frame. This contrast of Balinese brightness and activity against Matsui’s nō in the same production helped to emphasize the subtle movements and internal qualities of nō.
While much of the meaning and affect of traditional nō is lost in this kind of performance, Matsui always maintains the inner focus of a nō actor. At the same time, he draws from a diversity of influences to create a dynamic performance in this new context. Matsui’s Ur-Hamlet performance would not fall within a strict definition of nō as cited earlier by Yamanaka. Matsui, however, manages a tenuous balance: he offers a performance created through his cultivated nō body, but he is also responsive to the energies of performers in other genres who share the transnational stage.

Matsui’s ongoing creative relationship with Barba requires him to perform at the edges of nō’s formal qualities, interacting with the other performance traditions sharing the stage. Matsui describes a conversation with Barba in the development of Ur-Hamlet. “Eugenio Barba said to me, ‘Akira, I don’t want to see you act. The other performers want to see you do nō. However, I don’t know nō, so I don’t want to see nō. I want to see you walk that fine line [between nō and non-nō]’” (Matsui 2011). This method of collaboration requires Matsui to maintain his internal aesthetic of nō, but with enough flexibility to merge with other performance traditions. Oglevee articulates Matsui’s approach—that of maintaining internal aspects of nō—as “applying nō’s concepts to different forms, rather than applying the form of nō to different concepts” (telephone conversation with authors, 13 March 2013). Matsui describes this challenge as walking a fine line between nō and not-nō. If he leans too far one way, his performance becomes an excerpt or a quotation from nō. If he leans too far the other way, he becomes an actor rather than a nō actor. His goal is to perform in a way that can support interdisciplinary work, while still having his performance embody the aesthetic values and performance energy of nō. This is a creative challenge that Matsui embraces (Matsui 2011).

The directors Matsui works with internationally might be interested in nō, but their knowledge of the art is generally limited. By working internationally, Matsui employs his knowledge of modern and contemporary European and American arts as a means of communication: “Specifically when I am working with a director internationally, I can verbalize performance aspects by citing these works. I can verbalize something as ‘similar to Swan Lake’ for example” (Matsui 2009). In Matsui’s work with Barba, the shared knowledge is through a Western art vocabulary. However, in order for an artistic collaboration to be successful, there needs to be an exchange. Matsui is teaching his collaborators about nō while using their theatre vocabulary to make new work.

Matsui is sensitive to the creative process of working with a director, a role that is not part of traditional nō. “When I do fusion work, there is always a director, and the director always teaches me
something. He looks [at my movement and acting] from an amateur point of view and comments on my performance since he doesn’t know much about nō. He or she is knowledgeable about movies and theatre but isn’t knowledgeable about traditional Japanese art forms” (Matsui 2009). Matsui’s role becomes one not only of performing but also of educating the director and other performers about the possibilities of nō. This requires patience, diplomacy, and flexibility from Matsui.

In this situation, I say that I am a shōgi (Japanese chess) piece. According to what is said to me, I can flip over and become gold. I can be stronger, I can be weaker, or I can be taken away. From my side, I don’t say “This is how it is, this is how nō is.” After the director tells me how to do it, I do as instructed. He or she says, “Oh, this is nō, this is what you have in nō?” and I say “No, this is not what we have in nō.” The director then says, “Well then, what do you do in nō?” and I show them. (Matsui 2009)

In this chess piece metaphor Matsui reveals his view of the nō actor’s body as a versatile tool that can change in strength, value, and presence as it adapts to direction.

Matsui’s approach to the performance of nō is a living force made up of the many elements that have been discussed here. He employs the nō concept of “smell of the earth,” tailoring every performance he does to its audience and using improvisation and personal expression to imbue it with a distinctive flavor, whether it is squarely within the tradition of nō or far outside it. Drawing on the dance and theater forms outside of nō that have influenced him as a performer, he incorporates “new movements” into his nō that he performs as nō, though they are not traditional nō movements. Matsui participates in collaborations across forms and national boundaries, both learning from non-nō forms and directors and influencing them by teaching them about nō. Yet because he believes that nō resides in the nō actor’s body, all of his performances are nō. He is a living example of this concept, and he performs his definition of nō every time he takes the stage. In this way, Matsui personally embodies the tradition of change through performance that has always been a part of nō, but he also advances this tradition, expanding the boundaries of nō in all of his work. By inhabiting the liminal space between nō and non-nō Matsui transforms, like a flipping chess piece, the values, meanings, and locations of multiple performance traditions, including nō. He is making something new that is nonetheless shaped by the long tradition of nō, and by the ways that the form of nō is imprinted and carried in his body.
NOTES

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1. The play is named after the Unrin’in temple in Kyoto.
3. The company Theatre Nohgaku specializes in English nō and has staged new plays in English based on the structures and kata of traditional nō in the United States, Canada, Australia, and Britain. Matsui Akira regularly performs with Theatre Nohgaku.
5. Teachings on the Flower was published in 1909 by Yoshida Tōgo (Nishino and Hata 2011: 315). At this time small changes were made to the text to make it accessible to modern readers.
7. Matsui used the term akkanbe to describe this playful taunting. Akkanbe is a funny face made by pulling down one eyelid and sticking out the tongue.

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