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## On Ujino's "Duet" – The Reality of Imaginary Existence in Japanese Tradition

by Shinya Watanabe

Accompanied by the roaring sounds made by motors with flashlights, two denim shirts hung on wipers are the performers of Ujino's theatrical piece "Duet." The movement of wipers seems a little awkward, but we are made to feel that they are alive. As if these two wiper-shirts were human beings, they approach each other at the center of the stage in a sort of "boy meets girl" scenario, dance together, and separate again.

Behind the birth of this mechanical performance lies the influence of the traditional Noh Theater of Japan. One day, Ujino wondered why the movement of Noh performers are so machine-like. Asking a Noh performer about this, he received the answer that Noh needed to be taught to their patron Shogun; therefore the movement became mechanical so as to be easily taught. This comment inspired Ujino, and he thought that by using the wipers' mechanical movement, he could imitate the movement of Noh, and create his own contemporary Noh theater.

In the Muromachi period (1337-1573), Shogun Ashikaga Yoshimitsu patronized the "Kawaramono" (riverside men), pariahs who lived by rivers and worked as butchers or morticians, as performers. One of these performers was Zeami (1363 – 1443) who completed works representing a highly codified Noh Theater. Named after the Buddhism god of Infinite Light "Amitābha" after the reformation of Buddhism in the Kamakura period (1185 – 1333), Zeami dealt with the themes of life and death.

The origin of Noh is related to the myth concerning the birth of Japan. Zeami called himself as a descendant of Hata Kawakatsu, whose family originated in Continental Asia, and considered himself the reincarnation of the first Chinese Emperor of Qin in the 3rd century BC. Hata Kawakatsu made 66 theater pieces for Shotoku Taishi, a legendary figure who imported Buddhism from China to Japan in the 6th century. Some of the Noh repertoires even include the stories of the Yuezhi, an ancient Iranian people who fought against the Greco-Bactrian kingdom in the 2nd century BC.

In 1907, Dr. Saeki claimed that the Hata are likely members of the Lost Tribe of Israel. Ernest Fenollosa, one of the founders of Tokyo University of the Arts where Ujino studied, translated Noh plays into English, and the works fascinated Ezra Pound in London in the 1910s enough to spur his own versions of some of the plays. In post-WWII Japan, under the heavy influence of Singson Esoteric Buddhism, Gutai artist Kazuo Shiraga also made a contemporary Noh theater costume called "Sambasoo."

Noh often deals with gods, spirits and supernatural worlds from the perspective of the dead. The main actor, called "Site," wears the Noh mask, which is smaller than the face of the actor. The mask itself does not have a set facial expression, but expresses joy when tilted upwards (terasu=shine), and sorrow when drawn downwards (kumorasu=cloudy). Wearing his mask, Site brings both "afterworlds (of masks)" and "this world (of faces)," and depicts the boundary upon which can be traced the meaning of reality.

Western modernity, which divides subject and object, may fail to capture the concept of the imaginary body of Japan, which exists in the metaphysical world of animism, and does not correspond to what can be mapped onto the Cartesian coordinate plane, such as an imaginary number. Without having the expression by itself, the Noh mask acquires a multitude of expressions by drawing the borders of the imaginary body and the actual body as reality.

However, Ujino's genius is to try to express this imaginary body of Japan in our modern society as his own reality. Through research into the 20th century's modern material world, Ujino realized that Japan is a Mimesis of modern American culture grafted onto the tradition of Japan. Therefore, Ujino uses modern American products such as a Wiper (=Site) and a denim shirt (=Noh mask), in the context of traditional Japanese Noh Theater.

In Duet, Ujino tries to trace the blur boundary between the living and the dead, by connecting cheesy American culture (wiper, denim=real, live) with dying Japanese tradition (=imaginary, dead) in its most elemental way.