

One of the oldest surviving performing art forms in the world, noh is a form of classical Japanese musical drama. Its origins can be traced back before the ninth century when it was known as *sarugaku*, a loose collection of performing arts including acrobatics, dancing, and comedy. It wasn't until the fourteenth century that the art form was formalized as the prototype for present-day noh.

Noh performances blend storytelling, chanting, dance, and music into a cohesive whole. Many of the plays are based on ancient Japanese literature and revolve around universal human emotions of love, betrayal, longing, and filial piety. The traditional noh structure is as follows: *shite* (a masked protagonist), elaborately robed and holding a fan, is supported by a *jiutai* (chorus), which provides context to the story, and *hayashi* (musicians) playing a flute and three types of drums. To provide levity, noh shows typically feature an element of a comedy (*kyogen*) in between scenes.

To the uninitiated, noh may come across as slow and monotonous, but noh aficionados will insist that its minimalist, highly stylized movements are actually very graceful and elegant. The minimalist and restrained actions and gestures can carry a considerable emotional punch, making the tiniest movements seem profoundly meaningful and expressive. An experienced *shite* can portray a wide range of emotions with a slight tilt of the head.

The performance itself is just one element of the noh experience. Rich artistry goes into the making of masks, which are all handmade and passed down through the generations. There is also the beauty of the luxurious robes, with their intricate traditional motifs and patterns.

While there is little variation when it comes to noh stage design—the sets are bare save for a backdrop of a majestic pine trees and bamboo shoots—the setup is steeped in symbolism. The stage roof nods to the art form's past when it was usually performed outdoors. The pine is regarded as the “tree of the gods” and conveys the message that the stage is a sacred space.