

Winter 2007

## Review of "Theatre of Yugen, 25 Years: A Retrospective. Edited by Erik Ehn

Judy Halebsky

University of California, Davis, [judy.halebsky@dominican.edu](mailto:judy.halebsky@dominican.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholar.dominican.edu/all-faculty>



Part of the [Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Halebsky, Judy, "Review of "Theatre of Yugen, 25 Years: A Retrospective. Edited by Erik Ehn" (2007). *Collected Faculty and Staff Scholarship*. 257.

<http://scholar.dominican.edu/all-faculty/257>

### DOI

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/atj.2007.0011>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty and Staff Scholarship at Dominican Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Collected Faculty and Staff Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Dominican Scholar. For more information, please contact [michael.pujals@dominican.edu](mailto:michael.pujals@dominican.edu).

In part 2 of the book, Quinn demonstrates the impact of this new aesthetic on the material performed. Zeami's deepening appreciation of allusive language to pique the interest of sophisticated audiences led him to create a more literary theatre in which graceful language would be smoothly embodied by skilled actors with a poetic sensibility. Quinn illustrates this through a comprehensive analysis of Zeami's play *Takasago*. She provides not only detailed insights into composition and structure of *nō* plays, but also reveals the allusive interconnectedness between literary text and performance, "An echo chamber of allusions," as she puts it (p. 7). This is an extraordinary piece of work as Quinn combines in-depth literary analysis with detailed explication of Zeami's compositional methods while making comparisons with earlier *waka* and *renga* commentaries along the way. Through Quinn's analysis, one sees the multivalent nature of metaphor in *nō* in which action and language signify multiple meanings. The linguistic and literary analysis reveals the method, process, and poetics of Zeami's dramaturgy through illuminating illustrations of *nō* texts (helpfully presented as side-by-side English translations with *romanji*).

In the final section of the book Quinn looks deeply into *Kyū'i*, Zeami's late treatise on actor training. The discussion of the "nine levels" of accomplishment elucidates the relationship between Zeami's Buddhist imagery and its practical application to the work of the actor. Quinn also reveals Zeami's deep understanding of Buddhist and Daoist conceptions of "being" and "non-being" and the way he linked these ideas to matters of acting technique and "attunement" with the audience.

There is much more to this volume than can be treated here. Literary, linguistic, historical, aesthetic, and philosophical aspects of Zeami's theories about acting and dramaturgy are all explored in admirable detail. The annotated translations of *Sandō* and *Takasago*, an extensive character glossary of the many Japanese names and terms, an excellent bibliography, an index, and nearly a hundred pages of detailed endnotes provide valuable resources for scholars and students of *nō*. The book may also be of interest to students of Japanese language, history, and culture. Although it is certainly not an acting manual, this book that deeply examines some of the most profound aspects of the acting process could be inspiring for advanced students and teachers of acting, especially when read in conjunction with Zeami's treatises.

MARGARET COLDIRON  
*University of Reading*

**THEATRE OF YUGEN, 25 YEARS: A RETROSPECTIVE.** Edited by Erik Ehn. San Francisco: Theatre of Yugen, 2004. 115 pp. Paper \$25.00; institutions \$15.00.

*Theatre of Yugen, 25 Years*, edited by American playwright and a theatre collaborator Erik Ehn, documents how a Japanese theatre practice of *nō* and *kyōgen* through the work of director Yuriko Doi took root in San Francisco. It

notes the struggles, adaptations, and transformations that enabled these arts to bloom in American soil.

A central issue in the work of Theatre of Yugen is a constant negotiation of location. This begins with straightforward issues of Doi's move from Japan to the United States in 1967 and the company's nomadic existence before procuring their NOHspace theatre in 1991. More figuratively, the shifting included movement between classical *kyōgen/nō* training and performance with the Nomura family of Japan and innovative adaptations of European tales in works such as *Frankenstein* (October 2004) and *Nō Christmas Carol* (December 1993). The struggle of negotiating location—culturally, physically, and theatrically—is reflected in a chronology of the theatre's production history. Productions are divided into six categories: classic *kyōgen*, modern *kyōgen*, modern or experimental *nō*, fusion, contemporary Japanese, and contemporary American (p. 37).

The work of the company is continually renamed, relabeled, and reframed. The company has sustained a rich body of work for twenty-five years, thus the lack of a definitive location reflects the unique mission of the company and an American resistance to allowing Japanese performance techniques into the canon of practical theatre methods.

In an interview with Ehn, Doi confronts the critics who suggest that the company meet audience expectations by speeding up the pace and by employing naturalized speech rather than the stylized vocal techniques of *nō/kyōgen*. Doi is teaching in two directions: she is training actors but also educating audiences to access the form without adjusting to Western expectations of performance.

This book commemorates Doi's long career as the director and founder of the theatre, but also shares with the audience and theatre community the formal and aesthetic qualities of Theatre of Yugen productions. There is a section that defines key terms in the practice of Japanese performance such as the effervescent beauty of *yugen* and aesthetic build from beginning to climax to resolution in *nō's jo-ha-kyū*. There are also sections on training, production history, and tours the company has made. Contained within this is a history of the international practice of *nō/kyōgen* and insight into the performance philosophy of the art.

The book juxtaposes the first mission statement of the company with a more recent version. The early statement reflected the theatre's aim of fusion theatre within the forms of *nō* and *kyōgen*, celebrating the work of the theatre as "the only company in the United States that exclusively performs the 600 year-old *Noh* and *Kyogen* styles of theatre" (p. 7). The recent mission statement of fostering "intercultural understanding" reflects a change from the fusion of two delineated locations to a more liminal and fluid aim.

Much like *nō*, *Theatre of Yugen, 25 Years* is full of dreams and images. Erik Ehn, designer Libby Zilber, and contributing writers document the development of Yuriko Doi's company in San Francisco through performance histories, personal stories, and humorous anecdotes, illuminated by stunning photographs. Though at first glance this might seem like a decorative coffee

table commemoration of the company, the book is much more. The pages offer great understanding of the work of theatre practitioners in the United States who are cultivating contemporary theatre through a sustained, embodied practice of *nō/kyōgen*.

JUDY HALEBSKY  
*University of California, Davis*

**UNSPEAKABLE ACTS: THE AVANT-GARDE THEATRE OF TERAYAMA SHŪJI AND POSTWAR JAPAN.** By Carol Fisher Sorgenfrei. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005. 335 pp. Hardcover \$48.00.

As an artist and person, Terayama Shūji (1937–1983) was, and will likely remain, enigmatic to people both inside and outside Japan. The ambiguities and seeming paradoxes in his work and life are highly charged examples of those that have always been found in Japanese society and culture. This long awaited book by Carol Fisher Sorgenfrei will go far toward helping an English-speaking readership explore Terayama's complexities, go beyond the essentializing and paradoxical binaries that are so often used to explain both Terayama and Japan, and move toward a better understanding of the theoretical, practical, and cultural aspects that make Terayama's, and much of Japan's, theatre enigmatic and provocative. In describing and analyzing Terayama's efforts to "expand the boundaries of" art (p. 4), Sorgenfrei provides a more nuanced way to view Japan.

Held up for years because of a dispute over Terayama's literary estate, *Unspeakable Acts* fills a void in Japanese theatre scholarship on a major figure from the politically, socially, and artistically turbulent 1960s and 1970s. Terayama, in addition to his role as theatrical playwright/director, was also a poet, photographer, and filmmaker. Like practitioners such as Kara Jūrō and Satoh Makoto, Terayama was arguably the "baddest" of the "bad boys" who worked in the 1960s *angura* (underground) theatre scene. These artists constructed counterculture personas. Kara and Satoh's personas were explicitly political and therefore fairly well defined, but much of what made Terayama so "bad" and enigmatic was his insistence on making his persona apolitical. The book explains two important foundations of the ambiguity in Terayama's persona.

First, it provides a thorough overview of Terayama's activities in the theatre and related genres, translations of some of his theoretical writings on theatre, and texts of three of his important plays. Second, it attempts to elaborate on concepts that are often simplified into dichotomies. Then Sorgenfrei synthesizes various social, psychological, and performance theories into a methodology that addresses intricate aspects of Japanese society, thought, and theatre. As a result, the book should be useful to both those interested in Japanese theatre and those whose interest lies more in Japanese aesthetics as a whole.