
ANCHORING THE VERBAL IMAGE IN NOH AND SHAKESPEAREAN THEATRE

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Abstract: This paper investigates how verbal images are anchored in acting. It focuses on the concretisation of the actor's imagination and the possibilities of relating the declamation and gestures to the stage disposition and the theatre's location in the city. Two models are used – Noh and Shakespearean theatre.

Key words: verbal image, gesture, declamation, space, accuracy, concretisation, Zeami, Noh theatre, Shakespeare, Elizabethans

Comparative thinking often allows us to notice differences but hardly ever to see similarities. When comparing European and Oriental theatre, usually only unclear matters are dealt with. Moreover, Western theatre, which has undergone an immense development throughout history since ancient times, is only rarely strictly defined in such debates. What usually stands on the other side of the comparison is a particular fixed theatrical form – for instance, Noh theatre.¹ These two are compared with a certain intention in mind: for a century, the Oriental tradition has been mostly used as a means to criticise contemporary European theatre and give it an impulse for further development.

What is necessary is an approach that strives to overcome this contrastive thinking. If we understand Shakespearean studies concentrating on the reconstruction of the Elizabethan theatrical space as a step back from the doctrine of illusionism, there is a common denominator between Shakespearean theatre and Noh.²

Both forms can be characterised as a theatre of poetry, rich costumes and a relatively stable stage disposition. The character of acting in both forms was determined by the exclusively male cast. Although in English the etymology of the word “theatre” goes back to the Greek term *theatron*, the visitors are referred to as the “audience”. This suggests that the theatre was rather auditive in form at the time when the word was coined in the language. In contrast, the Slovak terms *hl'adisko* and *diváci* are optical; they underline the visual character of theatre.

¹ Kabuki can serve as a counterpart to Elizabethan theatre as well. Kabuki is viewed as entirely different from Noh. Should the two forms be compared, it could be stated that Noh is to Kabuki what Gothic is to Baroque. This kind of comparison is bound to be relative, so it is important to remember its limits. The principal limit is the spacial discontinuity of the Japanese and the British theatre cultures. From the temporal point of view, Shakespeare wrote in a period between the rise of Noh and the rise of Kabuki. Thus, it is possible to approximate Shakespeare and Kabuki. This was achieved by the director Ariane Mnouchkine, who staged Shakespeare's histories.

² The rise of Noh theatre is dated to the Muromachi period (室町時代) 1333–1573 (shoguns of the Ashikaga shogunate). The fixing of the form comes only with the Edo period (江戸時代), i.e. the period of the reign of the Tokugawa shoguns (徳川時代) 1603–1868.

In spite of its distinctive auditive dimension, Elizabethan drama³ did not leave any unoccupied space comparable to a radio play – the stage action did contain conflicting situations. On the other hand, Shakespeare's plays were written in such a way that their content could not be fully realised only by action. A lot of the space in his plays is dedicated to pure poetry and within it to the verbal image. If the function of Greek drama was to transform the movements of the human soul, Elizabethan drama developed imagination. In addition, it taught the audience to speak. It refined this skill, which began to develop from the enthusiasm for things beautifully said.

The sophistication of the Shakespearean metaphor is already apparent when reading his plays. However, only the knowledge of the theatre space where Shakespeare's words were uttered for the first time allows us to examine the anchoring of the verbal image.⁴ What did the Shakespearean verbal image relate to? To the urban location and the disposition of the space. To a live light of the celestial bodies – it was enough to evoke them verbally. The plays were performed in daylight, but the painted ceiling, depicting the sky with zodiac signs, could serve as a point of reference for the night scenes. The Heavens had a counterpart in "Hell", or a trapdoor. This represented the world order borrowed from sacral architecture. Three doors evoked the space division present in the Byzantine sacral space.

The so called "Pillars of Hercules," which supported the ceiling of the stage, marked the end of the world in the ancient understanding. Verbal evocations of new territories were related to this important stage element. Here, Shakespeare dreams yet remains standing firmly on the ground: "when the searching eye of heaven is hid, / Behind the globe, that lights the lower world, / Then thieves and robbers range abroad unseen / In murders and in outrage, boldly here."⁵ On the one hand, the beauty of this image shifts the imagery of the play towards the transcendental and on the other hand roots it in a nearby everyday reality – the thieves and robbers are local, from Bankside. Some adventurers may be in the audience, probably standing in the yard.

The audience at the Globe Theatre was seated according to social hierarchy; the actor could turn to the lords sitting in the galleries or to the standing poor. If the actor made a few steps towards the river or imagined the theatre space without the surrounding walls, across the Thames, he would see the Tower on the right and Westminster Abbey on the left. Near the theatre on the right side, he would see Southwark Cathedral. It is my intention to mention only the buildings that still exist today.

The horrors of imprisonment in the Tower and compassion with the convicts were very close and easily imaginable for the actor standing on the Globe's stage. In *Henry VIII* Shakespeare writes that "hoods make no monks."⁶ This Shakespearean contrast to the well-known "clothes make the man" could have been addressed to the opposite side, the Blackfriars Monastery. The actor could not see the buildings, but he knew where they were: he took their position into account when making his

³ Elizabeth I 1558–1603, William Shakespeare 1564–1616.

⁴ Reflections of this kind are encouraged by the stained glass cycles of Southwark Cathedral in the vicinity of the Globe Theatre. One of the scenes depicts a procession from Canterbury, as if coming from the surrounding streets with historical names. A separate cycle of stained glass placed above the sculpture of the lying Shakespeare in this sacral building is dedicated to the characters from his plays.

⁵ *Richard II*, Act 3, Scene 2.

⁶ *Henry VIII*, Act 3, Scene 1.



Spatial support of a Shakesperean actor's gesture, London 1616

declamation. His gestures could be as accurate as a compass and thus convincing. The Elizabethan audience shared the knowledge of the surroundings. They could relate what they heard to what they had seen or experienced previously: they were familiar with the situation which formed the background of the original Shakesperean verbal image.

Shakespeare's theatre began to stage its performances in a space owned by the Dominicans (their name "Blackfriars" was based on their black clothing). Their number did not reach the figures from the time of their boom, and thus they offered part of their premises to be used for other purposes. The Globe, just like other theatres, found a stable place on the riverbank of the Thames, amongst the poor and all phenomena connected with poverty. Shakespeare's theatre wanted to embrace the world; they played in such a way for everybody to find something enjoyable in their performances.

II

Similarly, Noh theatre had a space at the river at its disposal. In the past the actors were called "beggars from the river". This unsafe area with the potential for flooding had a rather central position. Parallels exist between the urban locations of both Noh and Elizabethan theatre. The social stratification in the surrounding area is similar as well; in both cases, it was full of the poor, vagrants and prostitutes. In contrast, Noh theatre was occasionally played in temple courtyards and, as it gained in importance, its connection with Buddhism became stronger.

The meanings of the individual parts of the inner structure of Noh theatre⁷ are based on the Kyoto topoi. The *hashigakari* bridge in the western part of the theatre space represents a road which often leads to the city of Kyoto. When walking in the opposite direction, the actors get to Paradise. There is the *Fukuoka* mountain at the back (in the north), the *Tobe* plain in the south (at the front), the *Kamo* river in the west (right) and so on.

The mountain protects the actor's back. The moon is represented by a fan, con-

⁷ "east – left – spring – blue – dragon – water stream
south – forehead – summer – red – Phoenix's gate – plain
west – right – autumn – white – tiger – mountain
north – back – winter – black – tortoise – the great western road" In Komparu, Kunio: *The Noh Theatre. Principles and Perspectives*. New York – Tokyo – Kyoto, 1983, p. 116. ISBN-8347-1529-X.

stituting a really perceptible celestial body. The river offers a point of reference for the actor's narration about a river in the underworld. In the narration there are three fords in the river, each of a different depth. A deceased man must cross the river using the ford which corresponds to the severity of his sins or the level of redemption of his soul.

In Noh theatre further metaphysical images are realised by consensual metaphors. At the end of the performance, which invariably concludes by setting the character free from his clinging to the ephemeral world, the actor returns to the western paradise using the very same bridge. In this sign system, the vertical stratification of the space has not found any significant use. For instance, in the play *Dōjōji*, the character is hiding in a hanging bell and the woman-demon does not walk off but rolls off the stage after her defeat. This means that in Noh theatre the lowest position along the vertical axis corresponds to that which can be achieved by an expression of the human body. Unlike kabuki or the Elizabethans, Noh theatre does not intensify the expression by using impressive scenographic means.

The image of the mountains in the Noh theatre space is accentuated by a pine painting on the back wall of the stage, the image of the river by the painted bamboos on its right side. When a boat is being evoked on the stage (as in the play *Sumidagawa*), the passengers sit down one behind another along the bamboo wall and face the audience. This represents sailing down the river lined with bamboos on the bank.

III

As can be seen, the inner structures of the Elizabethan theatre space and the Noh theatre space reveal some similarities. The most important parallels can be seen in the fact that both theatres perform in daylight and they relate the verbal image to a static stage disposition and the respective theatre's urban and geographical location.

When similarities in the social stratification of the audience are identified, differences must not be forgotten either. In Japan everything of worth eventually becomes a tradition. In Shakespeare's time (at the beginning of the Edo period), this was the case with Noh theatre: the form experienced a codification among the samurai. In contrast, the upswing of Elizabethan theatre was replaced by bans on acting.⁸

In Zeami's and Shakespeare's works, we encounter a different sense of space and a different experience of the known world: the Elizabethan actor faces the part of the River Thames which flows into a harbour. From there, Albion discovers India, Africa and America, and thus overcomes the formerly known world order.

When Noh theatre came into existence, China represented the most distant world. This is also evidenced by the thematic scope of the repertoire.⁹ After all, it is typical for the situation in Japan of the time: the synonymy of the terms "foreigner" and "Chinese" is documented by the usage of the same sign for both words.

⁸ If the samurai codification of the form (*kinsaku no*) is taken into account when doing research on Noh, Noh becomes simultaneous with the Elizabethans – and thus, in a sense, we justify our reflections. But because we are looking for the truth, it needs to be added that by tightening the form, Noh became more distant from the acting and staging freedom of Shakespeare's theatre.

⁹ The play *Kantan* can serve as an example. However, the omnipresent influence of the Buddhist thought must be also taken into account.

While sailors represented a great proportion of the inhabitants of the Globe Theatre's surroundings, a Noh actor in Edo period is no longer forced to engage the attention of all social classes and devotes himself to refining and aristocratising the form.

Zeami's¹⁰ followers perceive the world as geocentric even in the post-classical period.¹¹ Taking their founder for their example, they ask themselves the same meta-physical questions as him: existentialist and ontological questions transcending the opposition of the geocentric and the heliocentric understanding of the world. After all, regardless of what our perception of the dimensions of the world and unknown places is, the place we go to after death is the same for the whole of mankind: "the undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveller returns."¹²

Ghosts are encountered in Shakespeare's works, which was something of interest for Edward Gordon Craig. However, it could be said that in this respect the Western drama was distracted by its expansion of the terrestrial world and the transience was exposed only occasionally. In contrast, Noh theatre was focused on a systematic examination of the issue of coming back from the next world, a place of no return.

If the *mise-en-scène* of a gothic painting shows parallels between the Middle Ages in Japan and Europe,¹³ some similarities with Noh can also be found in Shakespearean theatre. Thus it can be understood that since Craig's times, the development of the theatre form in the struggle against the visual illusionism and the introduction of gas or electricity to theatres found positive impulses both in Noh and Shakespearean theatre.¹⁴

After the excesses of Puritanism, Shakespeare's plays have never disappeared from English stages and the tradition reached Craig loaded with a considerable interpretive drift. Therefore, it was needed to purify the Shakespearean impulse through research in the field of Shakespearean studies and archaeological discovery. The two resulted in the reconstruction of the Globe Theatre and thus provided us with a life-sized model to which we can attach contemporary reflections about what Shakespeare's plays looked like on stage.

Nowadays, of course, the theatre cultures of both the archipelagos know about each other. Therefore, arguments about the proven mutual influences of the two theatrical traditions should be added to our reflections about the structural similarities. If Noh was an inspiration for the living phenomenon of European theatre, European theatre research, especially within Shakespearean studies, influenced Japanese research. In the 20th century, knowledge of theatre schools became publicly available and the Noh families gifted their notebooks with the handwritten texts of individual characters to the Tokyo Noh Theatre Research Institute.¹⁵

¹⁰ Zeami Motokiyo (世阿弥元清) c. 1363–c. 1443 – the most significant representative of Noh theatre.

¹¹ In this respect, I focus my attention, following Rumánek's definition, not on the plays written in this period but on the productions of this period. "The post-classical period (*kinsaku no, kindai no*) means a formal stabilisation of the Noh performances." In: Rumánek, Ivan R. V. (2010): *Japonská dráma Nô. Žáner vo vývoji*. Veda, Bratislava, p. 101. ISBN 978-80-224-1148-6.

¹² *Hamlet*, Act 3, Scene 1.

¹³ Hlaváčová, Anna A.: Subtle *Mise-en-scènes* of the Middle Ages. *Human Affairs* 23, 40–55, 2013, DOI: 10.2478/s13374-013-0105-9.

¹⁴ E. G. Craig, a pioneer in the theatre reform, was inspired by both Zeami and Shakespeare – a partial motivation for the rise of this study.

¹⁵ Nogami Memorial Noh Theatre Research Institute of Nogaku, Hosei Daigaku, Tokyo.

Noh theatre also followed European standards by moving the auditorium indoors. This was done several centuries after Shakespeare. However, Noh has remained true to tradition in an original way: the codified space of the stage roofed from time immemorial is now roofed again together with the auditorium. And thus the Noh stage is architecturally constituted as a theatre within a theatre.

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