

Suien no Noh and Rosoku Noh

Suien no Noh (torchlight noh on the water) is performed as an event that has become an established summer tradition in the town of Kushibiki, held annually on the first Saturday of August. The performances of noh are presented on an outdoor stage erected over a pond at Sogo-undo Park.

The event began in 1984 to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the establishment of Kushibiki town. Today, visitors from all over the country gather to attend the performances of the torchlight noh, fascinated by the mysterious world created amid water and fire.

Kurokawa Noh is a style of noh unique to the area. It is performed locally and considered an essential part of Shinto traditions. A Shinto ritual is performed before the performances to purify the stage and welcome the deities of Kasuga Jinja Shrine, who are believed to then give permission for the noh to begin.

A sacred flame is lit at Kasuga Jinja Shrine and brought to the venue. Once the opening ritual is completed, the flame is placed in front of the stage to signal the opening of the performance. The program begins with a short dance in the style of *kyogen* (comic interludes accompanying noh plays).

[Performance]

Children of the local elementary school give a performance of *maibayashi*, a simplified form of noh performed without a noh mask or full costume. The students at the school also learn the basic movements of Kurokawa Noh. Next they skillfully perform a dance from the classic noh play, *Takasago*. The adults' performances of noh and *kyogen* (comic interludes) begin as the sun sets.

Kurokawa Noh's lower troupe (*shimoza*) performs the play *Tsuchigumo* (Ground Spider). In it, a song expresses the story of warrior retainers of the Minamoto family who defended their lord against the monster spider Tsuchigumo.

The performances feature stylized dramatic movements and traditional theatrical effects such as the spider web tossed by the monster. Against the dark night, veteran performers present traditional dances in the flickering light of torches reflected on the surface of the water. The water, the wellspring of life, and fire, the origin of civilization, usher the audience assembled on a midsummer's night into a world of art and solemnity.

[Performance]

Rosoku Noh (candlelight noh) is performed in mid-October. This type of noh has been performed to the flickering of candlelight since ancient times.

The current format was first performed in 1994. The hope behind creating this art form was to encourage as many people as possible to watch and appreciate these performances unique to Kurokawa.

An executive committee of local young people was established to attract noh enthusiasts from all over the country.

[Performance]

Large candles surround the noh stage erected at Kasuga Jinja Shrine. The performances are as similar as possible to their original format. The traditional dances performed in candlelight have been passed down from generation to generation for more than 500 years.

The upper troupe (*kamiza*) performs a play called *Kurozuka* (Black Mound). In it, practitioners of Shugendo, a highly syncretic religion dating from the Heian period (794–1185), find lodging in an inn in the middle of a field. As the night becomes colder, the inn's mistress goes into the mountains to collect firewood but asks the guests to

refrain from looking into her bedroom while she is gone. However, curiosity gets the better of one practitioner named Noriki, who enters the bedroom to see a large number of corpses.

Upon returning, the mistress finds her secret has been revealed and reveals her true identity, transforming into a demon. She attacks the group, but the powerful Buddhist prayers conducted by the Shugendo practitioners allow them to escape.

[Background speech and conversation]

At the end of the performance a banquet is held for those who wish to attend. Traditional dishes associated with the Ogi Festival, held in February to celebrate the lunar New Year and pray for a good harvest, are served. They include local delicacies like *shimi-dofu* (roasted and frozen tofu), a traditional dish greatly valued as a source of protein.

These dishes have been prepared for many centuries and served by the residents of Kurokawa who devote themselves to the festival. The ingredients of the dishes are sourced from the mountains of Tsuruoka.

The occasion offers a prime opportunity for the banquet attendees to socialize with noh performers and festival's executive committee members, drinking the local *nihonshu* (sake) and engaging in lively conversation.

Loud voices and cheers of excitement are heard when the lottery is held to distribute the large candles and other props used in the noh performances from the day among those participating.

Local residents are involved deeply in the festival to help preserve the art form of Kurokawa Noh for future generations. The upper and lower troupes organize programs of performances every year. Why not come and experience the Kurokawa noh for yourself?